

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses

Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences
(GSASS)

5-18-2019

Re-Assemblage of Self: Visual Art Journaling For Clients With Cumulative Trauma

Jenna Desmond

Lesley University, jdesmon2@lesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Desmond, Jenna, "Re-Assemblage of Self: Visual Art Journaling For Clients With Cumulative Trauma" (2019). *Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses*. 243.
https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/243

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.

Re-Assemblage of Self: Visual Art Journaling for Clients with Cumulative Trauma:

Option #1

Lesley University

March 20, 2020

Jenna Desmond

Expressive Arts Therapy

E. Kellogg

Abstract

Expressive art therapists work with a variety of diagnoses, including trauma-related disorders. Individuals who have experienced two or more traumatic experiences throughout their life can be defined as cumulative trauma, which causes increased risks for psychological and physical health issues. The creative journal is a modality within the expressive therapies that can be tailored to a variety of clients. The intervention utilizes imagery to facilitate the identification of feelings and inner communication with ourselves. Creative journaling has been used with a variety of treatment populations, including adolescents, students, and adults. To explore the effectiveness of this intervention with this treatment issue, I implemented a creative journal intervention at a community mental health center with an individual client I met weekly. After completion of the intervention, it was discovered that creative journaling was an effective intervention for this client to improve her self-concept, identify positive and negative emotions, and build an identity as an artist. Limitations of this investigation include the brief time allotment to complete the intervention as well as the consideration of client resistance to the arts. Continued research on this treatment intervention with trauma-related populations would be beneficial to learn more about its effectiveness.

Keywords: expressive therapies, creative journal, cumulative trauma, adults

Re-Assemblage of Self: Visual Art Journaling for Clients with Cumulative Trauma

Introduction

Expressive art therapy is a method of treatment that is used within a variety of settings and populations. This treatment method utilizes creativity along with verbal modalities to facilitate creativity in treatment. The arts have been used in settings such as schools, retirement facilities, hospitals, and mental health centers to facilitate clients accomplishing therapeutic goals throughout their treatment. I interned this academic year at a community mental health center, where I provided individual counseling services to adults who experienced a range of psychiatric diagnoses. While interning there, I noticed that a majority of my clients had a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. Another discovery I made was that many of my clients did not only experience one traumatic event—they had experienced multiple or ongoing traumatic events throughout their lifespan. My clients with a post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis were survivors of cumulative trauma.

At my internship site, I am the only clinician that specializes in expressive art therapy. The clinicians at my site utilize treatment methods in their therapy sessions such as cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy, psychoanalysis, and other evidence-based practices in the treatment of our clients. Common treatments for trauma-related disorders include some of these evidence-based practices, but the arts are not used very often in treatment at my internship site. This brought me to ask the question if the expressive therapies would be an effective treatment method for adults with cumulative trauma. To investigate this inquiry, I facilitated a creative journal intervention with one of the clients at my internship with a trauma disorder diagnosis.

Trauma vs. Cumulative Trauma

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2011), 61 percent of men and 51 percent of women report exposure to at least one traumatic event in their lifetime. The organization defines a traumatic experience as an event, series of events, or a set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening. Traumatic experiences result in lasting adverse effects on the individual's mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

It's not uncommon, however, for individuals to experience more than one traumatic experience in their lifetime. Individuals who have experienced two or more different traumatic experiences in their lifespan are survivors or victims of cumulative trauma. Due to the build-up of the traumatic experiences, individuals are at risk for developing mental illness, physical health issues, and re-traumatization. Individuals who have experienced cumulative trauma experience an increased difficulty in managing their post-traumatic symptoms (Naff, 2014). Therefore, it is paramount that clinicians sensitively address trauma to ensure the safety of their clients. Several evidence-based treatments are utilized to treat clients with a trauma history. Utilizing expressive art-based treatments, such as visual arts and bibliotherapy, have also been researched within the field of mental health counseling. Expressive arts modalities have been proved to be effective due to their nature of creating containment and safety for the client to process traumatic experiences (Capacchione, 2015; Deaver and McAuliffe, 2009; Ganim and Fox, 1999; Ikonomopoulous et al., 2017; Mercer, Warson, and Zhao, 2010; Mims, 2015; Rajasingam and Couns, 2017; Sackett and McKeeman, 2017; Utley & Garza, 2011; Vela, Rodriguez, and Hinojosa, 2019).

Outcomes and Contributions

My hope for this intervention was to provide my client with something that had yet to be taken away from her: art and creativity. Cumulative trauma had taken away her safety, shelter, relationships, trust, and so much more. Having a journal for my client to work on each week provided structure, stability, and a space to express herself. My client's treatment plan was developed to address issues such as low self-concept, anxiety, and depression. The intervention of journaling would hopefully help my client build an artistic identity and become a feasible coping strategy for her.

