

# Creative Art Therapy Groups: A Treatment Modality for Psychiatric Outpatients

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## Abstract

*This brief report examines the benefits of a creative art therapy group program for outpatients suffering from psychiatric disorders. Included is a review of relevant treatment outcomes literature on the effectiveness of group art therapy. The authors describe the Creative Art Therapy Group Program offered to adult psychiatric outpatients that is followed in various teaching hospitals. Case examples illustrate the clinical effectiveness of creative art therapy groups and highlight specific changes that improved patients' quality of life. The report's findings suggest that participating in a Creative Art Therapy Group Program is a beneficial treatment for patients in ambulatory psychiatric clinics.*

## Introduction

Since the 1970s, group art therapy has been used as a principal or an adjunct treatment intervention for psychiatric patients. Yet few studies have investigated the efficacy of group art therapy treatment for adult psychiatric outpatients. In this brief report, we will examine the relevant literature and discuss the use of group art therapy as a treatment modality for adult outpatients suffering from psychiatric disorders. We will present case vignettes of sessions with psychiatric outpatients and address the clinical effectiveness of creative art therapy groups with this patient population.

## Literature Review

### Group Art Therapy

Much of the literature addressing the value of group art therapy focuses on sexually abused women (Brooke, 1995; Waller, 1992), juvenile offenders (Hartz & Thicke, 2005), behaviorally disordered students (Rosal, 1993), emotionally

troubled children (Tibbets & Stone, 1990), and students with somatic symptoms (Philippopoulos & Lucas, 1983). Brooke's (1995) study of the effectiveness of group art therapy intervention for increasing the level of self-esteem of sexually abused survivors concluded that group art therapy raised the survivors' level of self-esteem. Brooke also determined that group art therapy increased the survivors' "trust in others and in themselves" (p. 452), promoted an increase in sharing their personal issues and in expressing their emotions, and fostered lasting relationships. Hartz and Thicke (2005) studied the benefits of an art therapy approach for improving female juvenile offenders' self-esteem. Their research found that group art therapy programs may foster an increase in self-worth and social connectedness. They also found that group art psychotherapy builds greater trust in others and increases self-disclosure for female juvenile offenders. Rosal (1993) investigated the effect of art therapy groups for students with behavioral problems. She concluded that attending art therapy groups improved the locus of control for these students. Philippopoulos and Lucas (1983) examined the use of art psychotherapy groups for students with psychosomatic symptoms. They found that each group member experienced an improvement in his or her emotional state after participating in the program.

### Group Art Therapy with Psychiatric Patients

Although there are quantitative and qualitative studies investigating the effectiveness of art therapy groups for adult psychiatric patient population, much of the literature is descriptive.

Siegel (1988) described the benefits of using group art therapy with schizophrenic in-patients who had been evacuated when fumes seeped into their hospital ward. Siegel found that the use of murals and metaphors during group art therapy sessions contributed to the patients' ability to address feelings of displacement, abandonment, and insecurity as to whether or not they would survive. Levinson (1986) discussed how participating in art therapy groups enabled adult patients in a psychiatric ward to express and represent repressed feelings and conflicts.

Shatin and Kymissis (1975) explored the advantages of using group art therapy with psychotic patients who were about to leave the hospital. They revealed that group art therapy was helpful in making the transition from the hospital to a group home. They also found that patients were more insightful about the purpose of their treatment and were more accepting of living with mental illness after group art therapy. The authors concluded that, in this case,

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group art therapy was more effective than verbal group therapy. In a later study, Kymissis (1976) examined the effectiveness of using group art therapy with patients diagnosed with borderline personality disorder who were recovering from a psychotic episode with hospitalization. The patients selected for this study were observed during their follow-up treatment in the outpatient clinic for a period of over one year. Kymissis found that group art therapy helped the patients reenter and adjust to society. The patients also developed the ability to express their feelings, to discuss their problems, and to share their emotional distress.

Other researchers (Gerace & Rosenberg, 1979; Jones & Rush, 1979) suggest that participating in art therapy groups significantly enhances chronic psychiatric patients' self-esteem, sense of identity, and self-competence. Jones and Rush (1979) examined the benefits of art therapy group treatment for psychotic patients who lived in supervised housing. The authors showed that the supportive and reassuring nature of art therapy groups played a role in diminishing the patients' defenses and resistances. Gerace and Rosenberg (1979) found that sharing observations of artworks in a non-judgmental atmosphere increased the likelihood that aftercare psychiatric patients could become more tolerant and receptive of their differences. According to Williams, Tamara, and Rosen (1977), analytic and supportive art therapy groups facilitated psychiatric outpatients' ability to express their feelings and thoughts, built a greater understanding of their "problems and conflicts, and stimulated personal growth and change" (p. 211).

