

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

---

Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses

Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences  
(GSASS)

---

Spring 5-21-2022

## Exploring Group Art Therapy Techniques in Complimenting The 12-step Program in Healing Substance Abuse in Adults: A Literature Review

Nadine El Essawi  
elessawi@lesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses)



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

---

### Recommended Citation

El Essawi, Nadine, "Exploring Group Art Therapy Techniques in Complimenting The 12-step Program in Healing Substance Abuse in Adults: A Literature Review" (2022). *Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses*. 530.

[https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive\\_theses/530](https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/530)

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](mailto:digitalcommons@lesley.edu), [cvrattos@lesley.edu](mailto:cvrattos@lesley.edu).

Exploring Group Art Therapy Techniques in Complimenting The 12-step Program in  
Healing Substance Abuse in Adults: A Literature Review

Capstone Thesis Lesley University

Date: April 15<sup>th</sup> 2022

Nadine El Essawi

Art Therapy

Dr. Sarah Hamil

### **Abstract**

This thesis study examined how group art therapy can enhance the effectiveness of the 12-step program in the treatment of addiction. Art therapy is versatile enough to include a variety of therapeutic procedures as well as nonverbal and creative strategies. The 12-step program is a reputable treatment option, but it may be improved by supplementing it with art therapy approaches. Because addiction affects many people, and it has a significant impact on the well-being of entire societies, necessitating the need for professionals to continue improving treatment. While current traditional treatments such as the 12-step program were shown to be effective, integrating art therapy into traditional methods of treating addiction expanded and enriched clients insight and recovery.

*Keywords:* art therapy, substance use disorders, addiction, 12-step program, creativity, the healing process

*Author Identity Statement:* The author identifies as a straight, female Egyptian woman from Cairo, Egypt. Although she resides in Egypt, she has received a formal American education beginning from middle school through her Master's degree.

## Introduction

This thesis project explored how group art therapy can strengthen the power of the 12-step program in dealing with addiction treatment. Art therapy has the flexibility to encompass multiple therapeutic methods while also offering non-verbal, creative techniques. The 12 steps program is an excellent treatment option, but could give better results when supported with art therapy techniques. There is a deep complexity to addiction and all its' "diagnosable patterns of behavior" (Stuebing et al., 2019, p. 250). There is a new worldwide reality of how substance use (SUD) has become an epidemic (Stuebing et al., 2019, p. 250). One of the world's leading issues has become drug epidemics, which have been a rising issue for many decades (Wang et al., 2022). The spread of drug abuse is "causing enormous damages to the physical and mental health of drug users and social well-being" (Wang et al., 2022).

Many governments and societies have attempted to limit the spread of drug use, like laws and safe use facilities. However, the "number of drug users have still been on the rise in recent years, along with illicit production and trafficking around the world" (Wang et al., 2022). Health professionals concluded such an issue as an epidemic, like ones of infectious diseases, because of how widespread the issue is becoming and its' effect on entire populations (Wang et al., 2022). Not only does addiction negatively impact the well-being of addicts, but also threatens their lives. It is estimated that "nearly 841,000 people have died since 1999 from a drug overdose. In 2019, 70,630 drug overdose deaths occurred in the United States. The age-adjusted rate of overdose deaths increased by over 4% from 2018," according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Injury Center (2022). In addition to the stress caused to the addict's family and loved ones, addiction is "a chronic and long-term disorder" that not only causes severe mental health symptoms to the users, but also on their family members, which is commonly stress,

anxiety, and depression (Karimi et al., 2019). Apparently "around 275 million people used drugs worldwide in the last year, while over 36 million people suffered from drug use disorders" signifying the need for more effective drug prevention and treatment options ("World Drug Report 2021", 2022). Since addiction affects so many sufferers and the people around them, it is safe to say that addiction has a significant impact on the well-being of entire societies, pressing on the need for professionals to keep working on developing treatment. While current treatments are working well, there is still room to improve results by incorporating more creative healing methods, like art therapy, which this paper aims to explore.

Addiction is a complex issue because there is a multitude of unique combinations of people in need of treatment (Adedoyin et al., 2014, p. 545). Because addiction's first issue is denial, art therapy is helpful because it provides an opening for resistance to be broken down and assessed so that clients can work through impending stages of the recovery process (Adedoyin et al., 2014). According to The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), substance use disorders (SUD) are categorized into four main aspects, "impaired control, social problems, risky use, and physical dependence" (American Psychiatric Association, 2017). The DSM-5 classified the diagnosis (how many categories one falls into) by levels of severity, 0.5 being at risk, one being mild, two being moderate, and three being severe addiction. Some other symptoms of addiction are a person not doing what they are supposed to do at work or school or home with family and fails to be present at other responsibilities expected of them. Another aspect is when they are unable to stop using the substance even when it is causing issues in their relationships and when they want to lessen or stop using, but are not able to. Additional signs of addiction are when individuals have to keep adding the dosage of

substance to combat tolerance, develop withdrawal symptoms when not on the substance, and use more drugs to alleviate symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 2017, pp. 483-589).