As I have been researching this topic, I have discovered that a lot of the peer-reviewed research on the therapeutic application of visual art journaling was limited. I searched in the database of my university and Google Scholar with a variety of search terms (in different combinations) such as: visual art/creative journal AND trauma/post-traumatic stress OR mental health. Upon combining these terms, I found only a handful of articles that referenced using journal making and complex trauma. Most of the literature and studies had been focused on college students or adolescents. I was hoping that my project would lead to future research in the field of expressive therapies with a variety of populations, such as clients with complex and cumulative PTSD. I hoped that the process of completing this capstone thesis project would contribute to the current literature on this unique and creative intervention.

Literature Review

This modality has been used with a range of populations and treatment issues, making it a versatile and effective intervention. Due to the versatility and approachability of this intervention, I believe it would be effective for clients with cumulative trauma. In my review of

the literature, I wanted to define the difference between trauma and cumulative trauma. An individual who has endured cumulative trauma presents negatively on both their physical and mental health throughout their lifetime. I researched several books on the intervention of visual journaling, describing the benefits that it can present to an individual's psychological well-being. I explored the different populations that this modality has been used with, ranging from adolescents and college students to survivors of domestic violence and military veterans.

Defining Cumulative Trauma

The American Psychological Association (2000) defined trauma as “an event during which an individual has experienced, witnessed, or been confronted with an event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others” (p. 463). Individuals with a trauma history rarely experience only a single traumatic event in their lifetime, but rather are likely to experience several episodes of traumatic exposure (Cloitre, Stolbach, Herman, van der Kolk, Pynoos, Wang, & Perkova, 2009). Cumulative trauma is the experience of two or more different types of trauma occurring in one's lifetime. The phenomenon of cumulative trauma has been reported among individuals who have trauma histories such as survivors of childhood abuse, domestic violence, and those who have been witnesses to or targets of genocide (Cloitre et al., 2009). Research confirms the harmful additive effect cumulative trauma presents on both an individual's mental health and physical wellness (Naff, 2014). Therefore, cumulative trauma doesn't have a damaging effect just on mental health, but also causes deficits within an individual's physical well-being.

The experience of multiple traumas such as physical assault in addition to childhood sexual abuse, is “thought to have an additive effect on symptom complexity and severity” (Naff,

2014, p. 80). Exposure to repeated, sustained, or multiple traumas include not only posttraumatic stress symptomatology, but also other symptoms reflecting deficits in affective and interpersonal self-regulatory capacities such as difficulties with anxious arousal, anger management, dissociative symptoms, and aggressive or socially avoidant behaviors (Cloitre et al., 2009). Evaluating the effects of cumulative trauma is critical as this occurrence characterizes the experience of the majority of trauma survivors as well as has significant implications for evaluation and treatment.

Trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) is a widely used treatment method that is claimed to be effective in reducing the severity of symptoms in trauma-related disorders. In a study completed by Lyshak-Stelzer, Singer, St. John, and Chemtob (2007), they compared TF-CBT with a trauma-focused art therapy group intervention to treat adolescents who had experienced cumulative trauma. Their findings indicated that trauma-focused art therapy was more effective for treating trauma-related symptomatology as compared to non-art therapy treatment (as cited in Naff. 2014). Art therapy has been described to be helpful in trauma work, as it “enables the processing of traumatic experiences by accessing and integrating traumatic memories” (Schouten, de Niet, Knipscheer, Kleber, and Hutschemaekers, 2015, p. 221). Art interventions have been helpful to reduce traumatic stress symptomatology, decreasing reexperience, arousal, avoidance, and emotional numbing. Art therapy has also been researched to improve positive symptoms of emotional control, interpersonal relationships, and body image (Schouten et al., 2015). Therefore, engaging in the visual arts can be an effective treatment method to manage the challenging symptomatology that cumulative trauma and complex PTSD presents to individuals.

What is Visual Journaling?

Visual art journaling is an expressive arts therapy intervention that engages creativity through non-verbal storytelling and expression. A premise of expressive arts therapy, particularly in treating trauma, is that sometimes there truly are no words. This intervention has been researched in the literature with many different populations and has been used as an effective modality to treat many different treatment issues. According to Ganim and Fox (1999), the art of visual journaling “involves using one’s inner vision to imagine what a thought, feeling, or emotional reaction would look like if it were expressed as a color, shape, or image” (p.1). The visual journaling process helps the individual “access the gentle guidance” of their soul’s wisdom. They argue that words separate us from our feelings and that visual journaling allows clients to see beyond words and into their inner imagery. The authors contend that the images clients create connect them to their inner voice that helps them to connect with their true selves. Visual journaling gives an outlet for clients to express themselves freely, with imagery that is unfiltered and fluid.

According to Ganim and Fox, within us all lies a "silent language" that reveals the inner truth of our thoughts, feelings, and emotions that is significantly more effective than words. This language is imagery. Imagery is our body-minds first means of inner communication in which we can access our subconscious mind, which is a "source of wisdom we all possess but often ignore" (1999, p. 2). The two contend that words separate us from our feelings and tell us what we should do, while the feelings that inform us what we must do often go unheard. Engaging in the art of visual journaling allows us to recognize as well as understand our inner feelings through the creation of imagery. Ganim and Fox argued that engaging in visual journaling daily is "the first step in the journey back to feeling without guilt, without shame, and without judgment" (p. 16). This modality offers clients a vessel to express and contain their true inner

selves that may have been repressed due to past experiences of shame or judgment. Visual journaling provides clients containment of difficult feelings, free expression, and creativity.