Green, Wehling, and Talsky (1987) noted that outcomes research focusing on the benefits of art therapy groups as a treatment modality with psychiatric disorders often refers to the in-patient hospital population. Our review of the literature yielded two studies that investigated psychiatric outpatients: one by Green, et al. (1987) and one by Borchers (1985). Green, et al. (1987) used a pretest/posttest design to study the effectiveness of art therapy for chronic psychiatric outpatients as an adjunct treatment. They randomly assigned 47 after-care psychiatric patients to either an art therapy group with verbal therapy or to a regular verbal therapy group and asked them to complete the Progress Evaluation Scale and Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale prior to and upon completion of the program. The authors reported that patients who received art therapy intervention showed a significant improvement in self-esteem and getting along with others. To examine the lasting effect of the benefits of art therapy groups with the after-care psychiatric patients, Borchers (1985) asked the subjects who had participated in the Green, et al. (1987) study to complete the Progress Evaluation Scale and Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale 9 months after the programs had ended. Despite their failure to reach statistical significance, Borchers found that the benefits gained by the patients who participated in art therapy groups, such as better self-esteem and ego functioning and improvement in social skills, continued as long as 9 months post treatment.

In a more recent study, Richardson (1999) explored the benefits of art therapy groups as an adjunctive treatment for in-patients and out-patients with severe and per-

sistent mental disorders. He used a randomized controlled research design to measure the efficacy of art therapy group programs on improving patients' quality of life and functioning, decreasing symptoms, and increasing the use of health care facilities. However, as of this writing, the research results have not been disseminated.

## Creative Art Therapy Group Program

The present study describes art therapy groups offered by the authors, one of whom is a psychotherapist and qualified art therapy clinician, to adult psychiatric outpatients suffering from persistent mental disorders being treated in various university teaching hospitals. Twenty-six psychiatric patients participated in these groups for a period of a little over one year (April 2002 to July 2003).

Supportive and psychodynamic group art therapy was provided. Each group consisted of 6-8 patients. The group met for 12 consecutive weeks in a hospital setting. Each session lasted 2 hours. The sessions were bilingual: they were held both in French and in English.

The groups were comprised of patients suffering from depression, schizophrenia, schizoaffective, disassociative, borderline, and bipolar disorders. Patients were selected on the following bases: capacity to symbolize with a concomitant difficulty for verbal symbolization, stable mental disorders including psychosis and personality disorders, and commitment to participate and to be punctual. Criteria for exclusion were acute psychoses or active crisis, acute suicidal state, or organic brain impairment. All patients had a designated psychiatrist and were referred either by their psychiatrist or case manager. We assessed the referred patients before they were selected for the program.

## Case Vignettes

In the following section, we present different issues that were addressed during clinical sessions and describe how the art therapy group process improved the psychological well being of adult psychiatric outpatients.

In early sessions, the theme of hope often emerged. For example, a patient's drawing titled "Trees in Spring" (Figure 1) expressed the hope for a new beginning. Another one, titled "Punch aux fruits (Fruit punch)" led to a discussion about the hope to be nourished emotionally during the group sessions. A picture named "Light in the Tunnel" conveyed hope as a means to get out of the darkness. Creating these pictures and sharing them with others centered the discussion, from the very beginning, on what patients hoped for themselves and hoped to gain from their experiences in the group.

Drawings also helped patients reveal their feelings and often led them to discussions that would not have occurred without them. In a second session, a patient drew a colorful picture of flowers and a green tree but titled it "Un peu triste" which means "a little bit sad" (Figure 2). When he presented his drawing to the others, he commented, "sometimes pictures look fine from the outside but inside it is different." During the discussion that followed, another

