Art Therapy, Adolescents, and At-Risk Youth

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Abstract

Art therapy has been known to benefit all kinds of age groups, populations, and personalities of all types. One population that art therapy can particularly benefit is adolescents and at-risk youth. This is partly because adolescents are somewhat opposed or skeptical about talk therapy a lot of the time. Art therapy can provide a safe space for adolescents and at risk youth to share their concerns in a non-verbal way. One therapeutic approach that can be paired well with this population is person-centered therapy. This is a good fit because person-centered therapy focuses on helping the client through self-reflection and expression. The client is the expert of his or her own life, much like an adolescent feels. Some goals that can be achieved using this therapeutic approach may include: increasing self acceptance and becoming less critical of oneself, becoming more aware of self and feelings and being able to express said self and feelings, and becoming more open and honest with oneself and others. Many art therapy experientials can be used to achieve these goals, some of which may include altered books, mandala art therapy, and dream pots. Adolescence is a difficult time, and art therapy helps teenagers and young adults deal with all of the ups and downs that it may bring.

Art Therapy, Adolescents, and At-Risk Youth

Adolescence and early adulthood are difficult times for a lot of us. Youth in the world today deal with more difficult things than they should at their age. Trauma, abuse, mental illness, homelessness, abandonment, depression, identity and self-esteem issues, among many others are dealt with by our youth every day. Some can overcome these unfortunate events, yet some cannot do it on their own. Youth that are in a situation that may lead to being involved in an even worse situation down the road could be considered “at-risk”. At-risk youth need intervention in their lives before things get out of hand. This is called preventative treatment. Preventative measures have been found to help adolescents a lot more than treatment after the fact. Art therapy can be used as a preventative measure with adolescents and young adults. Art therapy can be implemented in many different forms, including both individual sessions and group therapy, and art therapy can be used in schools. This is a very important component with this age group; because they must be able to be reached. Art therapy can be used to increase a myriad of skills to help the youth further develop and improve their lives. Art therapy can increase coping skills, relieve depressive moods, help with suicidal tendencies, keep adolescents in school, and even help with identity issues. Art therapy, especially group therapy, can even help youth develop important social skills, which is very important to have.

Youth encounter many stressful situations while they are growing up, and they might not always know how to cope or deal with these different situations. Art therapy is a great way to alleviate some of this stress and help them figure out what is really going on with them. Youth struggle with having a lot of things going on at once. From school, friendships, relationships, and sometimes a job, they may not know how to balance everything which could leave them stressed out. Stress is a terrible thing for the body. It can lead to so many other issues: depression, anxiety, eating disorders, running away, dropping out of school, identity issues, self-esteem issues, you name it. With all of the things that are going on inside and outside of a youth’s body, it is a hard time for anyone.

One particular issue with this population is keeping their interest. When kids start to grow up, they may think they are “too cool for school” or even therapy. “Talk therapy” gets a bad reputation from TV shows and movies, and adolescents may not want to get involved in that. They may not want help. They may think that they have everything under control, when they really don’t. Youth may not reach out to anyone, because they don’t think that they can. If they aren’t close with their parents, a teacher, or some other trusted adult, it’s possible that no one could know that they are having issues. Adolescents and young adults are stubborn. Art therapy can be the gateway into finding out what is going on with an adolescent, because it gives them a way to express their selves non-verbally. Group art therapy and counseling are especially suited for adolescents because they give them a place to express conflicting feelings, to explore self-doubts, and to come to the realization that they share these concerns with their peers. In the group, adolescents learn to communicate with their peers, benefit from modeling, and can safely experiment with reality. In a group setting, adolescents can help one another on the road toward self-understanding and self-acceptance.

**Therapeutic Approach**

One therapeutic approach that would be beneficial to use with adolescents and young adults would be person-centered therapy. In person-centered therapy, the therapist follows the client’s lead. The client is the expert, and the therapist avoids psychoanalysis and interpretive forms of art therapy. The role of the therapist is very important in this form of counseling. The art therapist is required to be empathic, open, honest, congruent, and caring. The most important thing, according to Carl Rogers, is that the therapist “communicates this acceptant understanding to the client” (Corey, 2016). Empathic understanding can be achieved through active listening. All of this makes the client feel safe in his or her environment.

