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Toward Holistic Mental Wellness:
A Literature Review of Mindfulness-Based and Focusing-Oriented Art Therapies
Capstone Thesis
Lesley University

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Art Therapy

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Abstract

Modern day living, for all its benefits, is synonymous with record levels of stress. The mental health clinician's role is to assist clients in accessing the skills and tools necessary to reduce and alleviate the symptoms of stress-induced anxiety. Mindfulness is emerging as a potent and effective tool to restore one's state of well-being. Likewise, engaging in art therapy has been shown to reduce stress and foster resilience. Grounded in humanistic and existential theories, this literature review aimed to assess the impact and effectiveness of two intermodal holistic therapies, specifically mindfulness-based art therapy (MBAT) and focusing-oriented art therapy (FOAT). A critical review of the literature on mindfulness, focusing and art therapy revealed a positive correlation supporting increased measures of well-being and self-efficacy in various populations. Adults who received mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) and partook in therapeutic artmaking have been found to benefit by increased confidence, self-compassion and resilience. Children and adolescents, who are especially receptive to expressive therapies, were found to be excellent candidates for MBAT due to the nature of its non-verbal and sensory-based methods. Benefits for youth included improved levels of self-confidence, increases in positive mood, improved relationships and decreases in anxiety and stress. While further research is necessary to determine the short and long-term impacts of arts-based mindfulness interventions, there is little doubt that holistic mental healthcare is here to stay.

Keywords: mindfulness, art therapy, focusing, holistic, well-being

Author Identity Statement: The author identifies as a straight, White, cis-gender woman from New England of mixed European ancestry.

Toward Holistic Mental Wellness:

A Literature Review of Mindfulness-Based and Focusing-Oriented Art Therapies

Introduction

In recent decades, enthusiasm has been mounting in the western hemisphere on the topic of mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn (2005) defined mindfulness “as moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is in the present moment, and as non-reactively, as non-judgmentally, and as openheartedly as possible” (p. 232). Focusing, another mind/body awareness practice developed by Gendlin (1981), directs one’s attention toward their bodily *felt sense*, welcoming it in each moment (Rappaport, 2008). As the benefits of mindfulness practices become increasingly apparent, it stands to reason that integrating complementary therapeutic modalities with mindful awareness has the potential to increase well-being and positive mental health outcomes. When combined with artmaking, these intermodal approaches are known as Mindfulness-based Art Therapy (MBAT) and Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy (FOAT). It was my intention in this literature review to inquire and assess how arts-based mindfulness approaches have been effective and advantageous to the mental well-being of various populations.

As a multitude of modern-day stressors increasingly overwhelms individual and collective bodies, mindfulness has emerged as a potent tool for combatting and reducing chronic stress. Rooted in ancient Buddhist principles, mindfulness teaches one to bring their attention to the present moment, while maintaining a non-judgmental attitude toward passing thoughts, sensations and feelings (Harp et al., 2022). Mindfulness practices often include formal sitting meditations, body scans, walking or eating meditations as well as lovingkindness meditations (Rappaport, 2013). Mindfulness was formally introduced to the scientific community by Jon

Kabat-Zinn, a pioneering practitioner of yoga and meditation in the United States. Kabat-Zinn (1990) developed an evidence-based mindfulness curriculum known as MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction) in the late 1970's at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. An eight-week training program originally designed to relieve chronic pain and illness, MBSR has been shown to effectively reduce a host of symptoms, including mood and anxiety disorders (Hoffman et al., 2010). Kabat-Zinn (2010) stated that his primary motivation for bringing mindfulness into the mainstream was to “relieve suffering and catalyze greater compassion and wisdom in our lives and culture,” (p. 285). Additionally, scientifically researching the mind-body connection was of utmost importance to Kabat-Zinn.

While mindfulness began to steadily gain interest and accolades in the secular domain, psychotherapists also began incorporating holistic, mind-body methods into their practice. From the humanistic approach of Carl Rogers' person-centered therapy to the existential, transpersonal and contemplative therapies, clinicians incorporated Eastern concepts of non-judgmental acceptance and a focus on the “here and now” (Rappaport, 2013, p. 29). Today, a wide range of therapeutic approaches incorporate mindfulness practices, including mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) (Rappaport, 2013).