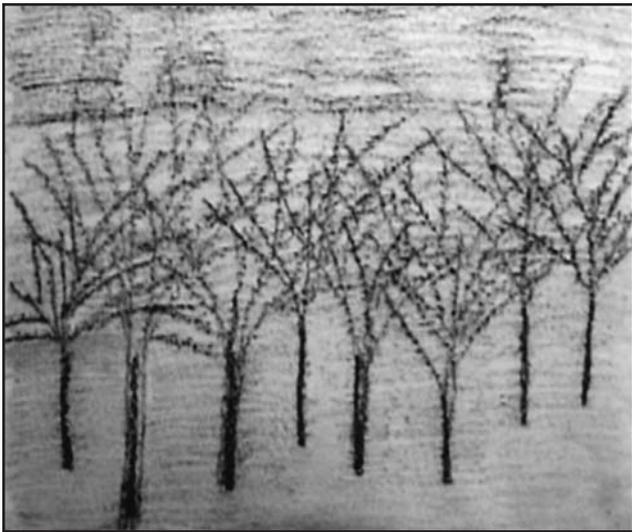


Figure 1 Trees in Spring



Figure 3 A Fish in the Sea

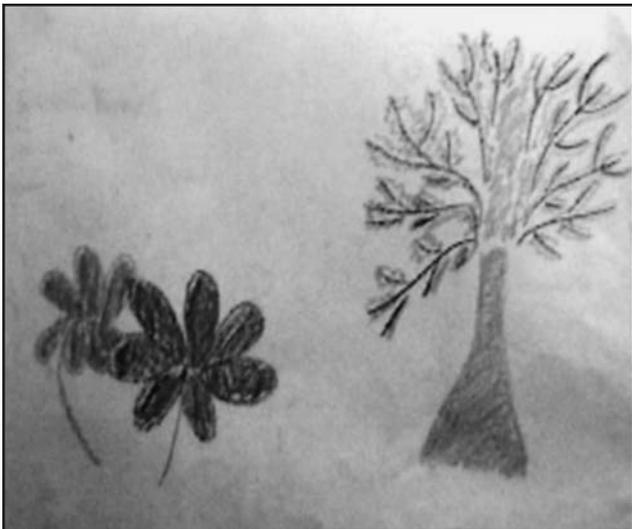


Figure 2 Un peu triste

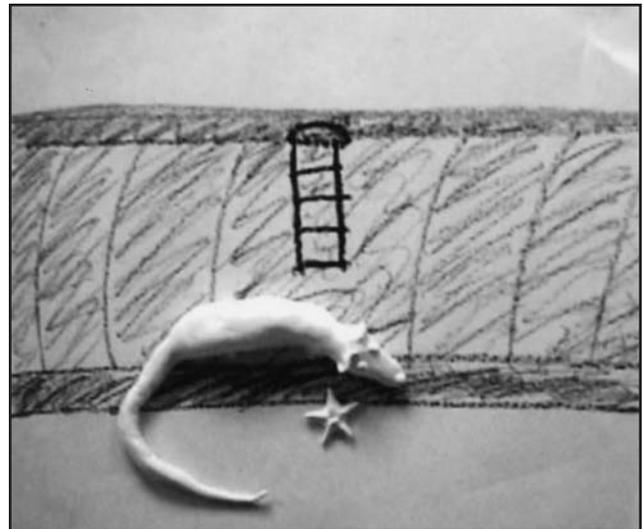


Figure 4 A Rat and a Starfish

er patient laughed at the same time as he talked about his despair in finding a job. One of us mentioned the discrepancy between his laughter and his despair. The artwork and these discussions led several patients to disclose that they sometimes present themselves differently than how they feel inside. This enabled us to bring up different issues, such as what they are afraid of when they hide their feelings inside and do not want to express them to others. We also interpreted that the patients may have been wondering to what extent they could safely reveal their feelings within this group and how they would be accepted.

The process of group art therapy enabled patients to disclose very intimate and worrisome issues. Providing patients with very safe and contained environments was a fundamental part of this process. Patients were encouraged to explore their own personal theme in a session where all patients openly disclosed personal events that were deeply affecting them. In one picture, a patient expressed her anx-

ety about her parents' hospitalization, her anguish over her mother's imminent death, and her stress over returning to work. Another one shared, through his drawing, his sadness about not having children.

In another session, a patient represented her suicidal ideation in her artwork where a split was characterized by a line separating the good, represented by a cross, and the bad, represented by a person hanging herself. In a later session, this same patient drew a picture that she entitled "A Fish in the Sea" (Figure 3). She stated that the fish was swimming between the seaweed. We believe that this may express symbolically that her internal world was moving from being less split to being more integrated, a conclusion she also came to when she reviewed all her pictures in the last session.

Through art, patients were able to make something non-symbolic symbolic. For example, a patient said that his drawing of signs and symbols, entitled "Visions," had



Figure 5 En ville en auto



Figure 6 Quack

no meaning for him. However, when another patient commented that this picture reminded her of mathematics, he was able to associate the mathematical shapes in his painting to his thoughts. He recalled that on the way to the session he had been thinking about his cousin who was a mathematician and had died the previous year. This enabled him to express and share his sadness about the loss of his cousin to whom he felt very close.

