



Art Therapy: A Psychotherapy Treatment for Clinical Disorders

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Introduction:

Mental disorders have been characterized as an imbalance or disturbances in an individual's cognition, behavior, and emotional stability. While the world is becoming more vocal about different mental disorders and the struggles that come with them, there is still a stigma around the idea of therapy. Therapy can take many forms and is a tool to help an individual get a better understanding of themselves and help in improving their mental health and better their emotional regulation.

Art therapy is one of the newer forms of psychotherapy that allow individuals to help express themselves by using art as their medium. This allows individuals to help with expressing emotions and address any trauma or emotional issues they may be facing. Art therapy, which is a non-pharmacological and an alternative mode of therapy, has been gaining more and more popularity with mental disorders as the clinical results show improvement. This has been found to be extremely favorable in treating various mental health disorders such as addiction, abuse, anxiety, depression, stress, and trauma.

The development of art therapy partly comes from an artistic expression in the belief of unspoken or symbolistic things and other from clinical work from licensed therapists in the medical field.

The American Art Therapy Association describes its main functions as promoting emotional resilience, improving cognitive and sensorimotor functions, fostering self-esteem and self-awareness, enhancing social skills, and reducing and resolving conflicts and distress. Art therapy which is facilitated by a professional helps to support personal and relational treatment goals as well as the concerns of the community. Art therapy is based on the theory that developmental conflict or early trauma may not be accessible through a verbal mode of communication. These memories are stored in an unconscious part of our brain and these various mediums facilitate these memories. The process of assessing these pre-verbal memories requires the therapist to create a space that allows the clients to bring these memories to a conscious state.

Looking at art therapy from a clinical perspective, it is viewed by many globally as an effective form of therapy. In its most basic form, art therapy is expression through drawings and paintings, these forms and mediums can also vary. This is provided by a licensed therapist and trained art therapist. This treatment is given and suggested not only for adults but children as well.

While this newer form of psychotherapy is becoming acclaimed by many there are still a number of misconceptions. One of the most common is that the client must have a background in art to gain from doing art therapy. Art therapy doesn't require the patient to be producing glorious works of art but for them to have a safe environment in which they can express themselves freely. The art therapist's primary and main goal is to not make a diagnostic assessment of the client's image. Overall, it is to allow clients to grow and change by using art as merely a tool for their overall betterment.

During art therapy, art therapists can use various mediums such as writing, drawing, painting, music, and movement to help their clients open up to their emotions. Among these, painting and drawing has been historically recognized to be the most useful medium of this therapeutic process.

Another widely believed misconception is that art therapy is only for children. While this is administered to kids it is also beneficial for adults as well. It is a valuable and suitable form of therapy for those who cannot express their emotions verbally and feel comfortable in other mediums of expression. Populations around the globe have viewed this as an alternative or unhelpful form of psychotherapy. But looking upon the evidence presented by well-reputed organizations such as the British Association of Art Therapists and the American Art Therapy Association, it proves that art therapy is legitimate and widely beneficial.

Combining psychology and creative tools to promote emotional regulation and growth is known as expressive art therapy. This form of therapy uses the inborn nature and desire to create through music, theater, poetry, movement, or other forms of art.

The difference between expressive art therapy and art therapy is that expressive art therapy draws from a variety of art forms while art tends to be based on one particular form (Ellen G Levine, 2011)

Expressive art therapy is used for children and adults and can also be used with individuals and groups. It helps and allows to nurture personal growth and transformation. For instance, expressive art therapy for a child with behavioral issues might use tools such as music, movement, and finger painting.

The therapist observes the child's process, behavior, and impulses, this encourages the child to talk about experiences they may have faced or issues they are dealing with.

Music therapy is a clinical and evidence-based use of music to accomplish individual wants and goals with a therapeutic relationship with a qualified professional (American Music Therapy Association). Music therapy is a well-established profession in which music is a useful tool to address psychical and emotional, social and cognitive needs of an individual.

Leading Models of Art Therapy:

Edith Kramer - Art as a Therapy

Edith Kramer was a renowned art therapy pioneer and a social realist painter had been one who develop the term 'art therapy'. Her premise said that the art process itself allows the client to recreate experiences and feelings that have once been forgotten. Through art, she believed that negative and destructive emotions could be turned into useful products. This offers the clients an opportunity to resolve and integrate internal conflicts.

