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Art Therapy in the Time of COVID-19

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These truly are unprecedented times. COVID-19 has impacted every aspect of the human experience. We are fighting two invisible enemies: COVID-19, and mental health challenges due to unmitigated stress and trauma as we follow directions to avoid the spread of the virus. We have been confined to our homes in an effort to flatten the curve. For some, this has meant isolation from others, resulting in significant loneliness and feelings of alienation. For others, this confinement has been with family that are not emotionally or physically safe for all members. And for others, the unmitigated stress from transitioning to working from home while simultaneously providing care to their family, and finding themselves as a homeschool parent, has taken a toll. And, for another group, confinement at home came because they lost their job. For all of these situations and so many others, stress levels are at an all-time high.

Isolation has been known to increase the effects of mental health disorders, heightening anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms, and more. Therefore, an easily accessible, low-cost therapeutic activity that promotes self-care and healthy outlets for heightened emotions is essential. Art Therapy can be a tool for individuals to use a healthy coping method of self-care and self-expression. Art Therapy offers a multiplicity of benefits, including the ability to reduce feelings of isolation and alienation, honoring the inherent need of individuals to have autonomy in their expressions, creates an outlet of such expressions for individuals in times of high stress without damage to one's self, and provides deep introspection for the participant (Ceașu, 2018). The goal is to gain self-awareness, increased understanding about one's life, and acceptance of one's limitations and strengths. Art therapy focuses on an individual evaluating their own

emotional states through their own self-expressions. Art Therapy utilizes the therapeutic practice of mindfulness; when used with intent and purpose, allows for self-reflection and expression (Williams, 2018). In Art Therapy, mindfulness is what allows an individual to receive the therapeutic benefit of “tuning out” the daily stress and anxiety and allows the individual to focus on a single task, while also focusing on the materials employed for self-expression.

Although art therapy can be integrated into many theoretical frameworks, most art therapists agree that images are external representations of internal reality (Moon, 2006). The creative process makes that which is implicit explicit. Art can also utilize one’s abilities to determine shape, color, and line to assist in communicating paradoxical, confusing, or ambiguous ideas within the same image. The subjective nature of art is not bound to the rules, structure, or organization of language (Malchiodi, 2007). The act of making art itself is tied to the ability to go into a mindful framework in the practice of self-care and self-compassion. (Williams, 2018).

Self-compassion is empirically correlated with reduced anxiety and depression, and greater life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and social connection (Allen & Leary, 2014; Barnard & Curry, 2011). And, art therapy can connect fear to a positive sensory experience, providing the individual with stronger coping skills and increased control over emotions (Hass-Cohen & Carr, 2008).

Creative arts therapies can be helpful in treating PTSD as it can assist in the reduction of depression and trauma-related symptoms such as alexithymia, dissociation, anxiety, nightmares, and sleep problems (Foa, Keane, Friedman, & Cohen, 2009). It can also contribute to emotional control, advancing interpersonal relationships and positive body image (Johnson & Lahad, 2009).

In a time when exposure to outside elements is all the more limited, and isolation hinders social interactions, such expressions can only be all the more useful in trying to find routines for self-care and mindfulness, as well as healthy outlets to cope with the rising symptoms of trauma and PTSD.

In the unprecedented age of COVID-19, isolation and heightened fears are just a few of the symptoms which can increase depression amongst many. Add to that the lack of control over the situation, and those who suffer from depression might find it all the more difficult to deal with situations of “self-containment”, “quarantine”, and “alienation”. Any coping mechanism which can reduce the stress and sense of fight/flight/freeze can only be a benefit; especially when typical support systems and mental health specialists are stretched thin. Having outlets for emotions in place, and routines to build around self-awareness of such emotions, can proactively help support individuals who are inclined towards depression/depressive episodes.

Without realizing it, our society has already begun this process. Families are finding ways to utilize sidewalk chalk and signs outside their homes to thank essential workers. Baking goods are some of the hardest to find in stores as families utilize this newfound time and isolation to “create” literally the bread on their table. Arts and Crafts have become a common trend as individuals find “Do It Yourself” methods to make and design their own masks. Musicians share their artistic talents from balconies, and entire neighborhoods join together to applaud medical and emergency responders. Video recordings of creative ways individuals are coping with this unknown time under “Stay At Home” orders are going viral. Most individuals are partaking in forms of Art Therapy by utilizing our natural urge to “create” and “express”. It’s in these outlets that the feelings of isolation lessen. All of these, and more, add to the ability to find a sense of control within the chaos. And it’s in expressing oneself, in a therapeutic approach

of “creating”, that individuals are able to ground themselves with self-compassion and mindfulness, as well as provide an outlet for their emotions.

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