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Artful Journey:

An Art Journaling Method for Adults with Physical Disabilities and Progressive Conditions

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Art Therapy

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Abstract

If given the opportunity to do so, all people have the potential to be creative and engage in artistic expression. In an environment of empathy and support, art therapy interventions can be adapted to be accessible for people of all abilities. There is limited research regarding the uses and possible benefits of art therapy for adults living with physical disabilities. To address this issue, this art therapy method looked at how a group of adults from a day program for people with progressive conditions responded to a series of art journaling interventions titled Artful Journey. Artful Journey was designed to be a flexible art therapy experiential that could be adapted to fit the needs and abilities of all who participated, regardless of their physical abilities. Using a person-centered and strengths-based approach, Artful Journey invited participants to engage in four collaborative art and writing interventions. Social isolation, depression, and increased reliance on others for assistance with activities of daily living are common challenges faced by adults with physical disabilities and progressive conditions. For many, these challenges have been heightened by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The collaborative art and writing projects of Artful Journey were able to help participants maintain peer support in a virtual setting. The multimodal design of Artful Journey also created flexibility that allowed for increased accessibility and the opportunity for deeper exploration of the topics discussed. The participants' responses to each intervention of Artful Journey also suggests that this collaborative art journaling project helped to facilitate positive emotions, including joy, hope, and strength during challenging times. With this experiential, art journaling was introduced as a potential coping skill for adults with physical disabilities and progressive conditions to continue to utilize as the symptoms of their illnesses progress.

Keywords: art therapy, accessibility, physical disabilities, progressive conditions, art journaling

Artful Journey:

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“Accessibility allows us to tap into everyone’s potential.”

-Debra Ruh

Expressive arts therapy innovator, Natalie Rogers, believed that all people have an inherent ability to be creative (1993). For individuals living with physical disabilities and progressive conditions, however, extra care must be given to ensure that the artmaking process is accessible for people of all abilities. There appears to be limited research regarding practicing art therapy with people who have physical disabilities. The purpose of this thesis is to help fill in this gap by looking at how a group of adults with progressive conditions responded to a series of art journaling interventions titled the Artful Journey project. Over the course of four weeks, members of a day program for adults with physical disabilities and progressive conditions participated in weekly collaborative art and writing interventions. This experiential was intended to help identify some possible benefits that engaging in group art therapy can have for this population. This thesis describes some of the challenges for adults living with physical disabilities and progressive conditions and how engaging in a group art therapy intervention can help this specific population cope with those challenges.

Previous research has identified the importance of maintaining social connection for adults with physical disabilities (Fraser & Keating, 2014; Symons, Clark, Williams, Hansen, & Orpin, 2011; Torkelson Lynch & Chosa, 1996). Social connection and support among peers with a shared experience of living with a progressive condition or physical disability is one of the main goals of the day program described in this thesis. Due to changing regulations of the COVID-19 pandemic, this project transitioned to a virtual setting. This transition created an even

greater need to learn how to continue to support this population in a virtual environment in order to help the group to stay connected.

There is a wide range of needs and abilities within the disability community. Therefore, it is also necessary to explore options for adapting and modifying art interventions so that they can be accessible for all who want to participate in artmaking. Artful Journey was intended to design a group art therapy method that was flexible, multimodal, and adaptable for people of varying abilities. It was hoped that the interventions used in Artful Journey would be able to highlight each individual's varying strengths and abilities. The group who participated in this study had a previous interest in writing and collage art. Artful Journey was designed to blend these two interests and show participants art journaling as a possible coping tool. Artful Journey aimed to be an introduction into art journaling that participants could continue to use as a coping technique as their illnesses progress. Each weekly intervention of Artful Journey was intended to be positive, hopeful, and strength-based to help participants continue to find joy and resilience, even during challenging times.

This project proposes that group art therapy can help adults with physical disabilities and progressive conditions maintain social connection and peer support. Additionally, multimodal art therapy interventions like art journaling allow for more flexibility to accommodate for physical disabilities and create the opportunity to more effectively reflect and express oneself.

Literature Review

The following will provide an overview of the existing literature around the topic of group art therapy for adults living with physical disabilities and progressive conditions. It will begin by further defining the population and the challenges and barriers that they cope with. There will also be a discussion about the potential benefits of engaging in art therapy and group

work, as well as some possible approaches and techniques to best serve this population. Finally, given the need for this project to be flexible and adjust to the changing circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, there will be a brief look at the impact that the pandemic has had on the delivery of art therapy and the mental health care needs of adults with physical disabilities and progressive conditions.

Challenges for Adults Living with Physical Disabilities and Progressive Conditions

It is important to first understand the population on which this research will be focusing. Physical disabilities look different for each individual and often involve limitations to one's mobility that create challenges to performing activities of daily living. This research will concentrate primarily on those whose physical disabilities are symptoms of a progressive condition. Progressive conditions are chronic conditions that cause one's health and functioning to decline over time. Most who participated in this project have progressive neurodegenerative disorders, which specifically target the central nervous system and often lead to a slow decline in one's movement, cognition, and memory (Gao & Hong, 2008).

People living with progressive disabilities encounter many challenges and barriers that can greatly impact their quality of life. Common disability-related life stressors can consist of physical barriers as well as psychological barriers to accessibility (Zapata, 2020). Physical barriers may include technology, transportation, and whether places are designed to accommodate wheelchairs, walkers, or other medical equipment (Zapata, 2020). Psychological barriers for people with disabilities can include stigmatization, discrimination, and marginalization. For individuals with progressive conditions, there is a significant correlation between one's quality of life and their physical health and psychological well-being (Homayuni,

Abedini, Hosseini, Etemadifar, & Ghanbarnejad, 2021). Quality of life often declines due to a loss of independence, a lack of social support, and the varying challenges of everyday living that one experiences as their disease progresses (Dehghani, Khoramkish, & Isfahani, 2019; Homayuni et al., 2021).