The 12-step approach is an effective approach to substance abuse treatment (Julliard, 1995, p. 1). Many facilities and programs that help people tackle substance abuse, at the very least, expose patients to elements of the 12-step program, if not the whole program because it was shown to be effective (Julliard, 1995, p. 1). The program consists of many parts that need to be consistently practiced to show effective results; "treatment programs include attending 12 Step meetings, finding a sponsor, "working the steps," living by official slogans such as "One day at a time," and "Easy does it," while establishing a support network among others in recovery" (Julliard, 1995, p. 1). Freimuth (1994) said that patients commonly "will be involved in one of the over 100 variations of 12-step program" (p. 551). The 12-step program is 12 action steps that help people get out of suffering due to addiction. Meetings created by addicts for addicts allow a safe space to discuss how their SUD affects physical, mental, and emotional well-being and provide each other with practical ways to go about such situations. A vital aspect of the 12-step program is the group setting, in addition to having a sponsor who "is simply another addict in recovery who is willing to share his or her journey through the 12 Steps" (Recovery Centers of America, 2022). The program has been criticized for being focused on God. However, the program uses more of a spiritual approach, which is a cornerstone of the program, allowing members to "define the higher power in their way" (Recovery Centers of America, 2022).

The 12-step program is a designed guide to help people with SUD navigate their lives more healthily and positively to achieve the life they want. The program promotes change towards a better life; however, the art therapy process has the potential to significantly enhance a

person's healing journey due to its' creative methods that promote self-discovery and provides tools for people to expand their expressive outlets. Addiction treatment is ingrained in the notion of long-lasting change; "the ideal goal for recovery is not a person who lacks control or responsibility but rather is a person who actively makes choices and strives to fulfill his/her individual needs" (Freimuth, 1994, p. 552). Holt and Kaiser (2009) claimed that when approaching patients with SUD, it is essential to realize that "each client is viewed as having the inherent potential for change and responsible for his or her change process" (p. 246). The art therapist's duty is to "empathize with the client's perspective, however ambivalent he or she may be about accepting treatment," (Holt & Kaiser, 2009, p. 246). This will allow for the client and the art to work through the resistance to reach a level of true acceptance and change. This major lack in the existing 12 step program method that art therapy fills: the presence of a trained professional to support clients' development of growth and expression.

This recovery goals by way of explanation – real change in the way a person thinks, makes decisions, and takes action in their lives - are possible through the 12-step program in many cases, as proven before. However, the argument is that in adding the group art therapy aspect to the program, it enhances the change within patients, taking them one step closer towards recovery.

Art therapy is a natural fit in that it compliments these models [of drug use treatment] and the art therapist is in a unique position to emphasize the client's ability to change via the client's creation of imagery. The very act of creating artwork catalyzes internal and external processes linked to an interpersonal connection that can enhance motivation, a key factor for generating lasting change (Holt & Kaiser, 2009, p. 245).

This study is critical because it questioned the universality of the 12-step program is universal when it is looked at from a spiritual perspective. The program is not universal from a religious perspective. Art is also a universal and spiritual practice, thus combining a spiritual approach to 12 steps with art therapy, which is a healing and universal modality, will enhance the existing 12 step program. My paper explored the gap in the 12-step program, of its' limited creativity in the medium of communication while assessing the suitability of adding art therapy as a way to fill in the 12-step programs' flaws that art therapy can solve. This is shown to be a critical aspect of the healing process as Scott and Ross (2013) stated that "in seeking a path of wholeness it is important to include preverbal, non-verbal, and metaphorical ways of communication" (p. 209). The literature examined in this thesis suggested the significance of incorporating more flexibility and heterogeneity within the 12-step program structure to gain more insight. The literature further demonstrated integrating different healing modalities can more comprehensively support substance abuse treatments instead of a more singular restorative philosophy, being the 12-step program.

### **Literature Review**

The research highlighted the value and efficacy of art therapy for people with SUDs (Holt & Kaiser, 2009, p. 245). Art therapy is an effective tool to help people break down defenses. It aids in fostering emotional expression, helps in "spiritual recovery," and works towards promoting creativity (Holt & Kaiser, 2009, p. 245). The group aspect of art therapy also fosters relatability, trust, safety, and many other facets needed for promoting communal healing. This is an idea of the 12-step program that the art therapy process reinforces by creating a trained therapeutic safe space of containment. The authors argued that it is the responsibility of the art therapist to "create a set of conditions that will enhance the client's own intrinsic motivation for



and commitment to altering behavior" (Holt & Kaiser, 2009, p. 245), which is an element of the 12-step program that is lacking. Art therapy offers a way of "experimenting with imagery to communicate symbolically, offers an outlet for clarifying feelings and attitudes, reduces distorted thinking, and fosters increased insight" (Holt & Kaiser, 2009, p. 245). These qualities help patients have a deeper understanding of the 12-step program and how they can make art therapy work for them uniquely rather than the non-individualistic approach that the 12-step takes.

Many art therapists have worked towards building more and better directives and plans to enhance the quality of treatment art therapy offers substance use (Holt & Kaiser, 2009). Holt and Kaiser (2009) explained that art therapy works well with SUD because art therapy has qualities that support the population's treatment in that it breaks down defenses, which helps the "increasing acceptance of step one in a 12-step recovery model" (p. 245). Art therapy also encourages and supports emotional expression, promotes spiritual recovery, and helps cultivate creativity (Holt & Kaiser, 2009). Adedoyin et al. (2014) stated that there is a need for incorporating more holistic interventions in the treatment of substance abuse, making a similar case that supports how art therapy techniques can complement the 12-step program in healing substance abuse in adults. They claimed that approaching this population with holistic techniques such as art therapy could "treat all aspects of the self to improve success in treatment and altered lifestyles" (p. 538). The authors based their studies on the fact that over the past 20 years, based on both research and their experience, art therapy "provides an active means of experimenting with imagery to communicate symbolically, offers an outlet for clarifying feelings and attitudes, reduces distorted thinking, and fosters increased insight" (Adedoyin et al., 2014, p. 245). It is also a powerful process that can deepen a client's understanding of almost any body of knowledge using symbolic methods, all of which are needed to support patients with SUDs.