Lucia Capacchione wrote a book about creative journaling, in which she provides information on the intervention as well as a series of exercises for the reader. Capacchione wrote that the creative journal is a tool used for personal growth. The art of keeping a journal has many benefits to the individual, including the facilitation to express feelings and thoughts, play with new mediums of expression, define and implement changes, enrich your relationship with yourself and others, and find deeper meaning in your life (Capacchione, 2015). She endorsed that the creative journal is a place “to let yourself out, channel your inner world into tangible form” (Capacchione, 2015, p. 5). The journal acts as a container for the individual to express their inner feelings, thoughts, and experiences. For survivors of cumulative trauma, this vessel serves as a safe place for them to freely create and express their inner selves.

Visual Journaling with Adolescents and Students

Utlely and Garza (2011) contend that journaling is an effective treatment modality, especially with adolescents, as it “offers a therapeutic distance between the person and the narrative” (p. 34). The process of journaling allows clients to “externalize their unspoken thoughts and feelings, assign the pain a meaning, and test the pain level on paper” (Utlely & Garza, 2011, p. 34). The authors argue that the intervention of journaling is empowering for clients. Journaling enhances internal motivation within the client, becoming internally motivated rather than externally motivated toward change. Journaling helps clients to navigate the meaning of suffering as well as serves the purpose of validating their pain. Through an interaction between both the body and the mind, it has been suggested that the act of writing allows for a

healing response. When taking pen to paper, the act of writing helps clients “clarify the invisible intricacies of their journey, connecting the feelings of the soul with the words on paper” (Utley & Garza, 2011, p. 32). This kinesthetic experience of processing complex emotions facilitates the client to connect feelings to words, decreasing the intensity of their traumatic symptoms.

Writing for therapeutic purposes allows clients to “interpolate thought and attenuate subjective distress,” leading to emotional release and healing (Utley & Garza, 2011, p. 31). An advantage of this modality is that it’s adaptable and its approaches can be tailored to the client across a variety of populations. Journaling can serve as a learning tool that acts as a vessel for inner dialogue to link together thoughts and feelings. The act of writing enables clients to “integrate the fragments of a stressful reaction into one coherent narrative” (Utley & Garza, 2011, p. 31). The modality of writing and journaling acts as a container for clients to process difficult experiences and feelings, allowing them to fully process these difficult events.

Utley and Garza (2011) find the intervention helpful for adolescents as it “contributes to the understanding of self within the context of peers,” (p. 33) as well as promotes problem-solving skills, interpersonal effectiveness, and increases emotional regulation. The use of symbols and metaphors within journaling provides a developmentally appropriate medium for adolescents. The symbolic metaphor in the expressive therapies is viewed as a guide to understanding the “internal ambiguities of one's true self” (Utley & Garza, 2011, p. 33). Therefore, the modality of journaling is an effective one for adolescents to assign meaning and depth to their experiences.

Inspired by the work of authors Ganim and Fox, three researchers conducted a study that measured the efficacy of visual art journaling as a stress-reduction intervention for medical

students. Mercer, Warson, and Zhao's (2010) intervention consists of 5 students and 5 staff who attended or worked at a medical school. The study consisted of two sessions. The first session consisted of a pretest of two inventories: one measuring stress and the other measuring mood. Following the assessments, the participants engaged in a visualization exercise that focused on breathing and identifying their stress-producing emotions. The participants then drew the images of stress that were elicited through the exercise. Following a brief reflection of their image, the participants were prompted to envision a new, less stressful image related to their stress, which they then drew.

After this exercise, the participants were given posttests of the two assessments. They were prompted to take their journals with them over the next two weeks and return for a follow-up session. They were provided with prompts and a handout on the uses of visual journaling. At the follow-up session, the participants were given a second posttest of the inventories and a follow-up survey. Within their pre-test and post-test design, the authors were able to note decreased stress and anxiety in the participants (Sackett & McKeeman, 2017). Due to only having 10 participants, the results could not show statistical significance.

Results from the survey, however, demonstrated that the participants were able to learn about themselves and how they could manage their stress. The authors contended that the "drawing process helped the participants to better visualize their stressors, more easily focus upon them, and more readily transform them into positive emotions" (Mercer, Warson, & Zhao, 2010, p. 147). Although the size of the study precluded statistical significance, the intervention provided a way to manage stress for the participants as well as transform their stressful emotions into positive ones.