As chronic conditions progress, people may experience a decline in mobility, cognition, or other aspects of physical health, creating a greater need to depend on others for caregiving and activities of daily living. People living with multiple disabilities often confront even more barriers and challenges in their everyday lives. In a study on the effects that multiple sclerosis has on everyday living, Dehghani et al. (2019) found that common challenges identified by people living with multiple sclerosis include, “confrontation to physical, emotional, psychological, and behavioral changes, fear of becoming crippled, tolerance of financial burden of the disease, and confrontation to cultural-social wrong beliefs” (p. 201). Progressive illnesses have no cure, and the outlook is often uncertain. Dehghani et al. (2019) discovered that the most significant challenge identified by patients with multiple sclerosis was fear associated with the ambiguous trajectory of their disease progression.

Impairments resulting from the symptoms of a progressive disorder can also affect one’s social life immensely. Therefore, isolation and a lack of social support is another challenge often faced by many individuals with progressive conditions (Dehghani et al., 2019; Marrow, Roeser, Gasper, LaRocca, & Frankel, 2020). A lack of social support can increase depression and anxiety symptoms, and Marrow et al. (2020) suggested that “depression actually makes the disease, and disease-related impairments, worse” (p. 202). Marrow et al. (2020) pointed to participation in groups and adult day programs as a possible solution and a way to increase emotional well-being and social support for those living with a disability like multiple sclerosis.

Potential Benefits of Engaging in Group Therapy

Group therapy is one way to overcome some of the challenges that adults with physical disabilities and progressive conditions encounter. There is much research to support the possible benefits of participating in group therapy for adults with progressive illnesses. Fraser and Keating (2014) emphasized the importance of social support for adults with multiple sclerosis and noted that it is beneficial for people with disabilities, “to find social activities of interest to increase social networks and interactions with other people, especially those who have similar concerns and experiences” (p. 331). Fostering connection and support among peers with a shared experience of living with a physical disability is a primary goal of adult day programs and groups, including the one described in this thesis project. Social support can help improve quality of life, increase adaption to one’s disability, and combat loneliness as one’s illness progresses (Homayuni et al., 2021; Torkelson Lynch & Chosa, 1996). Torkelson Lynch and Chosa (1996) discovered that their community program “provided much needed stimulation and socialization for individuals with disabilities who are isolated from peers” (p. 75). Adults with multiple sclerosis who participated in Marrow et al.’s (2020) survey reported that participating in groups and day programs also helped increase their emotional well-being, improve their physical functioning, and offer acceptance and a lack of stigma.

Potential Benefits of Engaging in Art Therapy

Research has also shown that involvement in the creative arts can help to improve the quality of life for adults with physical disabilities. When looking at how a group of women with multiple sclerosis were affected by participation in a creative art program, Fraser and Keating (2014) discovered that involvement in the program positively impacted participant’s self-esteem,

hope, and self-efficacy to function and control their illness. Fraser and Keating's (2014) study unveiled some unique benefits that artmaking and the creative flow had on the individuals with multiple sclerosis who participated in their art program. Some of these benefits included how artmaking diverted participants' attention away from negative thoughts of their condition, helped them to express grief, filled an occupational void, improved mindfulness and self-awareness, and increased their sense of choice and control through the use of art materials (Fraser & Keating, 2014).

Symons et al.'s (2011) study about the use of visual art in a rehabilitation facility for people with progressive neurological conditions found that "the psychological impact of doing art improved relaxation during and after art sessions, which assisted them in adjusting to life changes" (p. 48). Additional positive psychological benefits of creating art for people with progressive conditions that have been identified include, providing a coping strategy, a way of releasing and working through difficult emotions, and an opportunity for self-care (Symons et al., 2011). Participants of Symons et al.'s (2011) study also discovered that artmaking helped to improve their physical skills. Specifically, using various art materials can help those with degenerative conditions to utilize the skill sets and motor functioning that they still have despite the progression of their illness (Symons et al., 2011). Engaging in artmaking also can support cognitive functioning for those with progressive conditions by helping to keep one's mind active and challenge them to learn new skills like those that are involved in making art (Symons et al., 2011). Learning a new skill like visual art can also help to build confidence and empower those living with a physical disability. Symons et al. (2011) observed in their study that the "ability to learn a new skill provided participants with positive reinforcement of their ability to learn other skills, despite barriers related to their condition" (p. 48).

Artmaking in a group setting has demonstrated further benefits for people living with progressive conditions, including facilitating positive emotions and increasing enjoyment (Fraser & Keating, 2014; Symons et al., 2011). Group art therapy can provide an opportunity for individuals to share their feelings and experiences of living with a chronic condition and help find a sense of belonging as a part of the group (Fraser & Keating, 2014; Symons et al., 2011; Williams, Dingle, Jetten, & Rowan, 2018). Art therapy groups can be used to foster a sense of connection to others, which is especially important to help combat loneliness and depression during a time of social isolation from COVID-19.

A Person-Centered Approach

For individuals with physical disabilities or advanced stages of a progressive illness, there are often many challenges with mobility and motor functioning. A decline in fine motor skills can make many activities of daily living difficult and result in a greater dependence on others for support. When working with those who require more assistance and hand-under-hand support, it is important to approach the art therapy process in a way that respects one's dignity and autonomy. This can involve identifying and highlighting the strengths and skill sets that an individual still has, modifying art materials in order to empower them to continue to create art as independently and freely as possible, and continuing to let them lead the way in their creative and therapeutic journey. A person-centered approach to therapy is especially effective when practicing art therapy with people with physical disabilities and progressive conditions. Natalie Rogers (1993) argued that "each person has the capacity for self-understanding, insight, and an ability to find the path or direction they need if given an environment of empathy and support" (p. 76). When presented with the opportunity, support, and necessary adaptive tools, people of all abilities have the potential to engage in artmaking and creative expression.