She looked at art therapy as a theoretical model rather than a therapy. She was known for working with disturbed children which gave her the primary opportunity to develop a foundation for her psychoanalytic theory of work.

She had put forth the idea that the healing factor of any successful art therapy was not in the final product but in the process. Kramer believed that the gratification one can achieve from a piece of art proved that there were benefits in undergoing art therapy. This further led to her having a fully developed concept which is now known as 'art therapy'.

She viewed her work as a special form of art class where her clients were referred to as 'students' and the therapist must not only be an experienced therapist but an artist. Kramer's primary focus was to use art to enhance sublimation, inspired by Sigmund Freud. This was explained by Freud as a defense mechanism that helps in dealing with unwanted impulses.

Margaret Naumburg - Art in Therapy

Margaret Naumburg was an American educator and a pioneer of art therapy. She was not a psychologist but her work as a therapist and educator has influenced ideas of creativity and mental illness in the twentieth century. She believed that the modality of art therapy could be used to treat and diagnose various mental illnesses. The Freudian theory of unconscious communication due to the facilitation of symbols and imagines in art was initiated by Margaret Naumburg.

She was the founder of the Walden School and here she recommended that all the teachers inspire and encourage children to free expression through art. Naumburg was referred to as the founder of art therapy as through these spontaneous works of art she based her work on the theoretical framework and the methods.

Naumburg used art as a tool for her clients to project their conflicts. This whole practice emphasizes the role of the unconscious.

Characteristics of Art Therapy:

Non-verbal communication

Non-verbal communication begins at an early stage between an infant and their caregiver, they use different means and approaches to express themselves. Adults who have experienced trauma and abuse in their primary years find the form of psychotherapy to be an easier mode of communication.

Art therapy promotes non-verbal communication as it helps a client to recreate images that have been placed in the unconscious part of their brain. Since thoughts and emotions are harder to put into words, art therapy is helpful in allowing individuals to better explain their stories through various mediums. Guidance given by an art therapist can help in recognizing the emotional and psychological undertones of their client's art. Exploring these undertones allows the client to get a better understanding of their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. The saying 'A picture is worth a thousand words' is taken quite literally. The symbolism, hidden meanings, and messages are the therapist's goal to unpack and understand.

Metaphors as a Therapeutic Process

Humans have a system of communication in ways in which they communicate concrete or abstract ideas. Art has always had metaphors and symbolism, it mirrors the client's dreams, passions, fears, and past.

It is believed that using art as a tool and connecting them to feelings of the mind and body brings emotions into the open that have only been vaguely expressed. With these metaphors being interpreted, the concept of closure becomes more plausible. Metaphor is a difficult concept and can sometimes be misinterpreted.

When there is an understanding that things aren't always as they seem to the common eye and we are forced to look at something in a more unusual and different sense, there is an uncommon perception that is nurtured and should further be fostered.

Enhancing social skills

Humans are born with an innate capacity and need to form and build social connections. As a species we are social. These social interactions and relationships that we build help in enhancing our character and promote growth. The roles that these relationships play in our social lives are necessary for our well-being, societies, and future generations.

Clients in art therapy often talk about feeling disconnected or lost with themselves or in larger groups. There are other situations where they may feel overwhelmed and anxious. A lot of these clients experience these emotions due to past occurrences. Art therapy is about recognizing these emotions and helping them process this. It helps in overcoming past trauma and dealing with difficult situations in a productive and effective manner.

Reflecting and Processing

When clients begin therapy they should be open to suggestions, and conversations and be able to process and reflect. Therapy is an effective means to better oneself but a tough path to take for some. During therapy sessions, the clients are to focus on improving their mental health which is a long and grueling process.

Through art therapy, the client is to look at their work as a reflection of themselves whether their past experiences, hopes, ambitions, or fears. It provides insight and long-term solutions to the trauma faced in an individual's primary years.

Functions of Art Therapy:

Art Therapy as a Developmental Process

In order to come up with an effective treatment plan, art therapy requires looking at the developmental stages of a child and using that knowledge. This involves sensitivity to a child's psychological development and attempts to identify the conflicts and issues that are preventing progressive development. Through this creative experience, adults, as well as children, can have a 'peak experience' wherein they are more aware and alert.