Like mindfulness, the use of art in healing therapies has an ancient history spanning back thousands of years. McNiff (2004) noted the connection between modern day art therapy and the indigenous healing work of shamans in tribal rituals, rites and healing ceremonies. As in shamanism, McNiff (2004) wrote, art therapy “harnesses the healing powers of creative expression” (p. 185). Rappaport (2013) found similarities between the art process and mindful awareness. The creative acts of painting, drawing or molding clay often consist of repetitive

motions, while the tactile qualities of art allow for a sensory experience that brings one's attention fully into the present moment (Rappaport, 2013). In art therapy, the therapist can serve as a witness to their client's artmaking, providing their full attention to the creative and healing process the client is undergoing. This therapeutic and creative dynamic, when infused with mindfulness practices, has the potential to restore and uplift the client's well-being.

In this literature review capstone thesis, I will highlight the current research methods and practices of combining mindfulness and focusing with art therapy, while also assessing the effectiveness of MBIs among specific populations. Due to the highly experiential nature of mindfulness and expressive art, I will also be documenting my own MBAT and FOAT encounters by practicing various mindfulness techniques and creating response artwork. My hope is to contribute to the awareness of the many benefits achieved when combining MBIs with art therapy, while also assessing how and why certain populations benefit from these holistic intermodal approaches.

Literature Review

I chose the Literature Review option for my Capstone Thesis as a means of compiling and critically analyzing the available and relevant research on MBAT and FOAT. This option allowed me to summarize past and current studies on this topic and assess the relevancy and effectiveness in various clinical populations. Undertaking a literature review resulted in a thorough look at the outcomes and findings of researchers in the fields of art therapy and mindfulness, as well as clarified the types of interventions have been tested. It also provided a grounded knowledge base which may aid other clinicians in understanding the potential benefits and advantages of utilizing MBAT and FOAT techniques with their clients.

MBAT for Cancer and Chronic Illness

Receiving a cancer diagnosis is among the most distressing experiences humans can encounter, and breast cancer rates among young women in the United States are trending upward (Hendrick et al., 2021). Tragically, cancer rates among both men and women worldwide are predicted to increase by 47% between 2020 and 2040 (Baydoun et al., 2021). The distress caused by cancer results in an array of psychological symptoms, ranging from difficult emotions like fear, sadness and rumination, to serious mental health disorders like depression and anxiety (Baydoun et al., 2021). Holistic mindfulness protocols such as Kabat-Zinn's MBSR have shown to be effective in teaching cancer patients formal mind-body practices. This includes the body scan (focusing one's attention on the body in a systematic manner), hatha yoga (a gentle system of yoga postures to increase body awareness), and sitting meditation, the practice of bringing one's attention to the breath, thoughts and senses (Baydoun et al., 2021).

Qualitative and quantitative research studies have also documented solid evidence for the positive benefits of utilizing the arts and mindfulness among patients with medical diagnoses. In one such study, Monti et al. (2005) conducted a randomized, controlled trial to determine the efficacy of MBAT among a group of 111 women diagnosed with various cancers. Monti et al. (2005) noted the effectiveness of group therapy in reducing levels of distress and increasing overall quality of life among those with chronic illness by integrating mindfulness meditation with art therapy in their eight-week study. The basis for providing mindfulness alongside art therapy was grounded in research based on Kabat-Zinn's MBSR curriculum, which has a proven record of lowering stress levels among cancer patients (Monti et al., 2005). Monti et al. (2005) noted that the benefits of mindfulness practices include a greater ability to self-regulate "through cultivation of focused attention and acceptance of self in the present moment" (p. 364).

The advantages of art therapy are often complementary to those achieved with mindfulness. Monti et al. (2005) noted that art therapy allows for activation of the brain's right hemisphere with its sensory and kinesthetic tasks. This side of the brain is where nonverbal and traumatic memories are stored, whose activation in art therapy can foster a greater awareness of one's emotional response (Monti et al., 2005). The non-verbal process of art making also promotes greater adaptive coping, according to Monti et al. (2005), and when combining mindfulness and art therapy in an MBAT intervention, one's capacity for healthy self-regulation is often increased.

To test their theory, Monti et al. (2005) studied groups of cancer patients who received the MBAT intervention, meeting for eight consecutive weeks for two and a half hours per week. A group of patients who were placed on a waiting list were also studied as a control group. Participants in the MBAT groups received mindfulness meditation training and were given 30-minute meditation assignments to complete at home on the days between sessions (Monti et al., 2005). Group art therapy directives were designed to explore the present moment and integrate the mindfulness teachings of self-awareness, self-acceptance and "creative expression of internal thoughts and emotions" (Monti et al., 2005, p. 371). The findings of this study showed that the patients who received the MBAT intervention had significantly less symptoms of distress when compared to the control group, including improvements in anxiety, hostility, interpersonal sensitivity, obsessive-compulsive tendencies and somatization levels (Monti et al., 2005).