I think this type of counseling would be beneficial for youth because it encourages self-exploration. This self-exploration could lead to a person coming to terms with themselves, and striving towards being “whole” again. One of the goals of this type of counseling is to walk a “path towards wholeness” (Corey, 2016). When an adolescent or young adult is going through a time of stress or identity issues, the last thing they may be feeling is whole. Person-centered therapy rests on the concept that each person has the ability to reach their full potential; they just have to get there. Clients engaging in this type of counseling strive to reach towards self-understanding, or even “self-actualization” (Corey, 2016). Some goals for this type of treatment include being happy with oneself again, and generally being understood. I feel that many adolescents feel that they are not understood. I know that I felt that way when I was that age. Person-centered therapy guides clients towards healthy growth by becoming their best selves.

Some additional important concepts of person-centered art therapy that are relevant to adolescents include having a sense of belonging with others. Adolescents just want to belong and connect with their peers. They don’t want to be left out. Person-centered art therapy also helps clients find ways to connect socially by exploring the self in relation to others (Perryman, Moss, & Cochran, 2015). They develop self-responsibility and direction, and “internal resources for satisfying intimate relationships” (Perryman, Moss, & Cochran, 2015). Group therapy helps adolescents understand that they are not alone, and they are not the only ones that feel the way they may be feeling. Adolescence is all about fitting and connecting with peers, and group art therapy can help with just that.

**Goals for this Population**

I think a few goals for this population using person-centered expressive art therapy could include: increasing self-acceptance and becoming less critical of oneself, becoming more aware of self and feelings and being able to express oneself, and becoming more open and honest with oneself and others. I think that this population struggles with these things more than any other group. When you’re growing up, you always compare yourself to others; it’s just what happens. Of course this doesn’t just go away once adulthood is reached, but this is an especially difficult and critical time. As we become able to assess ourselves honestly, we are less in need of continual praise from others (Corey, 2016).

For this brief therapy to be effective, clients need to feel safe in their environment, and to feel like they can express what they need to. This can be achieved through empathic understanding and active listening from the facilitator. Group members can help others increase self-acceptance and become less critical of self by engaging in a few of Yalom’s curative factors. The feeling of universality could help members realize that others may be critical of their selves as well, and that they aren’t the only one who feels that way. They aren’t the only person that doesn’t accept who they are completely. The feeling of being connected to the other group members in some way will help them feel more self-accepting of their own self. Existential factors could also help group members accept responsibility for their feelings towards their self and others, and realize that they need to take their own self-acceptance into their own hands. Instillation of hope is also important here, because members could help each other feel good and hopeful about their self and their life. If they support each other, they can help each other feel better about their selves.

Group members can become more aware of self and feelings, and become able to express said self and feelings with the help of interpersonal learning and catharsis. Interpersonal learning is learning to interact with others, and this could also help group members learn how to interact with others’ feelings as well. This could help them acknowledge others’ feelings and then work on understanding what their own feelings are. Group therapy revolves a lot around testing the limits of one’s feelings and behaviors. Catharsis could also help towards this goal by helping them express feelings they have never expressed before. This is like a weight lifting off of your chest. Being in a group may bring up things that a member may have never thought about sharing before. If they do, they may experience catharsis, and it may lead to them sharing even more things. This leads to even more progress!

Group members can also become more open and honest with their self and others by experiencing group cohesion and universality. Group cohesion would help them feel safe due to the closeness of the group. This makes clients feel that they can explore more things with the group; therefore they are more open and honest with the other members, and they can bring this home into their every day lives. Once trust is built with one group of people, it becomes easier to build it with others. Universality may also cause a group member to want to share something about their self they may not have wanted to share before. Or maybe, there is something they have never officially admitted to their self, and they share it with the group. This is being more open with both oneself and others. Being open and honest with oneself is the first step towards self-acceptance, which is a huge goal of person-centered therapy. All of these curative factors can be used in combination with each other to reach these three goals. Really the combination of a lot of these is the best way to achieve these goals.

