

## DOING ART VERSUS VIEWING ART AS THERAPEUTIC MODALITY

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### ARTICLE INFO

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### ABSTRACT

Art therapy has been shown to have some effect on lowering stress levels, but it is questioned whether the creative process or the imaginative aspects bring the therapeutic benefits. Art therapy sessions were performed by 82 undergraduate college students aged 18-22 from a small, rural, liberal arts college in the southeastern USA. Participants were administered the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), which asked for gender, class standing, and age, then randomly assigned them to either the experimental or control group. The control group was provided acrylic paints and paper, and instructed to create art, while the control group was instructed to examine the images in a folio art history book for similar amounts of time. Upon completion of session participants were administered another PSS. Results showed a significant difference between experimental and control group through independent *t*-test,  $t(80) = -2.197$ ,  $p < .031$ , indicating that undergraduate college students have a reduction in their perceived stress through the production of art as oppose to simply viewing art.

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### INTRODUCTION

Art therapy can be helpful in reducing levels of stress, allowing individuals to express their feelings that cannot be otherwise articulated (Moon, 2007). Art therapy has been used with several clinical and subclinical populations, but little attention has been paid to stress reduction among community dwelling individuals.

Astrom, Eisemann, Lindh, Maghussum, Oster, Sjudin, Svensk, and Thyme (2009) found that through art therapy women with breast cancer had reductions in anxiety, depression, and levels of stress, and also levels of energy increased. Attid, Bar-Sela, Danos, Epelbaum, and Gabay (2007) found that cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy felt "lighter" after participating in an art therapy session and also that during their time in art therapy it allowed them to "relaxation and breathing space" during the process of chemotherapy.

Eisin, Langner, Nanis, Paice, Rao, and Williams (2009) found that patients with HIV/AIDS showed improvement with their physical and psychological symptoms after participating in a one-hour art therapy session. They placed participants into intervention and control groups with the intervention performing an art therapy session while the control watched a one-hour video of an art therapy session.

Dwendly, Dwendly, and Metcalfe (2000) used art therapy as a tool in psychotherapy found that it can help to inform the participant up front that they will not be judged on the quality of their work (for there is no right or wrong way to make their art). Hughes (2010) who used art therapy as a tool for sub-fertile women found that they "perceived many benefits, including stress reduction,

validation of feelings, fostering self-awareness, improving self-esteem, encouraging problem solving and decision-making.

According to Malchiodi (1999) that "within the field of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM), medical art therapy is defined as a mind-body intervention in supporting the 'power of the mind to influence the body in ways which encourage and stimulate health and well-being" (p.17).

Wallace, Yorgin, Carolan, Moore, Sanchez, Belson, Yorgin, Major, Granucci, Alexander, and Arrington (2004) found that through the process of art therapy they were able to determine which patients who were young renal transplant recipients were currently experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder. Physicians were able to diagnosis PTSD, which was expressed through the theme elements and colors, displayed in the patient's art. It was through art that these patients were able to express their fears, concerns, and psychological problems, which can "go unnoticed and untreated by medical staff" (pg.52).

Lust, Ehlinger, and Golden (2010) reported that 26% of college students responding were unable to manage their stress. The American College Health Association (2012) reported that more than 80% of students felt overwhelmed by all they had to do in their college lives. College students are a prime community population to explore the benefits of art therapy where myriad benefits could be gained.

An essential distinction of art therapy that has not been answered, however, is that alluded to by Eisin et al. (2009): is the creative process of art or simply the

imaginative release of viewing art responsible for decreases in stress? The current study explored changes in levels of stress for undergraduate college students who participate in the process of art or viewed art.

## METHOD

### Participants

Based on the computer program G\*Power (version 3.1.3, (c) Universität Düsseldorf, 2010) 80 participants were needed to perform this experiment with adequate statistical power. This study recruited 82 undergraduates (48 female & 34 male) between the ages 18-22 ( $M=19.91$ ) at a small, rural liberal arts college in the southeastern United States. All class levels were represented (31 freshmen, 18 sophomores, 15 juniors, 18 seniors). Since the students were all from a liberal arts college, all had taken at least one art class; major field of study was not recorded or considered in random assignment to groups. School-wide emails invited all current undergraduate students to participate in an experiment using art therapy, and that through their participation they could receive extra credit for certain psychology classes as well as being placed into a drawing for a \$25 Visa Gift Card.