Deaver and McAuliffe (2009) studied the effects of a visual journaling intervention had on eight counseling internship students in a multiple case study. The students were asked to create two visual journal entries per week, consisting of imagery and reflective writing, over a period of 15 weeks throughout their internship. The students endorsed that the intervention was an effective means for them to make sense of their experiences and provide a deeper level of understanding, as well as provide a way to manage their stress and demands of the internship. Through the use of journaling, participants used reflection as "a way of making sense of experiences, particularly the tensions, frustrations, and complexities that arose in connection with their internship experience (Deaver & McAuliffe, 2009, p. 626). The new perspectives the participants gained through the experience modified their approaches to working with clients and helped them to mitigate stress and anxiety. The insight the participants gained was not just from thinking about their experiences before working in their journals, but also through the process of art-making within each journal entry.

Researchers implemented a positive psychology and creative journal intervention with Latina/o adolescents to explore changes in their resiliency, personal recovery attitudes, and depression symptoms. Participants in the study included 67 Latina/o students who presented with mental health and academic needs. The participants participated in seven sessions, meeting for about 50 minutes each week after school. The matched control group did not participate in the intervention and followed normal school experiences. Within the treatment sessions, the program was designed to help adolescents "express emotions, identify gratitude, and develop hope toward the future" (Vela, Smith, Rodriguez, & Hinojosa, 2019).

The students participated in a pretest and posttest during the study to evaluate depressive symptoms, resiliency, and their attitudes of personal recovery. Findings from pretest to posttest

indicated that students who engaged in the journaling group obtained statistically significant lower scores on depressive symptoms, statistically significantly higher scores on resiliency, and significantly higher levels of posttest recovery attitudes than the control group that did not engage in the creative intervention. Therefore, creative journaling is an effective modality to facilitate expression, build perseverance and resilience, and inspire feelings of recovery within clients.

Visual Journaling with Adults

The literature on the use of this modality with populations other than adolescents and college students is limited, but the existing literature holds merit to the effectiveness of this intervention. Ikonopoulou et al. (2017) completed a study in which they evaluated the effects of creative journal arts therapy for survivors of domestic violence. The authors implemented individual creative journal arts therapy sessions inspired by interventions created by Lucia Capaccione, whose work was described in the previous sections. The three participants in the study received six to nine sessions to help them express emotions and re-imagine a positive future outcome for themselves. Sample activities included drawing with your non-dominant hand, creating balloons with positive affirmations, and drawing a door containing new values and goals.

The study was aimed to measure if the intervention improved clinical mental health symptoms and if it led to an increase in resiliency in the participants. The findings concluded that the intervention had generally improved scores for resiliency and a moderate improvement in scores for symptom distress and interpersonal relations (Ikonopoulou et al., 2017). Although each participant had positive and negative scores with this intervention, some of the

symptomatology that the participants were experiencing as well as their resiliency improved. Creative journaling for those living with complex trauma such as domestic violence can be an effective method of treatment.

Mims (2015) researched the efficacy of a visual journaling art therapy group with military veterans in recovery to reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma. Two participants completed the group, a pretest and posttest, and an individual interview. The study consisted of six visual journaling sessions which lasted for two hours each. Each session included a psychoeducational component, art directive, and group reflection. The themes of the sessions included stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma. During each session, participants were encouraged to visually express each theme through imagery in their journal.

Following the intervention, participants engaged in 60-minute interviews with the researcher to "describe the lived experience of veterans who have participated in a visual journaling art therapy group" (Mims, 2015, p. 103). Following the interviews, they were transcribed and analyzed for themes. Themes that were analyzed included: self-knowledge, preferred therapist qualities, benefits of art-making, and how the use of art communicated the "real" selves of the clients.

The pretest and posttest scores were conducted through an assessment called the CORE-OM. This assessment is used to measure global distress and subjective well-being. The domains of the assessment measure problems relating to depression, anxiety, trauma, life functioning, and risk to self/others. Both of the participants' scores indicated that they did not benefit from the participation in the journaling group. The two participants missed sessions throughout the study, which could have impacted the efficacy of the intervention.

In contrast to the scores on the assessment, the interviews indicated the benefits of the group. Self-knowledge increased in both participants, which led to an increase in self-expression and self-confidence. The art-making process resulted in reduced rumination and an increased feeling of calmness. Although the scores of the assessment indicated that this intervention was not effective, evidence from the themes within the interviews concluded that the intervention provided some benefits for these clients (Mims, 2015).

A study conducted in Malaysia investigated the use of creative journaling to help clients to process issues that they were experiencing in midlife. The small qualitative study included five women from different backgrounds between the ages of 40-60. The journaling intervention was implemented over 10 weeks. The journal prompts were inspired by Carl Jung and Hollis, and were implemented to "bridge the gap from the unconscious to conscious awareness" (Rajasingam & Couns, 2017, p. 5). The researcher used materials such as archetypal cards, spontaneous journaling, and serial drawings, which were used to facilitate the participants' engagement in expressing wishes and repressed emotions. After the conclusion of the study, each participant was interviewed and asked for feedback on if they felt the intervention helped them on their journey of self-awareness.