This thesis is intended to provide a treatment option that allows for self-exploration and investigating one's emotions, different therapeutic routes, the material's multidimensionality, and expressive mediums provided. Art therapy has many strengths that can support increasing the results of the 12-step program. This paper showed that the 12-step program is an excellent treatment option, but could yield better results with art therapy techniques. I anticipate this study will highlight the significance of art therapy in treating patients with addiction who are going through the 12-step program.

### **The History of Art Therapy**

Art therapy was first pioneered in the 1940s in New York by Margaret Naumburg who was a progressive educator (Davidow, 2018). She initially came up with a method called "free art expression," (Davidow, 2018, p. 1), which was a combination of many schools of thought, disciplines, and ideologies that aimed to develop the potential for the power of art to improve mental health (Davidow, 2018). Naumburg encouraged the idea of "spontaneous art-making as a therapeutic and diagnostic tool for the modern mental-health patient" (Davidow, 2018, p.1). Her work enabled "a widespread medical profession that utilized skill-oriented artistic practices to rehabilitate patients" in many types of institutions (Davidow, 2018, p. 1).

When working with people living with SUDs, it is crucial to raise awareness, a value present in all forms of SUD treatment. Art therapy can do it in a way that serves the individual uniquely. Patients who are undergoing treatment for addiction often need support because they are unable to understand the consequences of their behaviors. Because of the instant gratification they experience when using drugs, abstinence is overshadowed by the neurological reward experience (Holt & Kaiser, 2009). When creating art, clients can "engage in little activity that might shift their views, and can exhibit defensive strategies when problem behaviors are pointed

out" (Holt & Kaiser, 2009, p. 245). An essential aspect of this thesis paper is to show how "facilitated discussion can provide an opportunity to communicate important feedback that may enable the client to "see". This happens through the tangible art, more clearly the reality of substance abuse's negative consequences and the positive ones associated with recovery" (Holt & Kaiser, 2009, p. 246). Group art therapy allows participants to gain awareness through connecting with people and the materials. This experience fosters a tangible and physical product. The creative process can help individuals reframe their addiction thoughts and distortions through the art-making process.

One of the major advantages of art therapy is its' capacity to combine many different disciplines to empower its' impact. Adedoyin et al. (2014) proposed that when approaching a population with SUDs, it is optimal to employ holistic techniques such as art therapy treatment because it aims to "treat all aspects of the self to improve success in treatment and altered lifestyles" (p. 538). This study suggested the concept's significance called "holism" has in the context of art therapy as a form of SUD treatment (Adedoyin et al., 2014, p. 538). It becomes crucial to approach the clients in a neutral perspective while understanding everyone is a mixture of many different components and parts which comprise who they are. One can then find all the things that "suggest that there are different levels of explanation for behavior, including addictive behaviors, which cannot be reduced to one element of that behavior or the addiction itself" (Adedoyin, 2014, p. 538), which is one of the 12 step program's significant withdrawals. Art therapy considers everyone as a unique combination of characteristics, experiences, emotions, and thoughts. Art therapy works with distinct elements of individuals rather than applying a singular approach to the 12-step program manual.

Adedoyin et al. (2014) reasoned there is a necessity to take such a 'whole' approach with SUDs because of the nature of the disorder's "complexity and the diversity of individual needs"(p. 539). Adedoyin et al. (2014) believed that approaches like art therapy can help incorporate other critical aspects of a person's wholeness to get closer to a more lasting change towards recovery such as biological, psychological, social, and social-cultural considerations. They also considered the large amount of relapses that occur in current traditional non-comprehensive treatments like the 12-step program. Therefore, more research is needed in the use of more comprehensive programming that incorporates the expressive arts to reduce the rates of relapse in SUDs.

### **The History of the 12-Step Program**

The 12-step program was initially developed within the alcoholics' anonymous fellowship as one of the main types of help available to people suffering from this form of addiction. Woronowicz (2020) explained the program started in 1935 when two "hopeless" alcoholics met and spent many hours talking. Both were astonished they did not feel the urge to drink alcohol during this. Later, they met a few times as well to engage in a powerful discussion. By socializing and talking about their addictions, they were both able to abstain from alcohol consumption that day. This proved a testament to the power of togetherness and relatability in combatting addiction. When they understood the gravity of what had occurred, they began looking for and meeting with other people who had alcohol problems. The very first meeting took place in Akron (Ohio, USA), which included a stockbroker named Bill W. (1895-1971) and a physician named Dr. Bob (1879-1950) who took part together. Bill had spent much time in alcoholism treatment clinics between 1933 and 1945 when he was hospitalized four times. In southern California, the organization officially started in the 1950s and now has over 63,000

weekly meetings in 132 countries (DeLucia et al., 2015). Since the 1950s, the organization has had approximately 63,000 weekly sessions in 132 countries (DeLucia et al., 2015). Currently, the Alcoholics Anonymous Fellowship has over 2 million members and 120,000 groups worldwide and includes various AA groups for particular populations (Woronowicz, 2020).