### Instruments

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was developed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983) to assess subjectively experienced stress independent of a specific and object occasion. Respondents rate how often an item applies to them on a 4-point scale (1: almost never, 2: sometimes, 3: often, and 4 usually).

### PROCEDURE

Based loosely on Eisin, Langner, Nanis, Paice, Rao, and Williams (2009), participants were randomly assigned into either an intervention group (which performed an art therapy session) or in the control group (which examined the images in an art history book). Participants gave informed consent, then administered the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS).

After completion of the initial (PSS) participants in the experimental group were given primary acrylic paints, brushes, and a blank piece of paper and instructed to paint whatever they wanted on that piece of paper, and that they could paint for however long they wanted. The no time limit was emphasized heavily to make sure they understood that they could work for as long as they liked (*as per* Attid, Bar-Sela, Danos, Eplebaum, & Gabay, 2007).

When the participants completed their artwork they informed the researcher that they were done, who then handed them a second (PSS) to complete. As participants filled out the (PSS), the researcher would photograph their paintings so that the participants could keep their artwork. Lastly the participants were thanked for their help.

After completion of the first (PSS) participants in the control group were handed a folio-sized art history book and instructed to look at the images in the book for as long as they liked (minimum of five minutes). After participants had lapsed the researcher handed the participants a second (PSS) to complete.

Data were entered into Microsoft Excel (v2010, Microsoft Corp., Redmond, WA, USA), validated by at least two independent research associates on a 20% randomized check. Data were then imported and analyzed in SPSS for Windows, Release Version 20.0 (© SPSS, Inc., 2011, Chicago, IL, USA).

## RESULTS

Pre-test PSS scores were not significant between groups. Means for post-test perceived stress scores decreased for both groups;  $-.61$  for the control group and  $-2.22$  for the experimental group. An independent samples *t*-test indicated a significant difference between experimental and control group,  $t(80) = -2.197$ ,  $p < .031$ , indicating that the active art therapy session reduced perceived stress in undergraduate students. No significance was found by class year using one-way ANOVA.

## DISCUSSION

The creative aspects of art therapy seem to be the most salient in stress reduction. This is likely due to the creative elements of *doing* art instead of the calming effects of *seeing* art. Viewing art can consume attention, thus allowing for some distraction. While viewing art is important, and should be encouraged, the license to express oneself through artistic media may focus individuals on their emotions and not on the stressors that surround them. It appears that it is the creative process of art that is responsible for decreases in stress and allows for the efficacy of art therapy. This conclusion should not in any way decrease the importance of the imaginative release of viewing art responsible for decreases in stress in other individuals, and deserves more attention in its own right, but for the purposes of art as a therapeutic modality, the generative elements predominate.

Blanco, Okuda, Wright, Hasin, Grant, Liu, and Olfson (2008) found that "almost half of all college students meet criteria for at least one Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR) psychiatric disorder, with about 11% satisfying criteria for a mood disorder" (as cited in Hirsch, Webb, & Jeglic, 2011, p. 896). Since college students are constantly living under the pressures of schoolwork, money issues, relationship (personal) dilemmas, and the ever-constant issue of finding guidance toward the direction of life they wish to pursue. Undergraduate college students live under a weight of stress that can ultimately lead to physical and emotional damages if not relieved. This study found that if undergraduate college students are willing to take a small amount of time out of their busy schedules and do something as simple as paint a picture there will be a reduction in their perceived stress. If colleges and universities incorporated art therapy sessions during the courses of each semester could be beneficial on the overall perceived stress levels for the campus students.

Future studies of art therapy involving undergraduate college students could be beneficial if performed at larger colleges and universities where there would be a larger and more diverse population to recruit from. Also future research could be performed around midterms and final examinations when students (participants) would have higher levels of stress, which could in turn show effective and beneficial art therapy can be reducing the perceived stress levels for college students.

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