Using The Third Hand

Edith Kramer's (2000) "third hand" approach is especially useful in supporting individuals with physical disabilities. The concept of the third hand refers to the therapist supporting and assisting an individual's creative process, "without distorting meaning or imposing pictorial ideas or preferences alien to the client" (Kramer, 2000, p. 48). The support that is given through the therapist's third hand must strive to communicate the client's experience and artistic vision as authentically as possible. When working with adults with progressive conditions and physical disabilities, the third hand can be helpful in adapting one's art materials so that creating art is still accessible for them. For example, with this population, the use of the third hand can look like taping down someone's paper for stability, finding grips and adaptable drawing utensils, or pre-cutting images for individuals to collage with. Third hand assistance helps to ensure that people with disabilities are able to make use of their strengths and continue to create art as independently as possible.

A Multimodal Approach to Therapy

There is evidence to support the benefits of combining multiple art forms in therapy. Multimodal therapy utilizes multiple expressive therapies, "to foster awareness, encourage emotional growth, and enhance relationships with others" (Malchiodi, 2005, p. 3). Using multiple creative tools together can also allow an individual to delve deeper into exploring their feelings and experiences (Bastemur & Bas, 2021; Rogers, 1993). A multimodal approach can be especially useful in supporting individuals with physical disabilities in art therapy. People with physical disabilities all have unique challenges and abilities. Therefore, there is the need to be flexible and modify materials in order to highlight the strengths of everyone who is participating in an art group (Luzzatto, Bruno, Cosco, Del Curatolo, Frigenti, & Macchioni, 2017). Offering

the choice to use a variety of media and creative modalities gives participants multiple options of ways to approach each art therapy intervention and better express themselves. Allowing individuals to choose the art forms that best fit them and their needs ensures that the art therapy intervention is accessible for people of all abilities.

Using Visual Art with Writing

This thesis project focuses specifically on using a combination of visual art and writing in a therapeutic intervention. According to Bastemur and Bas (2021), “the integration of art and narrative therapies helps to transfer the verbal stories more deeply by giving individuals a visual expression tool in telling their stories” (p. 163). Keeling and Bermudez (2006) also looked at the experience of participants who utilized writing and visual artmaking techniques in a narrative therapy intervention. The study discovered that the multimodal experiential allowed for a greater exploration of the personal experiences of those who participated (Keeling & Bermudez, 2006). Additionally, Keeling and Bermudez’s (2006) intervention increased participants’ “awareness of personal resources and agency...and fostered a sense of empowerment” (p. 405). Creating visual art along with verbally telling or writing one’s story can also help people to externalize their problems and better separate themselves from the problems (Bastemur & Bas, 2021). Recognizing that one’s problem is separate from the self can be a helpful coping tool, especially for those living with the challenges of a progressive condition.

The Impact of COVID-19 and Art Therapy

People living with disabilities and chronic progressive conditions are a vulnerable population that often face a number of social disadvantages and barriers. These struggles have been heightened as the COVID-19 pandemic has created additional challenges and barriers for

individuals in the disability community and has negatively impacted the mental health of many. A 2021 study on the mental health of Medicare beneficiaries with disabilities during the pandemic found that nearly half of the individuals with disabilities who were surveyed had increased symptoms of general anxiety and one-third had symptoms of major depressive disorder as a result of COVID-19 (Friedman, 2021). Additionally, Friedman (2021) pointed out that during the pandemic, individuals with disabilities encountered many of the same challenges that other populations did. “However, they also did so while grappling with ableism, and the stress, trauma, and deadly consequences that come with it” (Friedman, 2021, p. 4). Friedman’s (2021) study highlighted additional barriers resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic that have contributed to the mental health of this population. These challenges include, financial insecurity, increased risk of death, unmet needs, and various forms of ableist discrimination (Friedman, 2021).

The pandemic has led to increased isolation and loneliness for many adults living with physical disabilities and progressive health conditions (Braus & Morton, 2020; Friedman, 2021). Art therapy can be used as a potential coping mechanism for combating loneliness and isolation during this time (Braus & Morton, 2020). Choudhry and Keane’s (2020) survey looked at art therapy and the impact of COVID-19 and concluded that, “art therapy is particularly effective during times of crisis, especially in coping with isolation, changes in circumstance, trauma, and grief” (p. 5). Engaging in art therapy can also provide a coping strategy for handling anxiety and depression related to the stress and uncertainty of living through a pandemic (Choudhry & Keane, 2020).

Although the above studies have illustrated an increased need for mental health care services for individuals with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, access to mental health

care presents additional challenges for many. Technological barriers, whether they are access to devices, internet connectivity, or unfamiliarity with technology, have prevented some from receiving telehealth services during pandemic times (Choudhry & Keane, 2020; Hackett & Zubala, 2020). This technological barrier is especially evident for adults with physical disabilities. Connecting in a virtual setting can be problematic for adults with disabilities who require more physical support and assistance with activities of daily living. This thesis project will explore how to adapt an art therapy experiential to fit the needs of adults living with physical disabilities and progressive conditions while dealing with the extra barriers presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

Inspiration

The source of inspiration for Artful Journey arose from observing the needs and interests of the members of a day program for adults with physical disabilities and progressive conditions located in Boston, Massachusetts. Many members of the day program had a passion for writing, and the group had published two books of poetry together in the past. In addition, the group had developed an interest in collage art over the course of previous art therapy sessions at the day program. Artful Journey involved a combination of these interests. The original intent of Artful Journey was for every participant to create their own art journal that consisted of a combination of visual art and writing. Each week, participants would add a page to their journal in response to a topic that revolved around the overarching themes of hope and strength. The multimodal approach of Artful Journey was to allow for deeper exploration and greater flexibility of ways for individuals to participate in the interventions, regardless of their abilities. Participants would be invited to create art journal entries however they chose to while using the materials that best

suited their needs and abilities. The original purpose of Artful Journey was to serve as an introduction into art journaling as a possible coping skill and reflection tool for individuals to continue to use on their own as their illnesses progress.

However, changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the need for adjusting the original plan for the Artful Journey experiential. To accommodate for the changing needs of the group members and the unpredictable circumstances of the pandemic, Artful Journey was adapted to work in a virtual environment. The virtual format for Artful Journey was still made up of four weekly projects that centered around the theme of hope and consisted of a multimodal approach that incorporated both visual art and writing. Many participants did not have access to art supplies at home and required some level of hands-on assistance when using art materials. Additionally, the sudden and unexpected shift back to virtual day programming created a greater need for the group members to stay connected during a time of social isolation. Due to these concerns and limitations, the Artful Journey project became a collaborative art journal that was created digitally over Zoom. Shifting Artful Journey to collaborative work also allowed for all members to still be able to participate in the project remotely, despite their varying disabilities. In addition to introducing a possible coping skill, the purpose of Artful Journey ultimately was to use a multimodal art therapy intervention to engage adults with varying physical disabilities and help them stay connected as a group during a period of social isolation.

Participants

The participants of the Artful Journey experiential included individuals who are members of a day program located in Boston, Massachusetts for adults with physical disabilities and progressive conditions. The program specializes in neurodegenerative disorders such as multiple sclerosis, although anyone with a physical disability or progressive illness is welcome to join the

group. The day program is designed to be a resource for health and wellness and provide peer support for those living with a physical disability or progressive condition. Members who participated over the course of Artful Journey have varying physical disabilities and chronic progressive conditions, including multiple sclerosis, Huntington's disease, and muscular dystrophy. Due to the nature of the day program, group members are able to come and go from the program as they choose to. Therefore, the participants of Artful Journey varied slightly from week to week. Members joined the Artful Journey program via Zoom over the course of four weeks to participate in a series of virtual poetry and collage projects.

Procedure

The Artful Journey experiential was structured into a series of ninety-minute group interventions that occurred weekly in January of 2022 with members of the adult day program. Participation varied between four to seven members each week. Although the group size was much smaller in the virtual setting compared to that of previous in-person programs, there remained consistent members and participation every week of the Artful Journey project. To adjust to the challenges and limitations of the virtual environment, the program alternated each week between focusing on writing and focusing on artmaking. In weeks one and three, participants engaged in collaborative poetry. Members all contributed words and phrases that the group rearranged into freeform poems. In weeks two and four, participants created collaborative digital collage pieces to accompany their poems. Each member chose photos and images to add to group collages. All the themes for the Artful Journey sessions were intended to be strengths-based and positive. This was to encourage participants to continue to find joy and resilience, even during challenging and uncertain times. All sessions started and finished with a discussion and check in among group members.

The goal of week one was to have participants compose a freeform collaborative poem reflecting on what hope means to them. Week two continued the theme of hope and focused on each member's sources of hope by creating a collaborative digital collage. The goal of week three was to explore the participants' sources of joy through creating a freeform collaborative poem about joy. The final session in week four focused on creating a collaborative digital collage about what joy looks like and feels like for each member of the group. As the facilitator, I shared my screen on Zoom in each session and assisted in rearranging the poems and digital collages based on the requests of the group participants. After the closing of the Artful Journey project, the members of the day program were emailed copies of their completed pieces in a PowerPoint presentation.

Materials

Once Artful Journey was adapted for the virtual environment on Zoom, the materials used for the interventions included blank Microsoft Word documents for collaborative writings and Adobe Photoshop for the creation of collaborative artworks. The pictures used to form the digital collages consisted of group member's personal photographs as well as stock images from the internet. A PowerPoint presentation was used to assemble all the virtual art journal entries created together throughout Artful Journey.

Record-keeping

As the facilitator, I took process notes for each session to record the progress and observations from Artful Journey. The process notes followed the same outline every week. After the completion of each group, I recorded a list of the session's attendees, a step-by-step account of what happened in the session, notes about what was created during the group, any notable comments from group members, how the session went, and ideas and adjustments for the

next week. I also kept an art journal to reflect more deeply on what I observed, including what I saw, heard, felt, and experienced as the facilitator. Whereas the Artful Journey participants engaged in virtual artmaking and writing, I kept a physical art journal for reflection. In response to each session, I created an art journal entry that utilized the same combination of collage art and writing that was intended for the Artful Journey project.

Results

The data gathered from the four sessions of the Artful Journey experiential will be reviewed. I will summarize the interventions used each week of the project and describe what occurred throughout each session. I will discuss observations about the group members' interactions with each other, the creation of their artwork and writing, and the overall process and happenings of each session. Additionally, I will share my own art process that I used to reflect and make sense of each Artful Journey session.

Observations

Week One:

Four individuals participated in week one of Artful Journey, which occurred in the first week of January 2022. The original intent for the first week of this project was to hand out blank journals and art materials and begin the first journal entry in response to the prompt: "identify a hope or wish for your new year." The goal of this was to begin to introduce art journaling as a possible coping skill for participants to use independently. Participants would be allowed to explore the materials of their choice and decide what worked for them and their needs. Due to the restrictions of COVID-19, the program had to be adjusted to a virtual environment. Many participants of the adult day program did not have access to art supplies at their homes, and the program was not able to distribute materials to members before the sudden shut down. To

accommodate for this limitation, the first Artful Journey experiential focused on a writing intervention that did not require any outside materials. Additionally, several members of the group needed more one-on-one support and third hand assistance when writing or creating independently. This obstacle was difficult to navigate through the screen. Due to this challenge, I decided to have the group focus on a collaborative project that all members would be able to contribute to. I also felt that it was important for the members of the day program to stay connected after the abrupt shift away from in-person programming. A collaborative project could support this connection.