Woronowicz (2020) justified that the effectiveness of this first group and model worked so well that many other self-help groups around the world have adopted the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous, such as "Narcotics Anonymous (founded in 1953), Gamblers Anonymous (founded in 1957), Overeaters Anonymous (founded in 1960), Debtors Anonymous (founded in 1968), Pills Anonymous (founded in 1975), Workaholics Anonymous (founded in 1983), Nicotine Anonymous (founded in 1985), Cancer Anonymous (founded in 1987), and Diabetics Anonymous (founded in 1988)" (p.169). Other self-help organizations exist for those suffering from phobias (Phobics Anonymous), depression (Depressed Anonymous), schizophrenia (Schizophrenics Anonymous), and dual diagnosis disorder (Dual Disorders Anonymous), in addition to the professional help, of course.

Many studies suggested that the Alcoholics Anonymous Fellowship has provided significant support for the treatment of "persons addicted to alcohol and other psychoactive substances, as well as those suffering from other mental illnesses" (Woronowicz, 2020, p. 162). Woronowicz (2020) claimed that the success of such programs would have been impossible without psychiatrists and psychologists' playing an essential role in the formation and growth of the Alcoholics Anonymous Fellowship around the world. Alcoholics Anonymous participation should be treated as good option to cope with alcohol use disorders and as one of the most promising and effective forms of post-therapeutic care. This promotes the strengthening

treatment results and "not only saves human health and lives but also relieves the public health care system significantly" (Woronowicz, 2020, p. 162).

Woronowicz (2020) explored the role of physicians and psychologists while questioning how that is and will always be everchanging. Woronowicz (2020) also offered research that suggested the efficiency of being a member of Alcoholics Anonymous and explored how professional therapy using the alcoholics' anonymous program works well within the model of self-help groups. Woronowicz (2020) suggested that combining professional help from psychiatry and psychology with basic principles of the organization significantly supports positive effects on individuals' health. Woronowicz (2020) argued that it helps members and/or clients to handle the aftermath of what addiction causes, like loss, depression, or anxiety. Together, they also help people accept the problem and learn how to deal with it. Integrating the two fields allows people to release their feeling through emotional support, communal support, and understanding, which is a key aspect of trauma-informed care. Woronowicz (2020) added that this idea aids in employing control over "one's destiny through mutual support and the fulfillment of shared desires," (p. 161) which can be recovery and other life aspects as well. Also, it helped "gain a psychosocial substitute for what has been lost"(p. 162) and awaken the therapeutic possibilities of clients by learning practical ways to deal with their problems. Finally, it helped create a new system of relationships and find a new way of life. Woronowicz (2020) highlighted the benefits of this system of treatment, nonetheless, when supported by art therapy, the results of treatment can be enhanced more. Especially that art therapists working with SUD, have blended their technique with the 12-step program to achieve a deeper understanding of one's self and motivations. Holt and Kaiser (2009) suggested that many interventions and

assessments created by art therapists who work with SUD have been developed with the 12-step program's fundamental principles in mind.

The Alcoholics Anonymous Fellowship has been an essential form of support for people with alcohol use disorders for a long time. It has a history and many fundamental assumptions, with assistance from doctors and psychologists in its' formation and development. There is abundant research on the effects of participation in the Alcoholics Anonymous Fellowship and professional therapy using the Alcoholics Anonymous experience and program (Woronowicz, 2020). For these reasons, the growth of the Alcoholics Anonymous Fellowship has spread worldwide, according to Woronowicz (2020).

DeLucia et al. (2015) proposed that current developments in research of mutual-help organizations like the 12-step program have been highly intersected in the field of positive psychology research, and many current studies are working on investigating the middle ground. This is because of how effective such groups can be. Nevertheless, art therapy can incorporate positive psychology-based directives to enhance that aspect of the 12-step program when working with SUDs. It has a capacity to mold and shift for whatever approach is necessary for individual clients and unique groups. DeLucia et al. (2015) 's research found that "the subjective experience of positive psychological functioning might be an important outcome worthy of clinical consideration and further empirical study in mutual-help organization research" (p. 187), implying the massive role art therapy can play in enriching the experience of the 12-step program. DeLucia et al. (2015) described the NA 12-step community-based organization for those who self-identify as having a substance abuse problem as a "mutual-help organization" (p. 187).

According to DeLucia et al. (2015), there are many goals of the program, firstly, "abstinence as the substance-related goal," (p. 817) *not* moderation or reducing consumption. Secondly, members attend non-professional, peer-led recovery meetings in which individuals share their experiences and support one another in their attempts to maintain recovery. Another important aspect of the program is "reciprocal or mutual helping", which implies that all participants help each other because they share similar experiences (p. 817). Also, incorporating principles embedded in the 12-step philosophy into one's life develops one's spiritual growth (*not* religion). Finally, the program focuses on people creating a vision and goals to work towards where they want to be by "utilizing recovery principles and supports to facilitate personal change goals" (DeLucia et al., 2015, p. 817). These characteristics suggest that Narcotics Anonymous and similar organizations can be thought of as "positive organizations"(p. 817) in the sense they provide environments where people can thrive and grow to become better versions of themselves (DeLucia et al., 2015). Art therapy can enhance the personal growth because it has more creative tools to create the vision. Art therapy has more qualities that help people explore who they are to envision where and who they want to be. DeLucia et al. (2015) argued that "recovery reflects an evolving process whereby participation in these core activities ultimately enhances one's spiritual, psychological, and interpersonal functioning" (p. 818). They suggested that while it is evident that the 12-step program serves more than just refraining from the drug, more research is needed for other forms of treatment, which is a gap that art therapy can fill. By applying art therapy as a form of treatment for trauma and addiction, the healing is deepened because of how patients experience a "rich ground for gaining insight, catharsis, and the integration of a compartmentalized self and lifestyle"(Scott & Ross, 2013, p. 247). All factors



needed for patients of trauma and addiction are encouraged by the 12-step program for addiction, and art therapy can fortify in understanding why these components are vital in treating SUD.

