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The Transformative Potential of Expressive Arts Therapy

By Virginia Jahyu

Have you ever gazed at a cloud and wondered what you see in its fluffy shapes?

Imagination is like a canvas for our thoughts, where ideas come to life, and limitless possibilities bloom. It's when the shapes of the cloud suddenly remind you of the silhouette of a familiar object or being. Imagination is the force driving creativity in various fields, from art and science, to solving problems, and personal growth.

Imagination weaves a vital connection between play and the arts, contributing to healing as it encourages and reminds us to embrace the world of possibilities and trust our instincts to guide us.

The transformative potential of the arts is a concept that transcends the boundaries of any specific therapeutic approach, such as Expressive Arts Therapy, and is deeply rooted in the history and traditions of cultures worldwide. It is not just a modern therapeutic method but a timeless and universal practice that has been an integral part of human societies for centuries.

Across diverse cultures and civilizations, the arts have always held a significant place in the human experience. Whether it is through painting, music, dance, storytelling, or other creative expressions, people have used the arts as a means of communication, self-expression, and healing.

When it comes to healing, which involves soothing discomfort, reducing fear, and finding effective ways to face life's challenges, creative expression offers invaluable tools to enhance well-being and alleviate various forms of pain and suffering.

In this article, we will explore the transformative potential of Expressive Arts Therapy (ExAT), and the power of expressive arts. We will offer a few generative arts-based activities that can be used by direct support professionals (DSPs), with the intention of deepening supportive relationships.

What is Expressive Arts Therapy?

Expressive Arts Therapy (ExAT) is a therapeutic approach and intervention that encourages individuals to express themselves through various art forms such as visual arts, creative writing, drama, music, voice, and movement. It recognizes that not

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everyone can communicate their thoughts and feelings easily through words alone. For people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) who may face challenges in verbal expression, ExAT can be especially beneficial.

ExAT can be used to address a wide range of issues, including trauma, anxiety, depression, grief, self-esteem, and interpersonal challenges. It is practiced by trained therapists who have expertise in both psychology and the arts, and it can be used as a primary form of therapy or in conjunction with other therapeutic approaches. Overall, it offers a creative and holistic way for individuals to explore and work through their emotions and life experiences.

Guiding principles and practices of Expressive Arts Therapy:

1. **Intermodal approach:** ExAT incorporates multiple art forms, inviting individuals to choose the medium that resonates most with them. This approach recognizes that different forms of expression can tap into different aspects of a person's experience. Going from one art form to another within the same session is referred to as "following one's attractors."
2. **Low-skill, high-sensitivity approach:** To participate in ExAT, you don't need to be an artist or have any artistic ability. The therapist helps sensitize the materials used, bringing high-sensitivity to experiences that require low-skill.
3. **Creative process:** The focus is on the process of creating rather than the end product. The therapist encourages individuals to explore their feelings, thoughts, and memories through creative activities, without the pressure of producing "art."
4. **Non-verbal expression:** ExAT is particularly valuable for individuals who have difficulty expressing themselves verbally, as the art making process itself does not require verbal communication.
5. **Metaphor and Symbolism:** Artistic creations often contain metaphorical and symbolic elements that can be explored to gain insight into one's inner world and experiences.
6. **Integration of mind, body, and spirit:** ExAT takes a holistic approach to well-being, recognizing the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a person's life. ExAT is somatic in nature since it involves noticing the body and using it as a part of the therapeutic process.
7. **Self-exploration:** Individuals are encouraged to reflect on their creations, and explore the thoughts and emotions they evoke, we call this "harvesting." This self-exploration can lead to increased self-awareness and personal growth.
8. **Individualized and flexible:** Therapy sessions are tailored to the unique needs, preferences, and goals of each individual. Activities can be adapted to suit a person's comfort level and dis/abilities.
9. **Therapeutic relationship:** Expressive arts therapists play a crucial role in guiding and facilitating the creative process, providing support, and helping individuals make connections between their artistic expressions and their emotional experiences. The individual is honoured as the "expert" in their own life, and the therapist as the "companion." Transitions in life may be hard; nurturing relationships may help.
10. **Cultural humility:** ExAT is often culturally sensitive, integrating art forms and practices from various cultures, thereby ensuring its accessibility and relevance to a diverse range of individuals. This inclusivity acknowledges the importance of cultural humility, and

respects the unique perspectives and traditions of each person, making the therapeutic experience more personalized and meaningful.

How does Expressive Arts Therapy help?

Expressive Arts Therapy (ExAT) offers a multitude of benefits for mental and emotional well-being. It provides an avenue for emotional expression, allowing individuals to convey complex feelings and thoughts non-verbally, which is especially valuable for non-traditional communicators or those who struggle with verbal communication.

ExAT uses the arts for emotional release, exploration and insight, trauma healing, narrative transformation, coping mechanisms, boosting self-esteem, and enhancing one's sense of identity and self-worth. Studies even indicate that creative activities release "feel-good" chemicals in the brain, contributing to improved mood and reduced symptoms of depression. ExAT can serve as a form of catharsis, enabling the release and processing of pent-up emotions.

All these aspects collectively underline the substantial positive impact that engaging in ExAT can have on one's mental and emotional health.

It's important to note that ExAT is a versatile approach that can be adapted to the unique needs and preferences of each individual.