Many therapists who use art therapy integrate other developmental frameworks into their own such as psychosexual, psychological, and models involving attachment styles.

Art Therapy as a Therapeutic Process

There are several studies and research that show that art is a very therapeutic and relaxing activity for many. It allows individuals to be creative and imaginative and helps in reducing stress and anxiety. This form is solely involved in letting one express themselves through art. The various forms of art therapy that have been done in different environments showed various findings. For example, art done in a clinical setting has had psychoanalytical applications while art done in educational institutions has proved to enhance development, motivation, learning, and behavior.

When a therapist places importance on their clients, art can be effective in ways that allow them to develop and change their behavior.

Limitations of Art Therapy:

Art therapy is a form of psychotherapy that combines traditional conversational therapy with the use of artistic expression and tools such as drawing and painting. While art therapy has been proven to be beneficial for large populations it still comes with its limitations.

One of the primary limitations is that art therapy is not a suitable form for everyone. Some individuals may not feel comfortable expressing themselves through art or needing it as a tool to help them. Additionally, some individuals may have psychical limitations preventing them from participating in this form of therapy such as vision impairments, lack of fine motor skills, or struggles in movement.

Another limitation of art therapy is that it can be difficult to measure its effectiveness. It is tough to quantify the exact impact the therapy is making on an individual's well-being. While there is some evidence to prove that art therapy can be helpful in treating various mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder it is a challenge for researchers to determine the most effective ways to use art therapy for treatment purposes.

Art therapy requires a trained therapist who is not only knowledgeable in psychology but in art as well. Not all therapists opt for this training and it can be a task to find qualified therapists in remote areas. Art therapy is considered to be a more expensive form of therapy and has limited access to only those able to afford this.

Art therapy is considered to be a more time-consuming form of psychotherapy. While some individuals find the creative process to be relaxing and therapeutic, for others it can be frustrating and boring. This can make it hard for the therapist to create a space where their client is motivated and engaged.

Art therapy might not be suitable for those who struggle with emotional regulation. Creating art can be a vulnerable and raw process and some individuals may easily become triggered when these emotions arise and find it hard to cope. For such individuals, vocal forms of therapy are more beneficial.

Art therapy is a valuable and acclaimed therapeutic tool that can help individuals explore and express themselves through art. However, it is important to recognize that this is not suitable for many people as it would further bring them out of their comfort zone. It is important to carefully consider an individual's needs and goals to determine if art therapy is the necessary step to take.

Art Therapy on Different Mental Disorders:

Stress and Anxiety

Nearly 30% of the population across the globe is affected by anxiety. It has been estimated that over 265 million suffer from anxiety and these numbers will continue to grow. The presence of anxiety disorder is occasionally associated with individuals who experience a lower quality of life and have a negative impact on psychosocial functioning. The most common anxiety that impacts daily life is a generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety, and panic disorder.

Art therapy is experience-oriented and nonverbal therapy that is provided as a stand-alone therapy or as a tool in other forms of therapy. This approach is considered suitable for clients with anxiety, especially if they struggle with the cognitive ability to label their emotions and have a positive coping mechanism.

Studies that show a patient in distress showing symptoms of anxiety can also be related to a lower quality of health. Painting was used as a tool to express the patient's anxiety or fear. This led to improving their mood and reduced symptoms of anxiety and stress in medical patients.

Depression

Depression is becoming highly prevalent within our societies, affecting individuals, families and their roles in society. Depression is a condition that is associated with a significant drop in the standard of living, medical reasons, and mortality. Medication is the most commonly used and effective way to relieve these symptoms of depression. Antidepressants do come with certain side effects that might not go away for many patients.

In recent years, many studies have shown that art therapy plays a crucial role in curing symptoms of depression. An observational survey was conducted in which populations of prisoners used art therapy as a tool to reduce signs of depression and help with improving their mood.

Art therapy is also done among students to help in relieving symptoms of depression and improve mood and cognition ability.