There are many different approaches to treating people with SUDs. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is one of the most used and has shown great results (Ouimette et al., 1997). CBT in addiction treatment stems from a social learning theory and clinical research perspective. This form of treatment believes that “substance abuse is a learned, maladaptive behavior” that can therefore be unlearned and/or substituted with another learned behavior (Ouimette et al., 1997, p. 231). The two main areas that CBT tackles when treating drug use are primarily “changing distorted thinking about the abused substances”, and secondly, “increasing adaptive coping responses” (Ouimette et al., 1997, p. 231). Ouimette et al. (1997) described the efficacy of combining the 12-step program with other psychology schools to treat SUD. They ran a study that showed that 12-step patients were likely to be abstinent after a year and that the combination of a cognitive-behavioral approach with the 12-Step treatment methods were all similarly successful in lowering SUD and increasing other aspects of functioning (Ouimette et al., 1997). Conversely, Morris (2014) argued that CBT is criticized for being “too verbal and abstract” (p. 345), and when art is incorporated into the CBT model, significant improvements were shown (Morris, 2014). Overall, Morris (2014) discussed that when art therapy is included with CBT, results improved across many different mental health issues. Morris (2014) concluded his argument by stressing that art therapy “may be one way to answer the charges that CBT is too inaccessible and abstract for some clients” (p. 351). Art therapy gives clients agency in their own healing more than CBT provides (Morris, 2014). Art therapy provides a tool using metaphor to help people express themselves more profoundly, especially because verbal language often cannot express levels and experiences of pain (Scott & Ross, 2013). Scott and Ross (2013)

argued that this expression of pain is complicated for patients of trauma and addiction because, in addition to the pain, there is much shame that is difficult to articulate using only words (Scott & Ross, 2013). Artwork helps patients to conceptualize thoughts and emotions in a more tangible form (Morris, 2014), while CBT is more verbal and abstract. Holt and Kaiser (2009) claimed that clients are often not ready to discuss significant matters or problems like trauma occurrences in verbal intake interviews, but are more probable to be expressed in art directives like "the Crisis Directive" (p. 246) that they suggested. They indicated that when allowing clients to have more space to open up and disclose earlier in the process, it makes the rest of the journey easier. The journey becomes easier because issues are spoken through the art and avoid having these issues appear later when they could get in the way of later stages of recovery (Holt & Kaiser, 2009). The power of a tangible art piece "helps to foster increased emotional awareness of the choices involved and the need for change if negative consequences are to be prevented" (Holt & Kaiser, 2009, p. 245). Holt and Kaiser (2009) explored the significance of the art therapists' role in that their response is critical for advancing a client's "motivation for change" (p. 245). The authors argued how it is imperative for art therapists to practice "empathic reflection related to the client's imagery and offering non-confrontational feedback while responding to any discrepancies in the imagery and the client's discourse helps to create a therapeutic environment that strengthens change motivation" (Holt & Kaiser, 2009, p. 250). The authors also reviewed how the art therapist should

communicate support as individuals move through one stage of change into the next include techniques and motivational strategies such as providing sincere affirmations and empathy; asking open-ended questions; eliciting change talk and self-motivating

statements; providing reinforcement that supports self-efficacy; and framing cautious, tentative reflections and summaries. (Holt & Kaiser, 2009, p. 250)

These elements are vital to tying the elements of the 12-step program with art therapy.

Scott and Ross (2013) stated that "in seeking a path of wholeness it is important to include preverbal, non-verbal, and metaphorical ways of communication"(p. 209). This statement emphasized incorporating principles embedded in the 12-step philosophy into one's life and the strong need to include more diverse forms of expression within the current treatments for SUDs. This is where art therapy can provide individuals with SUDs a wide range of expressive tools.

Despite the compelling arguments of the above scholars surrounding the power of art therapy, Adedoyin et al. (2014) talked about the limitations of incorporating expressive therapies for substance abuse treatment. The authors acknowledged the flexibility and adaptability that art therapy holds, in that it has the ability to relate to different personalities, age groups, and individual or group settings. However, when examining why people might not benefit from the modality, Adedoyin et al. (2014) recognized that some clients might be reluctant to participate in art therapy because they may not want to relive emotions that might appear – the very emotions that they run away from with SUD, which can be a trigger (Adedoyin et al. 2014). In addition to that, Adedoyin et al. (2014) also clarified the carefulness art therapists must have to “not to disclose their own interpretations of the client’s creative expressions because this prevents the client from fully expressing the intended meaning of the art” (p. 544). Well-trained art therapists should develop the following personal qualities to succeed in supporting client healing; compassion, tolerance, understanding, having strong insight and choosing mediums in an intentional manner. A well-trained art therapist must be trained to “hold the space for clients to