Important breakthroughs emerged through the art therapy group process and by use of the various art media. For example, in some sessions, patients were invited to create a living creature from modeling material and to draw their creatures' environments. In one session, a patient created a rat and a starfish living in a sewer (Figure 4). When he elaborated about his creatures, he mentioned that the rat didn't want to interact with any other living creatures. This same patient made an important breakthrough in a later session when another patient discussed his own painting, entitled "En ville en auto" (Figure 5), meaning "In the city by car." He disclosed that his picture represented him driving with the two passengers in his car to a restaurant in the

city. The patient who drew the rat and the starfish was deeply touched by the fact that this second patient cared enough to include him as the passenger sitting in the back seat, to drive him to a restaurant, and to share a meal. In the last session, when patients were invited to review their artworks, the patient who had drawn the rat in the sewer commented that his rat had to bring the starfish to the sea so it could live in a healthy environment instead of dying in the sewer. This seemed to convey that he was beginning to work more with the healthy part of himself.

The art process can help patients deal with mourning. At the beginning of a session, patients discussed the absence of other members. This seemed to have revived the pain associated with the loss of important people in their life. For example, one patient drew a picture of her childhood home, entitled "Walk Down Memory Lane," which allowed her to share with the group her sad feelings of loss, especially of her mother. Then she added that, since the last session, she went to the neighborhood and house where she grew up, which stirred up her memories of her youth and brought her to tears. Another patient responded by sharing her own painful loss and opened up about how she copes with her own "broken heart." This profoundly touched the other patients, who became more forthcoming in disclosing personal matters.

Squiggles can lead patients to discuss not only very personal issues but also to discover their sense of humor and playfulness. In a squiggle titled "Man and Beast," a patient drew beasts and a woman's face in the top left corner of the page. When a member of the group asked where the "man" from the title of the picture was, the patient rotated the picture and pointed to a fearful looking face, stating that this was the man. This image led to a group discussion about difficult relationships with former or present partners and about how to cope with dysfunctional families. For example, a patient disclosed an intimate and painful memory of when she had to go a women's shelter. Another talked about how she left her abusive partner. A patient linked her picture titled "Skipping Rope" to the playfulness of the session. All patients were surprised, as well, to discover through the creative process that they had a sense of humor. For example, a patient drew a duck from his squiggle and named it "Quack" (Figure 6). Group members also found that having humor was useful not only in stressful situations but in everyday life.

## Discussion

The following are some of the patients' comments and our observations of the benefits of the Creative Art Therapy Group Program for psychiatric outpatients.

In one first session, a patient expressed her concerns that others would judge her and her ability to draw. At the end of the program she said that she felt accepted in the group and that she appreciated its non-judgmental atmosphere. She added that she normally does not finish what she started. She commented that it was a big improvement for her to attend the group until the end. While participating in this group, another patient decided to join, for the



Figure 7 Me and Darkness



Figure 8 Peaceful Face

first time, an activity offered by her group home: a group visit to the park. This suggests that creative art therapy groups help patients become more trustful of others.

One patient mentioned that his artistic expressions and his experiences in the group allowed him to put aside his suicidal thoughts. Another was very stressed by a personal event. He found that his pictures and the process of group art therapy itself enabled him to have a different perspective on his feelings and thoughts and alleviated his stress. He added that he was then able to cope comfortably with the situation. This suggests that creative art therapy groups may help patients to improve reality testing as well as to put their feelings and perceptions in perspective.

Another patient noted that while participating in the program, he joined a choir and biked for the first time in 20 years. One mentioned that sharing her worries and the difficult aspects of her sickness in the group made her feel less lonely. This suggests that creative art therapy groups enable patients to diminish isolation and to foster personal connectedness.

During a last session, a patient expressed that she was feeling more autonomous and realized that she was capable of taking care of her home by herself. She also decided to commit to self-care by making appointments with her gynecologist, dentist, and general practitioner. Another patient said that the group experience motivated her to fix her teeth, which made her feel proud of herself. This may imply, among other things, that participating in creative art therapy groups enhances self-esteem and ego-strength.

In reviewing his pictures, one patient realized that through his drawings he could express and share his different feelings, such as loneliness, in a safer way than by only using words. This suggests that creative art therapy groups enable patients to feel more secure in expressing and sharing feelings.

In one patient's first drawing, titled "Me and Darkness" (Figure 7), the patient talked about feeling dead and surrounded by darkness. In a picture drawn during the termination phase, titled "Peaceful Face" (Figure 8), she recognized that she had moved from the darkness to seeing the world with open eyes and wishing for more peace in her life, peace she found partly, she said, in the process of the group. This may imply that participating in the creative art therapy groups enhances patients' quality-of-life.

Some patients also discovered and developed their own creativity and they wished that the creative art therapy group would continue, because they felt that they were just beginning to open up.

In conclusion, this review suggests that creative art therapy groups based on a supportive and psychodynamic approach is a beneficial treatment modality for psychiatric outpatients and indicates the need for further research in this field. In a creative art therapy group program, where a safe and contained environment is provided, psychiatric patients have the opportunity to discover and open their inner world to others which in turn leads to a better understanding and acceptance of themselves.

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