The virtual session began with a presentation and discussion about art journaling, including possible uses and benefits of creating an art journal. Some participants shared how journaling has been helpful to them in the past. One participant living with multiple sclerosis explained how journal writing had allowed her to create some distance from herself and the problems she faced, ultimately helping her work through her challenges and make them seem less overwhelming. After this introduction, the group transitioned into a collaborative writing exercise around the theme of hope. Group members were asked to share words, phrases, or thoughts that came to mind when they reflected on what hope means to them. To accommodate for fine motor challenges without being able to assist group members with writing in person, I facilitated the exercise by sharing my screen and typing a list of participants' responses into a blank Word document. The technological barrier of the virtual setting unfortunately contributed to a much smaller group size than one of the day program's usual in-person activities. Although the group was small, all members actively participated in the collaborative work. After all participants had contributed their ideas about hope, the group worked together to rearrange the items on the list into a freeform poem. The group began the task by deciding which lines should

go first and last, and then proceeded to continue constructing the poem from there. I moved the lines of the poem and made the necessary adjustments that corresponded to the decisions and requests made by the group members. Once the group decided that they were finished editing their poem, one participant was chosen to read the completed hope poem aloud. The group then discussed their reactions to the poem and how they felt about the experience. The group ended on a positive note as members continued to share their hopes and wishes for the rest of 2022.

The group dynamic felt positive and supportive in the first session of Artful Journey. The overall tone of the collaborative poem that was written was one of encouragement and optimism with reminders to always stay resilient and strong. The collaborative writing seemed to successfully allow for the group to stay connected even though they were physically distanced. It also allowed for all members to participate, despite their varying disabilities. One participant commented on how the poem was a “collage” of everyone’s ideas and positive thoughts. I sensed the group’s disappointment about the day program being abruptly transferred back to meeting in a virtual setting. Despite the challenges and uncertainty, the group remained strong and hopeful about the future. Additionally, going into the experience, I felt my own trepidation about learning to effectively lead an art therapy experiential in a virtual setting with this population. To reflect on the experience of facilitating this group more deeply, I wrote a poem in my art journal in response to some of the barriers that were encountered and how the group was flexible and worked through them together. I also created a collage out of torn paper in reaction to the “collage of positivity” that each group member helped create in the first session of Artful Journey (Figure 1). In the background of the journal pages, I made my collage transition from grays to more saturated bright blues and purples. This change of colors represents my change in

mood from feeling fearful and disappointed about the virtual environment to feeling more optimistic and proud of what the group members could accomplish regardless of the setting.



Figure 1

Week Two:

The second session of Artful Journey had seven participants. The original prompt for the second Artful Journey entry was to, “explore what brings you hope.” This was intended to dive deeper into the exploration of the theme of hope so that participants could identify their individual sources of strength and hope. This week, the group learned that the day programming would be continuing in a virtual setting indefinitely. Although my original intent for Artful Journey was for every participant to create their own art journal to discover the expressive tools that worked and were helpful for them, I sensed that what the members now needed was to maintain the connection and peer support that they had as a group. To achieve this, I decided that it was important to adjust my original plan and continue forward on Artful Journey with more collaborative pieces.

The second virtual intervention began by rereading the group's collaborative poem from the previous week about their meaning of hope. Participants were then invited to reflect on the things that brought them hope and strength. As facilitator, I once again shared my screen and typed up participants' responses into a Word document for all members to see. Common themes about hope that participants shared included, kindness, connection to others, family, faith, and peace. After creating a list of everyone's sources of hope, participants were asked to consider what images come to mind when they think about the items on the list. The group then worked together to find a picture to represent each hopeful item. Participants had the option of emailing me an image of their own or looking online for a stock photo. One participant emailed me photos she had taken of plants in her garden. To accommodate other members of the group who had limited fine motor abilities or technological challenges, I assisted in searching for their hopeful images online. As images were gathered, I copied and pasted them into a blank Photoshop document while I shared my screen for participants to see. Once pictures were found for all of the sources of hope that the group identified, the group worked together to organize them into a digital collage. The group discussed how to arrange the images, what colors to put in the background, and any final touches that the piece needed. The group members were also in mutual agreement that "chocolate" gives them hope, and a picture of a pile of chocolate candies was added to the collage. There was great participation among all members, and the group collaborated well to make decisions about their collective artwork. I made adjustments to the collage in response to the requests of the group members. To close the session, we looked at the group's finished hope collage alongside their collaborative hope poem. Group members then shared their thoughts and reactions to what they had created together. The participants seemed proud of what they accomplished as a group and felt that the hope poem and collage

complimented each other well. The group seemed to be creating a sort of virtual art journal together. They agreed that making collective artwork helped them to stay connected as a group. One participant commented on how she comes to the day program every day so that she can see her friends and continuing to meet as a group on Zoom allows her to stay in touch with everyone.

Although completing this project in a virtual setting was not ideal for this population and led to some technological barriers, this intervention appeared to work well as a continuation from the first week's intervention. It would also have been nice to be in an in-person setting where participants could engage in a hands-on experience of creating art. Instead, I felt that I had to do a lot of the physical work in the virtual setting to help the group put together the pieces of their collaborative collage. However, given the circumstances, the digital collage was an experiential that allowed for all group members to participate in the virtual setting, regardless of their disabilities. Participants could dictate what they wanted for their collage while I shared my screen and did the fine motor and technological work based on their requests. Each member was able to select the images that they wanted to contribute to the collaborative piece. In my artistic response to the second session of Artful Journey, I wanted to convey the positive and light tone that I felt from the group as they connected with and supported each other (Figure 2). I wrote a hopeful message and collaged a sun with rays that were creating a path across the page and spreading light. I noticed myself becoming less doubtful about the trajectory of Artful Journey after witnessing the positive responses from the participants so far.



Figure 2

Week Three:

There were five individuals who participated in week three of Artful Journey. The original design for the third week of Artful Journey was to have participants journal about their strengths and supports. The goal of this was to proceed with positive strengths-based themes as participants continued to become familiar with practicing art journaling. However, to provide some sense of structure in a time of uncertainty, I decided to continue forward with the virtual Artful Journey project using the same format as the previous two weeks: creating a collaborative poem followed by a collaborative digital collage art piece. The focus of the first poem and art piece was hope. For week three, I felt it was best to continue with another broad topic that would allow for flexibility. The focus of week three was the theme of joy. The intention behind this theme was to remind the participants to continue to think positively and find joy, even during the most challenging times.