Following the interviews, each of the participants displayed different positive outcomes under the following themes: increased self-awareness of cognitions and emotions, the emergence of the personal myth of the individual, and the emergence of insights. The researchers concluded that the abstract and pictorial nature of artwork facilitated self-cognizance and understanding of emotions within the participants. The art-making process of journaling allows an intangible idea to uncover one's inner feelings, which in turn is used to make rational sense of the images. The process of the intervention helped the participants to "heal some old wounds" and to "recognize

that they needed to embrace a more self-empowering self-concept” (Rajasingam & Couns, 2017, p. 9). The modality of journaling in this study provided participants a way to rationalize as well as understand the complex issues of midlife they were going through, such as growing old, fear of illness, and building an identity.

As outlined above in the literature review, the intervention of creative journaling has been utilized with a variety of ages, populations, and treatment issues. It has been a tool to manage the stress of medical students to visualize a positive outcome in their studies. The intervention has been demonstrated to be an effective method for adolescents to have a conversation with their emotional pain, while offering them the distance to address it via the method of a journal. In the study of the intervention used with Latino/a adolescents, journaling acted as a means to address depressive symptoms and build resiliency. In more clinical settings, the journaling offered a tool to increase the self-concept of military veterans and survivors of domestic violence. Journaling also led to insights for the participants of the women in the midlife study, where the participants discovered what current issues they were currently battling during their important milestone in their lives. The literature I explored didn't cover much about my chosen population of individuals managing cumulative trauma. To explore this, I implemented an intervention designed for this population.

Methods

Inspired by the literature and authors I read about who described the benefits of creative journaling, I developed an intervention for one of my clients at my internship site. The intervention took place over three weeks during individual counseling sessions. Over the next three weeks, my client worked in her creative journal. She decorated the cover and over the next

two weeks, completed structured prompts within the session. The prompts were structured to address several of the treatment goals she had identified she wanted to work on in her sessions. Following the completion of her work, time was given for us to reflect on her artwork together. For my processing, I created my artwork in response to her journal entries. It was of the utmost importance that I was working through my process for the intervention to be a positive and therapeutic experience for my client.

Creative Journal Intervention

Many of the above studies were inspired by different authors who wrote about the therapeutic benefits of creative journaling. One of these authors, Lucia Capacchione, wrote a book entitled *The Creative Journal: The Art of Finding Yourself*. The text contains information about the uses of journaling as well as journaling exercises the reader can use. Many of the studies above based their interventions on the work of authors such as Capacchione (2015) and Ganim and Fox (1999). Due to the adaptability of the different prompts within Capacchione's text, as well as the variety of treatment issues her prompts addressed, I decided to utilize her book in my intervention at my internship site.

At my internship site, I work with a variety of clients with a variety of diagnoses. Many of the clients on my caseload have a diagnosis of PTSD. One of my clients, D, has experienced several traumas throughout her 54-year lifespan. D has experienced cumulative traumas throughout her life, including sexual, physical, emotional abuse, homelessness, and grief. This accumulation of trauma has negatively impacted her self-concept, her self-advocacy skills, and her sense of identity. For my intervention, I decided to have D work in her creative journal to give her a tool to explore a positive self-concept.

My intervention was implemented over the span of 3 weeks. I met with D for individual therapy once each week. Each session ranged from 45-60 minutes. To ensure D had time to process any difficult emotions in between sessions, the prompts did not occur in consecutive weeks. I gave D a week in between each journal to process the creative work she was doing and/or leave space to have a session in between to have an optional traditional talk therapy session. Being cognizant that D was facing homelessness, I wanted to give her space to have an option to talk if she was in a state of crisis.

During the first week, I planned on having D decorate the outside of her journal using a variety of different art materials. Some of the art materials included collage images, paper scraps, glitter, paper flowers, markers, etc. For the following 2 weeks, D would complete a prompt in her journal based on the prompts from Capacchione's text integrated with some of the prompts that I created. The first prompt was entitled, "How Do I Feel Right Now," which invited the client to create a visual representation of their current affect and mood. My hope for this prompt was to help D convey difficult emotions in the session that she may not have been able to handle. My second prompt was an integration of music and writing, called, "I am," which encouraged the client to build their self-concept and self-esteem. The prompt started with D listening to a song and then completing a writing exercise based on the content of the music. This intervention was promoted to build confidence and self-compassion.

I chose to implement these interventions because I felt that each of them touched upon a treatment issue that I wanted to work with D on in her treatment. D identified goals of increasing self-worth, identifying feelings, and building an identity, all of which she lost while enduring cumulative traumas. Each prompt in the journal, along with giving her artistic freedom to decorate her cover, was selected to address these goals. I decided to use a prompt from

Cappachione's text, as some of the studies that I had researched utilized her methods of creative art journaling. Using her book as a guide and inspiration, I created my final prompt. I wanted to gain experience creating directives and I wanted to know if the experience of intermodal transfer, the act of shifting from one artistic modality to another, would benefit the intervention itself.