deepen the relationship, contain challenging emotions, connect to roots and explore identity” (Nolan, 2021, p. 171). When discussing issues through group art therapy, it provides a safe space for clients to "collaborative problem solving, revisions of relapse prevention plans, or other modifications to the client's treatment plans" (Holt & Kaiser, 2009). Therefore, Holt and Kaiser (2009) reasoned that "the therapist's task is to empathize with the client's perspective, however ambivalent he or she may be about accepting treatment" (p. 246), which allows for the client and the art to work through resistance to reach a level of true acceptance and change. The authors argued that it is the responsibility of the art therapist to "create a set of conditions that will enhance the client's own intrinsic motivation for and commitment to altering behavior" (Holt & Kaiser, 2009, p. 245). A trained art therapist who is skilled and well-qualified to hold the space can add so much to current forms of substance treatment, especially because it is done creatively and empathically. Art therapy with a well-trained therapist will improve a technique like the 12-step program as the latter lacks professional and therapeutically trained support, that is compassionate and rooted in psychology. Art therapy supports CBT approaches because it opens more expressive channels. Art therapy holds the space to contain a multitude of healing approaches as well as combine different disciplines, art and therapy, for the sake of enhancing the healing process.

### **Discussion**

Research demonstrated the value that art therapy holds in medicine and in taking steps towards abstinence and recovery. As described throughout the literature review, many researchers and professionals who work with addiction and SUDs argue that art therapy greatly enhances the treatment of almost any form of SUD and addiction. This is done by understanding the fundamentals of the treatment and improving them – especially the 12-step program. Years

of applying traditional approaches to SUD treatment have shown the efficiency of the 12-step program as a form of treatment, in addition to other therapy approaches like CBT. While these techniques work well, the addition of art therapy can make them work even better, as explained above. Scott and Ross (2013) explained that "the creative arts can take patients quickly to a great intra-psychic depth" (p. 209), which is an aspect of healing that is greatly needed and unavailable in the 12-step program.

Scott and Ross (2013) explained one of the most esteemed aspects of art therapy is in its' capacity to be specifically tailored to each client's needs. They agreed that it "is necessary for the clinician to assess the strengths and vulnerabilities of the patient and match them with the assets and limitations of the treatment setting, as well as the most suitable art form" (Scott & Ross, 2013, p. 209), which is another gap that needs to be filled in the 12-step program. Scott and Ross (2013) also emphasized the importance of having a "highly structured and supportive environment [when conducting art therapy as it] allows for a rich mixture of modalities to transform trauma, addictions, and the destructive thought processes associated with both" (p. 209). Group art therapy has the flexibility to encompass multiple therapeutic methods while also offering non-verbal, creative techniques to aid in healing by stimulating self-exploration, self-expression, and strengthening the power of the 12-step program.

Freimuth (1994) noted that "the twelve-step philosophy does value free service (vs. fee for service), experiential (vs. professional) knowledge, and self-leadership (vs. reliance on professional help)" (p. 551). However, based on the research shown above, art therapy and the 12-step program, and the similarities between the two bring them closer together for the benefit of a patient needing to start their recovery journey (Freimuth, 1994). Both the concept of therapy and the program's goals aim for patients to "actively make choices and strive to fulfill their

individual needs" (Freimuth, 1994, p. 552). In agreement with Scott and Ross (2013), the practice of art therapy allows "structure to disclosure, challenges cognitive distortions, reveals patterns/themes of behavior, develops a more congruent life narrative, addresses trauma and body shame, and encourages proactive relapse prevention" (p. 210). Achieving these therapeutic methods is achieved through a creative modality. Scott and Ross (2013) noted that "All of the creative arts or experiential therapies, with the guidance of a skilled therapist, help evoke the essential processes necessary for wellness. No all-encompassing theory defines art therapy" (p. 210). Art therapy provides flexibility to contain several different aspects from diverse theoretical approaches, multiplying the impact of the approach.

The work shown through this paper shows the impact of a developing framework in exploring how group art therapy can strengthen the power of the 12-step program. Art therapy has the flexibility to encompass multiple therapeutic methods while also offering non-verbal, creative techniques. Group art therapy utilizes non-verbal, innovative techniques to aid in healing substance abuse in adults. Integrating different healing modalities can more comprehensively support substance abuse treatments instead of a more singular restorative philosophy when underlying conditions exist.

Finally, I recommend that people coping with SUDs and addiction pursue a more multimodal approach to healing that includes art therapy in the 12-step program. Although adding art therapy to the 12-step program will add additional costs, the results are worth the long-lasting change. I hope that advocacy for art therapy can spread awareness and raise resources for more people to access such critical help. If more non-governmental organizations (NGO's) were conscious of how effective art therapy is for SUD clients, they could provide a

means to alleviate some financial burdens on clients; for example, collecting donated art materials for client use.

My recommendation for future research would be to incorporate more specific art directives to help guide art therapists working with this population. In addition, I have recommendations for art therapists and researchers in the Middle East. Primarily, it is essential to translate western literature into Arabic to help develop the field in the area. Secondly, it is vital to conduct culturally specific research in the Middle East. One of the issues I faced working as an art therapist in Egypt is the lack of culturally appropriate research.