Week three began by reviewing the hope series created in the previous two weeks. The group then engaged in a discussion about their sources of happiness and things people can do to control their own happiness. The group shared suggestions of ways to “hunt for happiness” when they are feeling down. Some suggestions from participants included spending time doing activities that one is passionate about, social connection, meditation, and getting exercise. The group members were then invited to participate in a collaborative poem about what brings them joy and happiness. Similar to the structure of the first collaborative poem, participants each shared some ideas of what joy meant to them and their personal sources of happiness. I typed up everyone’s responses into a blank Word document as people shared their thoughts about joy. I shared my screen so that all participants could see the list of things that they associated with joy. Some members shared just the names of things that they relate to the meaning of joy, such as “sunshine,” “smiles,” “peace,” and “nature.” Other participants shared longer comments about what brings them joy. One member who is living with Huntington's Disease spoke about how seeing old friends always brings him joy, especially those who he is not able to see often because of the pandemic. Another member who has multiple sclerosis agreed that it was very difficult to be away from the other members of the day program for a year and a half when COVID-19 first hit. It is evident that the social connection and peer support among this group is very meaningful and important to the members of the day program. Once group members had finished sharing their thoughts on joy, they worked together to rearrange all of their ideas into a freeform poem. I reordered the lines and words based on the directions of the participants. Another member who has multiple sclerosis shared that finding acceptance for her illness has brought her joy. Group members agreed that accepting their disabilities has helped them cope and bring more joy to their lives. The group decided to conclude their joyful poem with a line about finding joy through the

acceptance of their differences. When the poem was complete, a member of the group was chosen to read it aloud. The session concluded with participants sharing their thoughts about what they created. By week three, the group had gotten familiar with the structure of the Artful Journey project and the similar format of the interventions each week seemed to be giving them a sense of consistency and control during a time of uncertainty.

The virtual setting certainly limited the possibilities of what could be created. At this time, it was not clear whether participants were learning how to use art journaling as a personal coping skill like I originally intended for the Artful Journey project. However, the project was demonstrating that it had some positive benefits, including fostering social connection and helping participants cope as a group through the challenges of the pandemic. It also seemed to be assisting participants in exploring their strengths and resilience during times of difficulty, as evidenced by the positive and optimistic responses people were sharing to each intervention so far. This week, I was struck by the group's discussion about how finding acceptance of their illnesses had brought them more joy in life. As a non-disabled person, I will never truly understand what it is like to live with a physical disability or progressive condition like the participants of my group. Perhaps it was because of my ignorance that their joy and acceptance of their disabilities initially stood out to me. I wanted to explore this further with my third reflective art journal entry (Figure 3). I collaged a sunflower and used warm colors on the page to represent how participants described the warmth that they associated with the feeling of joy. I included the phrase "connect through unique challenges" to describe what the members of the day program have been able to do as a group with the shared experience of living with a physical disability.



Figure 3

Week Four:

Week four of Artful Journey had six participants from the day program. As the closing session for Artful Journey, the original plan for this week was to have participants pass around their personal journals and leave a hopeful message in each group member's art journal. To adjust to the virtual environment and provide a close to the collaborative digital art journal that the group had been creating, week four consisted of making a collaborative art piece to go along with the joyful poem they had composed in week three. This intervention would continue with the structure of the previous three weeks of Artful Journey. It would also allow the group to continue to work together and complete their series about joy.

The final week of Artful Journey began by viewing a PowerPoint slideshow of all of the artwork and writing that the group had created so far. This felt like a good closing activity to bring the group together. After rereading the joy poem written in the previous session, the group transitioned into designing a digital collage to compliment it. This intervention followed the

same format as the hope collage created in week two of Artful Journey. The group was invited to share ideas of what joy looks like and feels like. Responses were typed into a collaborative list on a blank Word document. I shared my screen as I typed participants' ideas. Common thoughts for what joy looked and felt like for members of the group included sunshine, laughter, warmth, peace, and tranquility. Similar to the structure of week two of Artful Journey, participants were then asked to consider what images came to mind when they thought about the items listed. The group then worked together to find a photo to represent each joyful item they came up with. Members again had the option of emailing me a specific photo of their own to represent their thoughts about joy. For those with a technological barrier or physical disability that prevented them from navigating the computer, I also offered the option of assisting in finding a stock photo on the internet. Participants told me what image they wanted to use, and I helped them to search online for options. Once participants chose the pictures that they wanted to use, I copy and pasted them into a blank Photoshop document. The screen was shared so that all participants could see the formation of their collaborative joy collage. After an image was found to represent all items that were on the collective list, the group worked together to rearrange the photos and design a digital collage. As the facilitator, I made the adjustments in Photoshop according to the requests of the participants. This format made it so that people could use verbal cues to dictate what they wanted in the artwork while I assisted with the technology and fine motor skills in the virtual setting. The participants this week seemed to have more comments and suggestions about what they wanted in their artwork compared to previous weeks of Artful Journey. This might suggest that the participants were getting more comfortable and confident with the process of making art together. This also might suggest that participants of the group wanted more agency over what they created and were ready to begin practicing art journaling independently. The

session closed with viewing the completed joy series and inviting participants to share their reactions to the experience. The group agreed that the sudden change back to a virtual setting had forced them to learn to be creative and flexible. They seemed proud of the digital art journal that they had managed to make together even though they were socially distanced. The members of the day program were emailed a PowerPoint slideshow of their collaborative digital art journal after the closing of the Artful Journey experiential.