Following the completion of each intervention, my client and I reflected together on the process of the art-making and how my client felt about the prompt itself, any discoveries she made and gave her a chance to contain any conflicting emotions the art-making brought. As a clinician working with complex trauma, it's important that the client feels a level of safety before leaving the sessions, as some prompts might activate difficult emotions. The intervention of a journal will act as a container for these difficult emotions.

An intervention such as keeping a visual art journal might have stirred up conflicting emotions and counter-transference for myself. Due to this possibility, I planned to utilize clinical supervision as much as I can at my internship site while I implemented this intervention. To record my reflections, I planned to make responsive artwork each week after our sessions as well as complete written journal entries to process the work we did together. Being aware of any counter-transference as well as my own emotions becoming activated during this process was important; as doing my reflections will prevent burn-out and keep the focus on my client.

Finding inspiration from the literature and the purpose of keeping a creative journal, I was enthusiastic to implement this intervention. I was nervous to see how D would interpret this experience. I wasn't sure if she would have any ambivalence towards the prompts I chose. I was hopeful that the prompts chosen would address the treatment goals we had developed together in our first few sessions. I had hoped that she would build a positive self-concept, vocalize her emotions in a healthy and contained manner, and have her reconnect with her artistic identity.

Including time to reflect following the artmaking would give D time to discuss the process, any difficulties that came up during the process, and any insights that may have appeared during the artmaking itself about D's treatment.

Results

Overall, I interpreted that D had a positive response to the intervention I presented to her. A common theme I perceived to notice throughout the sessions together was that each session led D to have a discovery about herself. Each session led D to become aware of how her post-traumatic stress affected her psychological well-being. Another perception I noticed was that the sessions led D to achieve a small step in rebuilding a positive self-concept. In my artwork in response to D's journal entries, I reflected on some of the key aspects that D disclosed when she discussed her process of art-making before the end of the session.

D's Artwork

Session #1: Cover

During the first week, D decorated the cover of her journal with a variety of art materials. I tried to present a few different materials to her to offer her the space to let her freely express her creativity, while at the same time try not to overwhelm her with the various art supplies. Some of the materials she used included paper flowers, collage images, and glitter. On the left upper corner, she had a picture of a rat, cut into 3 fragmented pieces. The upper right corner had blue glitter with paper flowers nestled in between. The bottom left corner pictured a piece of recycled sheet music. D had pasted a collage image of a phrase she found over the song title which read, "Adapt or Die." When she found this phrase in the magazine, she became excited, exclaiming, "This is my catchphrase." D disclosed in the session that throughout her life, she has had to adapt to her environment and traumatic experiences to live. Decorating the cover for D brought me to

understand the very nature of what someone living through traumatic experiences must go through to continue living. A survivor of sexual, emotional, and physical abuse, D has developed a resiliency to survive.

When I asked D how decorating the cover was for her, she explained that it felt "good" to reconnect with herself through art-making. She described that she felt as if she's lost her identity throughout the years, stating that "her true self feels like a ghost." The decorating of the cover was a first step for D to reconnect with her identity as a person and as an artist, something that had been taken away from her throughout the years of trauma that she had endured.

Session #2: How Do I Feel Right Now?

During the second week, D created imagery and words after being asked, "How do I feel right now?" I invited D to pay attention to not just her emotions, but also to any physical sensations she was experiencing in her body. She was invited to experience these sensations and emotions creatively in any form, whether it was in the form of words, doodles, textures, scribbles, etc. When she finished, she approached the prompt as a combination of words and imagery. She had written words of emotions and stylized them in a certain way to match the emotion. One word, reading, "anxious," was written in large, black, marker, looking as if it was written with a shaky hand. The word "hopeful" was written in big, red letters, with ornate detailing on some of the letters. At the very bottom of the page in black, tiny lettering, read "sorrowful." A range of emotions were conveyed on the page, ranging from sadness and sorrow to feelings of hope and gratefulness.

The process of exploring her emotions led to positive results for D. She explained that she often represses emotions and doesn't let people "know how she truly feels." She found the exploration to be helpful, as she was feeling a range of different emotions throughout the past

few weeks that she wasn't able to safely express. Putting her emotions on paper provided D the space to express herself openly without judgment and fear of rejection or reprimanding.

Week #3: I Am

During the final week, the prompt I facilitated combined music and writing. D listened to a song called, "I Am Light," by artist India Arie. The song conveys a message of identifying the positive aspects of oneself and celebrating them, while also recognizing that we are not our faults and failures. After I had D listen to the song, I had her complete a free-writing exercise. I had her write for three minutes. During that time, I instructed her to write as many statements as she could, starting with the words "I am..." and to complete the sentence.

Following the three minutes, D shared with me what she wrote. She wrote an eight lined poem, evolving with themes of self-respect and self-advocacy for the voice she had lost. She explained the process of writing as a positive one that helped to "connect with her creative self," which she identified as "a large part of my identity." My impression of how D took the prompt was that the music offered inspiration for her to speak for herself. She had voiced in previous sessions that she felt as if her ability to self-advocate was a skill she no longer exercised due to revictimization over the years. I interpreted that the writing exercise acted as a means for D to regain her voice and to rebuild her identity.