**Art Therapy Experientials**

**Altered Books**

One of the art therapy experientials I chose to use with this population is altered books. An altered book is any pre existing book that has been changed into a new work of art (Chilton, 2007). I love the concept of altered books because they are a process, therefore are done in more than one session. I think a good time to introduce this concept is once they are in the beginning of the working or middle phase. This is about the time where they are starting to open up about things, and to really think about what is going on with them, and are hopefully making some progress in the group. I would love to do this at least three times even in a brief therapy group; once at the beginning of the working phase, once in the middle, and once towards the very end. This way, there can be progress shown in the books.

The process of creating altered books can be life affirming, healing, and helpful in producing growth and change, and they are a great way to document it (Chilton, 2007). They provide freedom of expression in a “no rules” sort of way, since they get to create art on already existing pages. This art form is a sort of rebellion; the creator becomes a “rebel agent of change and transformation” (Chilton, 2007). We all know that many adolescents love to rebel. This is part of why I love this project. This works well with person-centered expressive art therapy because they are basically making a story about their lives. One day, they may feel sad or depressed, and create a page that reflects how they feel. The next time, they may create something empowering or uplifting. Afterward, the client may look back and remember how they felt that day, and want to feel more of that. They then may create a page about feeling empowered! Clients can also use them to express changes they have seen in their selves both inside the group and outside in the real world.

Altered books are also a great way to keep a client’s art all together in one place. It is portable and easily accessible. Books are for reading, so it would be easy to share this artwork with others if they are so inclined. Also, with altered books, there is no facing a blank page, which serves as a road block sometimes for people with low self esteem and other problems. A client may think, how could I possibly fill up that entire page? The altered book becomes a one of a kind art object, and it “mirrors the drive to make one’s identity unique in the world, and to become one’s own person” (Chilton, 2007).

**Mandalas**

Another art therapy experiential I have chosen for this population is mandala art therapy, specifically for anxiety. This could be used in the beginning phase, as an icebreaker or even at the beginning of each session. This exercise could even be used during the introduction period, where everyone creates a mandala that represents them and then introduces their self to the group using the mandala. Just introducing oneself to the group could make the clients anxious, especially at this age, for fear of being judged by their peers.

Creating or even just coloring in mandalas is a very stress relieving activity, and is a great way to take one’s mind off of things that may be taxing them at the moment. Alleviating anxiety in the school age years is crucial. Experiencing a lot of anxiety in this age range can lead to insecurity, being doubtful, becoming impulsive, and being closed off. Anxiety also hinders development of creativity, originality of thought, and curiosity. All of these things need to be developed in adolescence, not choked off. A mandala is a spontaneous picture, image, symbol, or artistic composition created in the form of a circle (Kostyunina & Drozdikova-Zaripova, 2016). This is of importance because a circle is seen as a protected space, which then promotes self-expression by the client inside of the safe space. Mandalas can also help the client find their center of balance and stability (Kostyunina & Drozdikova-Zaripova, 2016). Jung stated that mandalas were meant to be used in difficult life circumstances, emotional stress, or crisis (Kostyunina & Drozdikova-Zaripova, 2016). This all can be directly related to adolescents and anxiety. Mandala art therapy is used for relaxation, relieving emotional stress, and bringing joy. Mandalas can be used for the prevention of anxiety disorders.

In relation to person-centered therapy, they encourage the client to reflect inward on what colors to use, what they want it to represent, and what they want it to look like in general. It is generally meant to be a relaxing activity, but the client decides what colors to use, and it may reflect their feelings of anger or sadness that day. This brings about self-awareness, and this leads to further self-understanding. This being said, I think that mandala art therapy is a very important part of the treatment process of this age group.