In the final week of Artful Journey, I was proud of the group's strength and resilience and their ability to continue to find joy regardless of the circumstance. One participant commented that "joy is what you make of it." I decided to include this phrase in the background of my last journal entry as a reminder to stay positive even when encountering roadblocks (Figure 4). My creative response to the fourth session of Artful Journey also included a tree that is growing strong in the bright sun, representing the group's ability to stay strong and carry on. I reflected on my initial hesitation and disappointment about facilitating groups virtually with this population. The Artful Journey project ended up looking different than originally intended. However, the group was able to come together and create something memorable and powerful. I also included the words "stronger together" to represent a common theme that I had noticed across all sessions of the Artful Journey project. I was proud of what the group was capable of accomplishing regardless of the barriers they faced.



Figure 4

Discussion

Care must be given to ensure that art therapy interventions are accessible for people of all abilities. There is limited research involving making art therapy accessible for adults with physical disabilities. It is important to continue to investigate the possible uses of art therapy with this population to ensure that people of all needs and abilities have the potential to benefit from engaging in art therapy. The Artful Journey project was designed to look into the possible use of art therapy for adults with varying physical disabilities and progressive health conditions. Prior studies have noted the significance of social connection for individuals with disabilities. The need for combating loneliness and isolation only became greater with the extra challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Artful Journey hoped to maintain social connection and peer support during a time of social isolation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another purpose of the Artful Journey experiential was to establish a group art therapy intervention that was multimodal and adaptable for people of varying abilities. Additionally, Artful Journey was

intended to introduce art journaling as a possible coping skill and reflection tool that could continue to be utilized as the symptoms of one's chronic condition progressed. Despite the limitations encountered, Artful Journey was able to successfully address all of these intentions.

Findings

The following section will review the main findings that were discovered through the completion of the Artful Journey experiential. Themes identified through the completion of Artful Journey include how group art therapy can be used as an effective coping skill for adults with disabilities, how artmaking can help promote positive emotions, and how it can help maintain social connection. Additionally, it was found that multimodal art therapy can allow for greater accessibility and deeper exploration for this population. Each of these themes found in the results of Artful Journey will be discussed and related back to the findings of the literature review.

Art Therapy as a Coping Skill:

The use of group art and writing experientials provided participants of Artful Journey with a useful coping skill. A study by Symons et al. (2011) argued that art therapy is an effective coping strategy for people with physical disabilities and progressive conditions. This was also found to be true in the Artful Journey experiential as participants coped together through unexpected changes and a time of uncertainty. Although the original intent was for participants to learn an individual coping skill, the collaborative interventions of the virtual Artful Journey still allowed for participants to reflect, stay resilient, and cope through a difficult time as a group. Using art and writing interventions via Zoom, the group was able to find connection amidst isolation. Symons et al. (2011) also noticed that artmaking helped individuals with neurological conditions and physical disabilities in "adjusting to life changes" as their conditions progressed

(p. 48). Similar findings were discovered through the results of the art and writing interventions of Artful Journey. For example, when composing a poem about the sources of joy, participants of Artful Journey reflected on how finding acceptance to the inevitable changes of their progressive conditions brought them happiness. This demonstrates how the Artful Journey interventions allowed for participants to have the space to discuss and reflect on their experiences of living with a disability and work together to adjust and find acceptance.

Art Therapy Promotes Positive Emotions:

One of the greatest benefits of art therapy interventions for adults with physical disabilities that was identified by Artful Journey was the ability to facilitate positive emotions through the creative process. Prior research supports this finding. Symons et al. (2011) looked at the effects that creating art had on adults with physical disabilities and discovered that artmaking helped participants in “facilitating humor, joy, and positive emotions” (p. 45). Fraser and Keating (2014) made a similar observation when they studied how adults with multiple sclerosis responded to artmaking. They found that individuals with multiple sclerosis reported an increase in enjoyment as a result of creating art, learning a new skill, and working with others (Fraser & Keating, 2014). The results of Artful Journey further support this conclusion that artmaking can assist in increasing joy and positive emotions for adults with physical disabilities. The positive and strengths-based topics for each experiential of Artful Journey allowed participants to reflect and find joy in their lives. The interventions of Artful Journey were adapted with a strengths-based mindset to ensure that all members of the group could contribute to the projects regardless of their disabilities. In addition to a strengths-based approach, the focus on the topics of hope and joy helped facilitate a hopeful and optimistic tone among the group. Even during a challenging

time of change and uncertainty such as the COVID-19 pandemic, participants of Artful Journey were able to use the prompts to identify and think about their sources of hope and strength.

Art Therapy Facilitates Social Connection:

Artful Journey allowed for members of a day program for adults with progressive conditions to combat loneliness and isolation. Loneliness and social isolation are common challenges for adults living with physical disabilities and progressive conditions (Dehghani et al., 2019; Homayuni et al., 2021; Marrow et al., 2020; Torkelson Lynch & Chosa, 1996). This challenge was only heightened by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to socially isolate. Especially for those living with a chronic condition, the pandemic caused further disconnection and isolation. Although the virtual setting was not originally intended for this project, participants were able to remain connected as a group over Zoom while collaborating on the Artful Journey interventions. Group art therapy sessions on Zoom allowed participants to continue to have discussions about their experiences as they would in an in-person setting. Engaging in collaborative art making and writing helped group members stay connected and offer peer support among those with a shared experience of living with a physical disability.

Multimodal Art Therapy Allows for Deeper Exploration and Reflection:

Artful Journey successfully utilized both art and writing to provide more opportunities for those with physical disabilities to connect and respond to the weekly topics. Research has also demonstrated that multimodal interventions such as those used in Artful Journey can also allow for a deeper exploration of one's feelings and experiences (Bastemur & Bas, 2021; Keeling & Bermudez, 2006). Bastemur and Bas (2021) wrote about integrating art and writing in therapy and determined that using the two artforms together often "leads to a more comprehensive self-discovery and self-expression" than other types of therapy (p. 147). Offering multiple tools for

expression can create more opportunities for communicating one's thoughts and feelings authentically. Artful Journey was structured to allow participants to be able to reflect on the chosen themes with both writing and artmaking. Ruminating on the same topics for two weeks of Artful Journey made it so that people could have space to respond in both art and writing to each topic, and overall engage in a deeper reflection process.