Author's Reflections

Due to the risk of countertransference affecting the therapeutic relationship with D during this process, I had to do my processing of my emotions during this intervention. After each session, I reflected on the art that D created with my response artwork. It was important to be self-aware of any of my issues that could bubble up to the surface during this work with D and to confront it via my way of processing through art creation and clinical supervision.

After the first week, the conversation I had with D about her motto, “Adapt or Die,” impacted me. In response, I created a poem in my journal, reflecting on D’s experience of having to survive. I wanted to express my frustration that D wasn’t allowed to live or enjoy life, but had to do what she could to keep going. She wasn’t able to thrive in her world, she had to survive.

During the second week, I reflected on the statement D had said in the session, saying that “her true self is like a ghost.” To reflect on the statement, I created a watercolor painting of a ghost-like figure, colored with hues of blue and purple. Throughout her life, D had felt as if she wasn’t able to truly express how she felt. When I met her for our first session, she hesitated to speak to me, as she said she “wanted to be honest with me” but was struggling to do so because she “wanted to tell me what I wanted to hear.” D stated that she often felt as if she was “walking on eggshells” with the abusers in her life, and didn’t quite feel like she could be true to herself. I wanted to convey that feeling in this ghostly figure. I wanted to convey the feeling of being lost and the fear of being yourself.

For the final week, I created a visual art piece based off of D’s writing that she created. I wrote in different styles and colors, the words “I’m sorry” all over my page. In the middle, in big letters, read “I’m not sorry!” In this piece, I wanted to celebrate D’s want for self-advocacy. Many of the people in her life who would be classified as supporters, actually had silenced her, and contributed to the abuse she had endured. I hoped that through this intervention, D would come to build her self-concept, identity, and self-advocacy and regain her artistic identity. I wanted to portray in this image the feeling of power and self-compassion.

Implementing a creative journal intervention proved to be effective in touching upon the treatment goals and issues that D and I identified she wanted to work on in our work together. Keeping a creative journal gave D a tool to increase her self-advocacy, express difficult

emotions, and promote a positive self-concept. The prompts she had a conversation within her journal led her to evaluate how cumulative trauma had negatively impacted her psychological well-being, while also giving her motivation to work towards a positive self-concept. Creative journaling is a versatile intervention that can be used with a variety of populations, including clients such as D who have a complex trauma history.

Discussion

Cumulative trauma is a condition that negatively impacts clients in the mental health counseling field in a multidisciplinary matter. Clients develop mental illness, physical health issues, and have extreme difficulty to manage their post-traumatic symptoms. According to the literature, creative journaling is an effective intervention to encourage clients to identify emotions, build resiliency, decrease mental health symptoms, and discover their true selves. I wanted to add to the literature and research on this intervention. Many of the populations researched in the literature were adolescents and/or students. I wanted to evaluate if creative art journaling was an effective intervention for adults with cumulative trauma.

I found that the intervention that I implemented with D over the 3 weeks was beneficial for her. My goals for this intervention were for D to develop a positive self-concept, reconnect with her identity, and identify her emotions and feelings. Ganim and Fox (1999) stated that visual journaling “involves using one’s inner vision to imagine what a thought, feeling, or emotional reaction would look like if it were expressed as a color, shape, or image” (p.1). This intervention was effective in giving D a place to express herself, no matter what the medium it was she utilized.

Creating the cover of her journal gave D the accessibility to art, something that she had lost due to her traumatic experiences. The experience of decorating the cover gave her artistic

freedom and the space to create without fear of judgment. D was able to reflect on how her traumatic experiences have influenced her way of life, and brought light to her resiliency that she has developed as a survivor. In the literature, some of the studies focused on examining if the intervention of creative journaling could increase resiliency among their participants. Many of the results of these studies found that their participants gained an increase in resiliency through the use of journaling (Ikonomopoulos et al., 2017; Vela, Smith, Rodriguez, & Hinojosa, 2019).

The literature also looked into the effectiveness of journaling to build interpersonal skills and decreasing mental health symptoms. The prompt in which D identified her feelings and created imagery based on this prompt enabled her to identify her feelings effectively as well as identify them on paper, creating a vessel to contain difficult emotions. The intervention was able to address emotions she had repressed as well as offer a means to safely contain them. As Utley and Garza (2011) mentioned, D was able to "assign pain a meaning" and externalize her thoughts and feelings on paper. She connected with her authentic self, experiencing a range of feelings. The journal offered her "therapeutic distance" for her to safely process her emotions.

The final prompt encouraged D to build her identity and her self-advocacy. In the literature, journaling was discovered to be an effective intervention to develop resiliency, self-esteem, and their "true selves," as identified in Mims' (2015) study. D disclosed compared her true self to that of a ghost during the second week of the intervention. It was inferred that due to her traumatic experiences, she no longer had access to art-making. During the final week, she felt as if she was able to "connect with her creative identity" again. Through her artwork, D made her voice known again and developed a theme of self-respect and self-advocacy.