**Dream Pots**

The last art therapy experiential I found that I thought would be good for this population is the creation of dream pots. It is a simple enough concept. The experiential is done in two sessions; the first session could be done in the beginning of the working stage. The participants are given clay and asked to think of images and symbols from good dreams, or things that they like to do (Perryman, Moss, & Cochran, 2015). Once they open their eyes, they begin creating a pot out of the clay. The clay pots dry until the next session, which could be immediately afterward or at a different time. The next session that they work on the dream pots, clients are asked to draw a picture of what they want in life right now. They then place these pictures into the pot, take the pots home, and place them by their beds (Perryman, Moss, & Cochran, 2015). I think they could also take the time to paint the pots, if time allowed.

This experiential can be used to increase awareness of their dreams, and give the clients a sense of accomplishment from creating something. I like this experiential because it gives the client something to physically take home and look at when they go to bed. Hopefully then, when they go to bed, they are thinking about all of the positive thoughts they had when they were creating the pot, and the dream that they put inside of it. They can even take the dream out and look at it whenever they want. I think this gives adolescents a ton of self-awareness. It is brought back into awareness every time they see it. This increases both self-confidence and self-esteem. The concept of this little dream pot is so empowering and amazing.

**Discussion**

I have been working with adolescents and at-risk youth for the past year. When I first moved to the Metro Detroit area last year, I started working at a placement for youth who were abused and neglected, and ultimately wards of the state. They were a difficult group, but I felt like it was rewarding work. I had more bad days than good, though. They didn’t want to be helped. Looking back, they didn’t need talk therapy. They didn’t want to tell the group their “highs, lows, and goals” of the day. They needed something to occupy their minds, while at the same time providing a way to express their selves and their grief and loss. They needed art therapy. Shortly after, I began working at a homeless and runaway shelter for at-risk youth. There, they had group therapy twice a day, and they actually had art therapy. I could see them grow in every session. Even the kids that didn’t want to participate in other groups participated in this one. The ones who felt like they didn’t have any artistic talent simply chose something that was easy to do. It was simply amazing to see. This is where my love for art therapy started to grow, and so did my love for working with at-risk youth and adolescents in general.

I’ve had depression and anxiety since middle school. I know what it is like to feel this way and not have anyone to talk to; and to not know exactly how to express it, at that. When I was a senior in high school I finally started to see a therapist. I was so depressed I saw her every week for a while. I felt that it helped my general mood, but I don’t think I ever made any progress into what was actually going on with me, or how to fix it or alleviate some of the anxiety I was feeling. This is when I really started turning to art as creative expression. I stopped seeing my therapist because I moved away to college and started pursing my undergraduate in psychology. Art has helped me in so many ways. These days, I feel that I could benefit from talk therapy again. Back then, it wasn’t for me. This is why art therapy is so important with adolescents.

Adolescents don’t know what is going on with them. They want to figure it out, usually, but they don’t know how. We need to help them and be there for them, and provide them with adequate care that can help them overcome their issues. Group therapy is so important. Adolescents need to feel connected to other people. When we had group therapy in class, I felt connected to the other people in class. I didn’t know them very well, but we all connected on many different levels. This in itself provides comfort. Most of us are just beginning our graduate programs, and there is stress and anxiety that comes with that. Feeling connected to other people in the same situation makes you feel better about your own situation. Adolescents that are around others that have identity issues, self-esteem issues, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, personality disorders, etcetera can benefit from being in group art therapy. Universality and group cohesiveness are so important. These aren’t the only important factors in a group, though. Every one of them works together to create the ultimate group therapy experience.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, teenagers are sensitive about their image, particularly with their peers. They will often put themselves at emotional risk rather than confess they need help from a “shrink” (Riley, 2001). This is why art therapy and adolescents is so important. Everyone needs a way to express their selves and to figure out who they are. Art therapy is one of the best ways for adolescents to do this. It helps people everyday. I can tell by my journal entries that group art therapy has helped me grow as a person. I feel less anxious about pursing my graduate degree, and more in tune with myself. If it just helped alleviate some of the anxiety I was feeling, that would have been enough for me. Small steps can lead to much larger things down the road. If an adolescent comes to one art therapy session, creates an art piece, and gets to decide their self what it means, without the therapist interpreting it, they will feel more empowered. After that one session. That one session is all they needed. Art therapy can facilitate change in the most stubborn of age groups.

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