How art therapy can be integrated into Arab culture is one of the most important study subjects that must be addressed in Egypt and the Middle East. Due to the rigid Mental Health (MH) systems and crippling stigma surrounding it, providing high-quality and accessible MH interventions are prominent issues within Egyptian society. Because there are few art therapists in the region, beginning by translating peer-reviewed published journals from English to Arabic will benefit many practitioners by revealing and emphasizing the importance of art therapy in existing MH practices. In Egypt, MH is considered taboo. MH is regarded as something that should be kept secret. When someone within Egyptian society is labeled as "crazy" or "mad", society assumes it is because of a neglectful family upbringing or lack of religious practice. Not only does the suffering individual become socially ostracized and judged, but also this tarnishes the family's reputation. The individual and families often resist seeking help because they fear the shame associated with receiving MH aid. Raising MH awareness is imperative to help others feel less alone by being vulnerable and to encourage them to speak up about other issues and seek appropriate help. Breaking the taboo cycle and assisting individuals in society to heal and live better and healthier lives, will help normalize MH struggles.

In Egypt, there are now approximately three master's-level art therapists and a few individuals that claim to be art therapists, but lack the necessary qualifications. People who are knowledgeable about art therapy should promote the field and its' benefits. Because there is not a large number of therapists within the field, many people are unaware it exists as a valid mental health treatment option. Art therapists in Egypt need to advocate for the field in a way that distinguishes between clinical art therapists and those who utilize art for non-clinical therapeutic purposes. Carol Hammal, my current supervisor and an art therapist in Egypt for 11 years, has tried to educate others about the differentiation between clinical and non-clinical art therapy. However, now that we have a larger group, it has been suggested we look at starting an Egyptian art therapy board. This would aid art therapists in Egypt to promote the field and advocating for it to be recognized as a legitimate mental health profession. Regarding the aforementioned content, I feel that art therapy can be integrated into Egypt's present healthcare system to increase both awareness and treatment. Because the art therapy field is essentially non-existent academically, few people have the opportunity to study it because would necessitate going abroad to obtain the required education to practice. This also causes obstacles when trying to expand the field in Egypt due to the limitations, which include the following: accessibility, relatability to the culture, affordability, language, and the lack of Egyptian clinicians holding master's degrees. It would also mean that present Egyptian art therapists, such as myself, would have to perform research and possibly pursue employment in the academic sector of MH education to make the field more accessible to Egyptians interested in studying art therapy.

This section of the paper is an art piece (see Appendix A) produced to address the difficulty of establishing oneself as an art therapist in a society where art therapy is mostly insignificant in size, and where mental health, particularly addiction difficulties, is stigmatized.



The artwork served as a multi-directional, multi-symbolic depiction of the numerous themes explored in this essay. One of them is employing the flexibility of art therapy to fill in the gaps, which could be useful in both the 12-step structure and the strict MH regimes in Egypt. Furthermore, the adaptability of art therapy could help meet the need for additional education about mental health and addiction through a creative medium. The multimedia art project reflected the complexities of all of these specific scenarios, including addiction, MH systems, and the impact of art therapy on both those issues.

This artwork which is depicted shows how art therapy can complement established institutions. This has been discussed by others when addressing the 12-step program, but it might also be useful when looking into the gap between mental health and addiction in Egypt's current systems. One of the primary challenges I have witnessed in this sector with young practitioners is a desire to change a system that has repeatedly been demonstrated to be ineffective for persons suffering from mental illness. However, as I was writing this paper and conducting the research necessary to determine how art therapy can supplement the 12-step program, I realized that while changing an existing societal mentality towards MH is nearly impossible, there is also much potential for growth and understanding. Rather than exhausting energy and resources to abolish pre-existing systems, we should strive to add to and improve them. This concept is shown in the artwork where I utilized old Egyptian newspapers, that have been established. The work illustrates how although I cannot fully modify the substance of what they are, I can employ new techniques and resources to improve the impact and art's significance. This, I feel, is what art therapy contributes to the 12 step and MH systems in Egypt.

Art therapy's ability to reframe a narrative from a negative, non-productive one to a healthier one is one of its' most important characteristics. This is one of the most important

aspects to consider when advocating for mental health, particularly addiction, in a country where the culture appears to be hostile towards such ideas and concepts. One could be discouraged to enter the field of art therapy in Egypt right now, but one could also see it as an opportunity to be a part of a long-lasting change, to be a pioneer of not just art therapy but also the MH development in this region.

The artwork depicts a map created with a permanent paint marker, demonstrating how some places areas have rigid structures while others have more fluid structures. The illustration shows how some regions have more space to play in than others, and how finding the proper tempo to thrive in creativity becomes a matter of finding the right place and having a few people to support the work that needs to be done.

Using available resources to achieve a larger goal necessitates the inclusion of a varied range of perspectives. This indicates that while having a support system of art therapists and people interested in art therapy is crucial, it is equally important to attract supporters from other elements of the MH field, such as psychologists and psychiatrists, to help art therapy flourish. This is true in terms of using art therapy to supplement both the 12-step program and the MH system. This notion entails working with what I have and what is available in order to get a more robust output by filling in the gaps in the system, which is why I created the art piece with primarily reclaimable materials.

Unfortunately, in Egypt, the stigma surrounding MH, particularly addiction, prevents those who are suffering from reaching out for treatment, stifling the field's growth. This requires addressing in every way imaginable, especially at the societal, governmental, and educational levels. According to art therapy, everyone is a unique blend of traits, experiences, emotions, and thoughts. Rather than employing a specific strategy to combat existing systems, such as the 12-

step program and current MH regimes, art therapy focuses on the positive aspects of each and fully strengthens them. MH is a topic that needs to be discussed more often and in a more positive manner. As an art therapist, I am aware of my obligation to advocate for MH and art therapy, and I feel that by utilizing art therapy's unique traits, people will be able to see things in new ways and attach new meanings to things, resulting in better systems and methodologies for those who are struggling with mental health concerns and substance used disorders.