I found creating response artworks to D's work to be helpful to respond to what she was processing as well as process my thoughts during the intervention. As a young clinician working

with clients with complex trauma, it was paramount that I took the time and space to process my own emotions. Completing my artwork allowed me to relate to what D was experiencing and understand what she might have been feeling during the art-making process. Any possible occurrences of countertransference were explored in clinical supervision.

There were several limitations while I implemented this intervention. Due to psychosocial stressors, D was not always able to attend our sessions. Sometimes the interventions would be weeks apart as opposed to the one-week difference that I had originally planned. This distance in between could have impacted the results. Another limitation is that I think the intervention would have been more effective if the period it was implemented over was increased. Due to the nature of mixed attendance of the sessions, the intervention was over a span of only 3 weeks. The intervention could have possibly been more effective if it was extended, giving the chance for more opportunities for creativity and processing. After the implementation of this intervention, D was encouraged to use the journal during our sessions to express herself creatively whenever she felt the need to create. D enthusiastically continues to utilize the journal she's made for creative writing and artwork.

One consideration I also considered was the nature of ambivalence to artmaking and the experience of artmaking. D had a college background in which she studied fine arts as well as displayed enthusiasm when asked to participate in the intervention. What results would have occurred if I worked with a client who was ambivalent or resistant to art therapy? What if they had no prior fine arts experience? The results and content created in this intervention would probably look vastly different from someone who doesn't enjoy art-making or have experience in fine arts.

Due to the nature of the literature being focused on differing populations than the one I've worked with at my internship site, this intervention will be beneficial to the expressive arts therapy community. The literature focused on populations such as students and adolescents, with very few studies done in mental health settings. This intervention gives context to how creative journaling can be beneficial to a different population in a clinical setting. Due to the severity of the lasting impacts that cumulative trauma can create, individuals must seek a treatment that is effective for them. Creative journaling is an effective means for individuals with cumulative trauma to give meaning to their experiences, while safely communicating with them in a creative and artistic means.

References:

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Capacchione, L. (2015). *The creative journal: the art of finding yourself* (35th-anniversary edition.). Swallow Press. Athens, Ohio.
- Cloitre, M., Stolbach, B. C., Herman, J. L., Kolk, B. van der, Pynoos, R., Wang, J., & Petkova, E. (2009). A developmental approach to complex PTSD: Childhood and adult cumulative trauma as predictors of symptom complexity. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 22(5), 399–408. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1002/jts.20444>
- Deaver, S. P., & McAuliffe, G. (2009). Reflective visual journaling during art therapy and counselling internships: A qualitative study. *Reflective Practice*, 10(5), 615-632.
- Ganim, B., & Fox, S. (1999). *Visual journaling: Going deeper than words*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, Theosophical Pub. House.
- Ikonomopoulos, J., Cavazos-Vela, J., Vela, P., Sanchez, M., Schmidt, C., & Catchings, C. V. (2017). Evaluating the Effects of Creative Journal Arts Therapy for Survivors of Domestic Violence. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 12(4), 496–512. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/15401383.2017.1328290>
- Mercer, A., Warson, E., & Zhao, J. (2010). Visual journaling: An intervention to influence stress, anxiety and affect levels in medical students. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 37(2), 143–148. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1016/j.aip.2009.12.003>
- Mims, R. (2015). Military Veteran Use of Visual Journaling during Recovery. *Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research, and Education*, 28(2), 99–111. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/08893675.2015.1008737>

- Naff, K. (2014). A Framework for Treating Cumulative Trauma with Art Therapy. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 31(2), 79–86.
- Rajasingam, U., & Couns, M. (2017). Creative journaling to process issues in midlife: a multiple case study. *MOJPC: Malaysia Online Journal of Psychology & Counselling*, 2(2).
- Sackett, C. R., & McKeeman, A. (2017). Using Visual Journaling in Individual Counseling: A Case Example. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 12(2), 242–248.
<https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/15401383.2016.1246993>
- Schouten, K. A., de Niet, G. J., Knipscheer, J. W., Kleber, R. J., & Hutschemaekers, G. J. (2015). The effectiveness of art therapy in the treatment of traumatized adults: a systematic review on art therapy and trauma. *Trauma, violence, & abuse*, 16(2), 220-228.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2011). Rockville, MD: Office of Applied Studies, SAMHSA. Retrieved from <https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/trauma>
- Utey, A., & Garza, Y. (2011). The Therapeutic Use of Journaling with Adolescents. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 6(1), 29–41. Retrieved from <https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxyles.flo.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ918083&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Vela, J. C., Smith, W. D., Rodriguez, K., & Hinojosa, Y. (2019). Exploring the impact of a positive psychology and creative journal arts intervention with Latina/o adolescents. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 14(3), 280–291. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/15401383.2019.1610535>

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

**Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Expressive Arts Therapy, MA**

Student's Name: Jenna Desmond

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Re-Assemblage of Self: Visual Art Journaling for Clients with Cumulative Trauma

Date of Graduation: May 16, 2020

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: E Kellogg, PhD