Epilogue

Due to the fact that participants were not able to practice their own art journaling in the virtual environment of Artful Journey, I wanted to ensure that the group members still had access to the necessary tools and resources in order to utilize art journaling for their own self-care. Following the completion of Artful Journey, the members of the day program for adults with physical disabilities who had participated in the project were mailed a package of art materials that they could use in their own time as they desired. The materials included blank journals, pre-cut magazine images, pre-cut words, decorative papers, glue sticks, and prints of the collaborative art and writing pieces completed during the four weeks of Artful Journey. When considering what supplies to send participants, I wanted to make sure to include supplies that would be accessible for all, including those with limited fine motor abilities. Therefore, I decided to include a collection of pre-cut magazine images for collaging for those who were unable to use scissors. Additionally, some participants are no longer comfortable with writing by hand. To accommodate for this, I decided to also include a bag of pre-cut words for people to arrange into poetry or short phrases to glue in their journals. I held a follow up session with the participants on Zoom to introduce the art materials and give some ideas and suggestions of how to use them. I shared a presentation that included some benefits of art journaling, some ideas for additional art materials and how to adapt them for accessibility, examples of art journals, and some suggestions

of prompts to get people started. The presentation slides were shared with the group following the session. The materials sent and the resources shared were intended to be a starting point for participants to get inspired and explore ways of using an art journal that are effective and helpful for them.

Limitations

There were limitations that occurred as a result of the many unanticipated circumstances that arose during the Artful Journey project. Although the virtual environment on Zoom allowed for group members to remain connected to some extent, the virtual setting created some additional barriers to accessibility for the adults with physical disabilities who participated in the project. When facilitating art therapy groups in person with this population, it is possible to work individually with each participant in order to help adapt materials and interventions to be accessible for varying needs and abilities. This third hand assistance can ensure that everyone is able to physically engage with the art materials. Sometimes this involves adjusting materials or providing hand-under-hand assistance. Offering this same level of support was not possible through the screen. Instead of collaborating with each participant to help them find the art journaling materials that worked and interested them, I had to come up with a new plan of how to still engage all participants in the digital environment. In addition to lacking hands-on support, most participants did not have access to art materials in their homes. Therefore, instead of physically interacting with art materials as was originally intended for the Artful Journey experiential, the interventions all had to be digital. Participants had to dictate what they wanted to write and create while I navigated the technology as the facilitator. The original intent of this experiential was also to have each participant create their own journal based on their needs and interests. However, in order to support and engage all members of the group in the virtual

setting, the project was switched into collaborative interventions. Ideally when exploring art journaling as a coping skill, each participant would be able to decide if they wanted to write, make art, or do a mix of both. However, creating collaborative works in the virtual environment required some organization and structure for the group. Instead of allowing participants to choose which modalities and materials to engage with each week, the virtual Artful Journey project was formatted so that each week it was pre-determined whether the group would be writing or creating art collectively. Further technological limitations occurred throughout Artful Journey. Complications with access to devices, internet connectivity issues, and problems with audio connection all impacted the level of participation in each group. Overall, the number of members who participated in each session was significantly smaller than that of previous in-person day programming. Also, it must be noted that the participants of Artful Journey represented a more limited selection of physical disabilities and progressive conditions than what was originally hoped for the project.

Ideas for Future Research

If this project were repeated, it would be helpful to involve a larger sample size with a greater representation of physical disabilities. This would allow for a better understanding of how art journaling and group art therapy can impact adults living with physical disabilities and progressive conditions. Conducting Artful Journey in-person as was the original intention for the project would be helpful in observing participant's reactions to physically interacting with the art materials and noting similarities and differences between the experiences of in-person versus online art journaling interventions. In order to gain more of an understanding of how adults with progressive conditions can benefit specifically from art journaling and use it as a coping skill, it is essential to conduct this experiential in person without the various limitations of the virtual

environment. Further observations could also be discovered from completing Artful Journey in an individual setting rather than a group one. Working one-on-one could allow for more individualized support in adapting art materials and ensuring that a client is able to find a method of art journaling that is effective and accessible for their needs and abilities.

This project confirmed that virtual art therapy can be effective for adults with physical disabilities. To further this research, it would also be helpful to continue practicing and learning more about working virtually with this population. It would be beneficial to explore the different impacts of digital versus tactile art materials for those with physical disabilities. Further research that assesses other art therapy interventions in the virtual environment could investigate how the digital platform can be creatively used to foster joy and connection for adults living with physical disabilities and progressive conditions.

Conclusion

Completing the Artful Journey project in a virtual setting was not ideal for this population and contributed to some limitations. However, the group was able to adjust to the circumstances to the best of their abilities and still highlight some of the possible benefits of group art therapy for adults with physical disabilities and chronic conditions. Artful Journey successfully determined that group art therapy can combat isolation and promote social connection for adults living with physical disabilities and progressive conditions. Having the opportunity to create collaborative art and poetry helped to foster connection among the group, even though they were physically distanced. The collaborative interventions used also allowed all participants to contribute to the projects and more deeply reflect on the themes discussed each week. This project also found a way to continue supporting this population in a digital setting. Artful Journey was intended to be flexible and adapt art and writing materials to fit the needs of those

who participated. Instead of modifying physical art materials to be accessible, this project adjusted to the digital environment so that all members of the program could share and contribute to each intervention. Lastly, Artful Journey was able to introduce participants to some ideas and tools for using art journaling individually as a coping skill and possible mode of self-care in the future. Through collaborative art and writing interventions, participants practiced art journaling techniques that can continue to be explored after the completion of Artful Journey.

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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

Thesis Advisor: _____ **Raquel Stephenson**_____