Adaptive and generative art making

Collaborative artmaking can be a great and often fun way to get people together, as well as help foster relationships, communication, and problem-solving skills. It highlights both individuality and a sense of community.

Group activities don't have to be complicated or expensive either – they can often involve simple items that can be found around the house; being resourceful makes using the arts much more accessible.

When planning any kind of arts-based group activities for adults with IDD it's important to remember safety first, and make the adaptations necessary for the unique needs and preferences of the individual(s) you support. That means making sure all equipment used is appropriate, and that there are enough staff members on hand to support as needed.

Expressive arts therapists receive extensive training to become qualified in their field. If you're a DSP without this specific training, you may not officially provide "Expressive Arts Therapy." However, you can still incorporate the arts in a healing and supportive way. Here are some creative activities to engage with the individuals you support:

Three creative activities specifically designed for DSPs to use with adults living with IDD:

1. Tissue Box Characters

Tissue box characters are crafted to embody emotions, providing a creative avenue for delving into various feelings and externalizing internal experiences. For instance, envisioning 'anxiety' as a character prompts exploration of its visual representation – how would it look?

Suggested Materials:

- an empty tissue box or a small box with an opening hole for the 'mouth'
- paints and brushes
- glue
- scissors
- spare cardboard
- googly eyes (optional)
- fabric or any other textured craft items (pom poms)

Guidelines:

- Customize the character by painting its body in a colour of your choice.
- Add eyes – whether googly eyes, shapes cut and stuck on, or directly painted onto the box.
- If your character has teeth, paint them on a separate piece of cardboard, cut them out, and affix them inside the hole of the box to form a mouth.
- You can also add hair (using fluffy craft items), arms, antennas, or any addition that will make your character feel accurate and capture its intended emotional expression.

2. DIY Stress Ball

Stress balls provide tactile stimulation, aiding in stress relief. This is particularly valuable for adults with IDD dealing with high anxiety. Stress balls enhance dexterity, strengthen hand and arm muscles, and help people feel calmer.

Suggested Materials:

- small balloon
- 1 cup of cornstarch
- funnel
- permanent marker (optional: for drawing designs)
- scissors

Guidelines:

- Partially blow up the balloon to make it roughly five inches in size. Don't knot it, instead, use your finger to keep the air from escaping.
- Attach a funnel to the opening of the balloon and pour cornstarch powder into it.
- Gently release your finger to let the cornstarch go into the balloon.
- Once the balloon is filled, press out any extra air to ensure it is only filled with cornstarch.
- Knot the balloon and trim off the excess part using scissors.

3. Memorial Collage

Making a memorial collage helps process grief and honours shared memories. It can be done alone or as a group activity, intentionally addressing the experience of loss. The collage can be an ongoing and ever-evolving project, providing a therapeutic space that can be revisited as needed, fostering healing and remembrance.

Suggested Materials:

- canvas
- pictures
- magazines
- pens, markers, paint
- scissors
- glue or tape
- textured material (optional)

Guidelines:

- Begin by recalling shared stories and memories.
- Go through magazines or photographs and select images that evoke memories of the person(s) who passed away – cut out the image.
- Express your feelings by writing words or drawing dedications.
- Assemble a collage on the canvas using glue or tape, combining words, images, and textures.
- Finally, decide on a meaningful title.

Tips for DSPs implementing generative art making:

1. **Co-create a safer space:** Ensure that the environment is safe, non-judgmental, and welcoming. Encourage individuals to express themselves without fear of criticism. Invite the person you are supporting to tell you about their artwork – stay curious!
2. **Offer choices:** Provide a variety of art materials and activities, allowing individuals to choose what attracts their attention.
3. **Be patient:** Some individuals may take time to warm up to art making. Be patient and give them the space they need to feel comfortable by acknowledging their efforts and offer opportunities for smaller engagements.
4. **Focus on the process, not the product:** The value of generative art making lies in the act of creation, not in creating a masterpiece. Emphasize the process rather than the result.

Remember that there is no such thing as "bad art." The purpose in using the arts for healing is to inspire reflection and invite authentic expression.

Conclusion

The world of imagination and Expressive Arts Therapy is a testament to the incredible human capacity for creativity, healing, and growth. Through various forms of artistic expression, we find a way to break free from constraints, give voice to the unsaid, and tap into the transformative potential within us. As we have explored, the arts offer us a path to release emotions, nurture personal development, and promote overall well-being. They celebrate the beauty of shared human experiences while honouring individual stories and cultural diversity. Whether it's painting a canvas, jamming to a tune, scratching a record, or telling a story through drama, the arts have a remarkable power to uplift, inspire, and nurture. By embracing the wondrous world of creativity, we embark on a journey of self-discovery and transformation, finding comfort, resilience, and a deeper connection to ourselves, each other, and the world around us.

About the Author:

Virginia Jahyu (she/her), MA, ExAT, is an expressive arts therapist with a strong interest in arts empowerment, community building, and social justice. Virginia is inspired by liberation healing, and is invested in deeper understandings of colonial impacts on mental health and identity. She values the intersectionalities and breadth of human identities, dis/abilities, experience, and creative expressions. Her passion for the arts, accessibility, and equity continues to guide her work. Virginia proudly serves as the Vice President of the Ontario Expressive Arts Therapy Association and works in the clinical department as an expressive arts therapist at Vita Community Living Services.

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