## References

- Adedoyin, C., Burns, N., Jackson, H. M., & Franklin, S. (2014). Revisiting holistic interventions in substance abuse treatment. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 24(5), 538–546. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2014.914718>
- American Psychiatric Association. (2017). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: Dsm-5*.
- Cadge, W. and Konieczny, M., 2014. "Hidden in Plain Sight": The Significance of Religion and Spirituality in Secular Organizations. *Sociology of Religion*, 75(4), pp.551-563.
- Captari, L., Sandage, S. and Vandiver, R., 2021. Spiritually integrated psychotherapies in real-world clinical practice: Synthesizing the literature to identify best practices and future research directions. *Psychotherapy*,.
- Davidow, J. (2018). Art Therapy, Occupational Therapy, and American Modernism. *American Art*, 32(2), 80-99. <https://doi.org/10.1086/699611>
- DeLucia, C., Bergman, B. G., Beitra, D., Howrey, H. L., Seibert, S., Ellis, A. E., & Mizrachi, J. (2015). Beyond abstinence: An examination of psychological well-being in members of Narcotics Anonymous. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 17(2), 817–832. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-014-9609-1>
- Drug Overdose Deaths | Drug Overdose | CDC Injury Center*. Cdc.gov. (2022). Retrieved 1 March 2022, from <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/deaths/index.htm>

Freimuth, M. (1994). Psychotherapy and twelve-step programs: A commentary on

humphreys. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 31(3), 551–553.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-3204.31.3.551>

Holt, E., & Kaiser, D. H. (2009). The first step series: Art therapy for early substance abuse treatment. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 36(4), 245–250.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2009.05.004>

Julliard, K. (1995). Increasing chemically dependent patients' belief in step one through expressive therapy. *American Journal of Art Therapy*, p110–119-10p.

Kahler, C., Read, J., Ramsey, S., Stuart, G., McCrady, B. and Brown, R., 2004. Motivational Enhancement for 12-Step Involvement Among Patients Undergoing Alcohol Detoxification. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 72(4), pp.736-741.

Karimi, Z., Rezaee, N., Shakiba, M., & Navidian, A. (2019). The Effect of Group Counseling Based on Quality of Life Therapy on Stress and Life Satisfaction in Family Caregivers of Individuals with Substance Use Problem: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *Issues In Mental Health Nursing*, 40(12), 1012-1018.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01612840.2019.1609635>

Kurtz, L., 2017. The recovery community as a location for secular spirituality. *Addiction*, 112(6), pp.939-940.

Nolan, E. (2021). Holding the Space. *Art Therapy*, 38(4), 171-172.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2021.2003654>

- Morris, F. (2014). Should art be integrated into cognitive behavioral therapy for anxiety disorders?. *The Arts In Psychotherapy*, 41(4), 343-352.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2014.07.002>
- Oren, R., Orkibi, H., Elefant, C. and Salomon-Gimmon, M., 2019. Arts-based psychiatric rehabilitation programs in the community: Perceptions of healthcare professionals. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 42(1), pp.41-47.
- Ouimette, P. C., Finney, J. W., & Moos, R. H. (1997). Twelve-step and cognitive-behavioral treatment for substance abuse: A comparison of treatment effectiveness. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 65(2), 230–240. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006x.65.2.230>
- Scott, E., & C. R. (2013). Integrating the creative arts into trauma and addiction treatment: Eight essential processes. *Psychological Trauma and Addiction Treatment*, 221-240.  
doi:10.4324/9781315808406-17
- Strobbe, S. and Kurtz, E., 2012. Narratives for Recovery: Personal Stories in the ‘Big Book’ of Alcoholics Anonymous. *Journal of Groups in Addiction & Recovery*, 7(1), pp.29-52.
- Stuebing, M. D., Lorenz, H., & Littlefield, L. M. (2019). Literacy-free 12 step expressive arts curriculum enhances engagement and treatment outcomes for dually diagnosed substance use and mental health disorders. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 38(2), 250–265.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07347324.2019.1681331>
- Uttley, L., Stevenson, M., Scope, A., Rawdin, A. and Sutton, A., 2015. The clinical and cost-

effectiveness of group art therapy for people with non-psychotic mental health disorders: a systematic review and cost-effectiveness analysis. *BMC Psychiatry*, 15(1).

Wang, W., Lu, S., Tang, H., Wang, B., Sun, C., & Zheng, P. et al. (2022). A Scoping Review of Drug Epidemic Models. *International Journal Of Environmental Research And Public Health*, 19(4), 2017. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19042017>

*World Drug Report 2021*. United Nations : Office on Drugs and Crime. (2022). Retrieved 1 March 2022, from <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wdr2021.html>.

Woronowicz, B. T. (2020). The legacy of psychiatry and psychology in alcoholics anonymous fellowship program. *Alcoholism and Drug Addiction*, 33(2), 161–198.  
<https://doi.org/10.5114/ain.2020.98880>







### **Author Acknowledgements**

Sarah Hamil, Hoda El Saady, Carol Hammal, and Carolyn Brazil

***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

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

**Student's Name:** Nadine El Essawi

**Type of Project:** Thesis

**Title:** Exploring Group Art Therapy Techniques in Complimenting The 12-step Program in Healing Substance Abuse in Adults: A Literature Review

**Date of Graduation:** May 21<sup>st</sup> 2022

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

**Thesis Advisor:** Sarah Hamil    04/25/2022