Cognitive Impairment and Dementia

Dementia is used as a general term that is characterized by cognitive impairment in memory, thinking, behavior, emotion, and performance leading to a challenging daily life. Alzheimer's are the most common cause of dementia. There are 46.6 million people suffering from dementia and the number will almost double by the year 2050. Although art therapy has been used as an alternative treatment for dementia, its positive effects of this are still unknown. Two clinical studies showed that there is no sufficient evidence about art therapy for dementia. This is because patients with severe cognitive impairment are unable to accurately remember their own behaviors and might lose the ability to enjoy the benefits of art therapy.

Alzheimer's which is a subtype of dementia, has the effects of chronic pain. Previous studies have shown that art therapy could be used as a complementary treatment in relieving pain. Results showed that the patients had experienced less pain, reduced signs of anxiety, and an improved way of living. In addition to the release of chronic pain, patients with mild Alzheimer have experienced positive effects on cognitive and psychosocial symptoms.

Art Therapy Around the Globe:

Art therapy is used in various settings all around the globe such as hospitals, schools, community centers, and private practices. Art therapists work with individuals from various backgrounds and across all ages. Therapy is adopted by individuals to help in improving mental quality and life.

Art therapy on a global scale is used to treat various mental health issues. In the United States, art therapy is a recognized form of psychotherapy and is valued by many. In Europe, it is recognized as a valid form of treatment as it has proved to be beneficial to populations present in Europe. In countries like Asia, art therapy seems to be gaining more popularity and there are programs and organizations that are providing art therapy to the public. In countries like Africa where symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are prevalent, art therapy is used as a tool to help cope with these issues.

Conflict zones areas such as Syria and Iraq, are using art therapy to help in dealing with trauma and distress as a result of violence and wars. This is being worldwide as not only is it cost-effective but it has proved itself to be beneficial when coping with mental distress.

There are various ways in which art therapy can be implemented and this can change depending on the surroundings. In hospitals, it has been seen to have a positive impact on individuals dealing with sickness, art therapy helps in calming them down and improving their mood. In private practices, the sessions are one on one and allow the therapist to focus completely on their client. The therapist creates an environment in which the client feels no judgment, is safe, and is secure in dealing with emotions and feelings.

With the world becoming more modern and technology being implemented into practice, we see the course of therapy change. When psychotherapy utilizes these digital methods there are barriers that are broken by distance, increasing accessibility and introducing new opportunities. These types of sessions are beneficial to those individuals living in remote areas and are not accessible to any means of therapy. It could also benefit people having disabilities that restrict or prevent movement. The practice of art therapy has only recently entered the online space and has opened up the concept of digital art to its clients. This is a space that is continuously changing and adapting and in terms of art therapy, it seems to be positive.

Conclusion:

With the development of modern medicine and technology, life expectancy seems to be rising. At the same time, there is a larger population facing a decrease in mental health and experiencing side effects and psychological problems during their treatment. Due to the increasing demand for finding psychological treatments that don't prescribe medication but help in achieving the needs and the goals of the individuals.

Art therapy is primarily offered as an individual form of therapy and from various reviews it has been found that it is mainly used in treating anxiety and depression.

Mental disorders constitute a large burden on the social and economic lifestyle of a country and developing countries have more prevalence of mental disorders. Given that large populations are suffering from these disorders there is an urgent need to address these issues and find effective and valuable ways to cope with this efficiently. Having good mental health administrators will not only benefit the individual but the country as a whole. With such a controversial topic as mental health, people's views and concerns on this can be biased or illegitimate simply due to lack of knowledge. Beliefs that mental health diagnoses are not valued or that the treatments do not work could be outdated ideas. It is for advocates of mental health to bring suitable knowledge to the public and help with moving forward a conversation of mental health, disorders, and struggles.

It has only lately been gaining more recognition in the medical field but has been around for decades. Most adults do seek out art therapy as they cannot express themselves through verbal communication, one of its long-term benefits show that communication of the individual does improve gradually. Art therapy has been well regarded as a form of therapy that helps in treating stress and anxiety. It provides a safe outlet for individuals to express their feelings.

Any kind of therapy looks into giving the individual a better sense of self and increasing self-esteem. Most individuals seeking therapy hope for growth and change within themselves and therapy is a tool for promoting better mental health or treating disorders.

The clients that do come for art therapy have been through different kinds of trauma, abuse, or facing other mental disorders. Emotional healing is a goal of every therapist, they provide insights and ideas on improving their client's internal struggles.