When assessed for measures of health-related quality of life, the MBAT group subjects significantly improved on measures of mental health, general health, vitality and social functioning (Monti et al., 2005). These results supported Monti et al.'s (2005) hypothesis that MBAT interventions can increase the quality of life for cancer patients, while also decreasing

levels of distress. Being the first study of its kind at the time it was published, the authors admitted that further research is required to assess whether the MBAT techniques used in their study would be more beneficial for cancer patients, rather than one of those treatment modalities alone (Monti et al., 2005).

Klagsbrun et al. (2005) conducted a FOAT research study for a group of women with breast cancer diagnoses. Focusing, a mind/body technique that promotes insight and stress reduction, has been shown in prior research studies to improve body image, decrease depression and provide emotional benefits for patients undergoing physical illness (Klagsbrun et al., 2005). Composed of six distinct steps, focusing was originally developed by Eugene Gendlin in the 1960's as a tool to connect individuals with their *felt sense*, or the somatic sensations that compose the body's inner knowing- a process that often directs one's attention to what is necessary for emotional healing to occur (Sandmaier, 2017).

The first step of focusing, referred to as *Clearing a Space*, was utilized by Klagsbrun et al. (2005) with a group of 20 women in various stages of breast cancer treatment. The focusing intervention was followed by a variety of expressive therapy modalities (such as visual arts, movement and creative writing). Participants were provided multiple opportunities to experience clearing a space, led by trained facilitators in sessions and with focusing partners to practice in between sessions (Klagsbrun et al., 2005). The purpose of clearing a space in focusing is to assist the individual in mentally placing aside three to six obstacles to their well-being, thereby attaining a feeling of resting in an "all fine place" (Rappaport, 2008, p. 37). After placing each obstacle at a comfortable distance outside of themselves, participants may sense that their internal space feels "cleared" and are then prompted to find a word, image or phrase to summarize that feeling (Klagsbrun et al., 2005).

To complement the experience of clearing a space, Klagsbrun et al.'s (2005) group was next invited to create "art lifelines" using a variety of art materials. The art lifeline was a visual representation of the individual's engagement in creative expression over the course of their life, noting high and low points of creativity along the way. Next, a "safe place" guided visualization was offered, followed by a writing prompt intended to personalize the individual's connection to safety (Klagsbrun et al., 2005). Other expressive therapy modalities featured in the retreat included mindful movement sessions, movement mirroring among partners, nature collages, art mandalas, spirituality-infused creative movement exercises and more.

Klagsbrun et al. (2005) found after completing the study that the benefits realized by participants included increased emotional strength and courage, reduced levels of anxiety, an increased sense of empowerment and resilience and a better capacity to reduce stress and physical tension. Limitations of the study included the small sample size, inability to separate the benefits of focusing/clearing a space from the expressive arts components, and the unknown influence of how the workshop's location (serene, beautifully landscaped gardens) contributed to the wellbeing of participants (Klagsbrun et al., 2005). Follow-up interviews with participants six-weeks after the sessions ended indicated that many of the women were still utilizing and practicing focusing while continuing to experience the positive benefits of the group interventions (Klagsbrun et al., 2005).

With the guidance of a Focusing Trained Art Therapist, Wendy Sharak, I had the opportunity to experience clearing a space during my final semester as a graduate student. Having dealt with a chronic illness myself for the past several years, I embraced the opportunity to metaphorically place this burden outside of my being in order to access the "All-Fine" place. After "clearing" several issues, I felt a noticeable shift in my mind and body- a lightness and

feeling of relief. Following the session, Sharak encouraged me to process the experience by creating artwork in the medium of my choice, with the option to depict my vision of the All-Fine place (see Figure 1). My artwork captured the memory of an oceanside cliff from which I watched the sunrise and sunset over the course of several days. The symbol of the rising sun allowed me to synthesize my yearning for renewal, freedom and lightness, feelings that were also experienced in the focusing session. Later, reflecting on the image provided the residual benefits of recalling the sensations of the focusing session, another benefit that often accompanies art making with focusing or mindfulness practices.

Figure 1

Pastel Drawing of the author's "All Fine" place



Along with exploring the various mindfulness practices that are utilized in MBAT or FOAT, this literature review also provided the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of diverse art mediums. In a pilot study of a MBAT intervention for outpatients with cancer, Meghani et al. (2018) combined mindfulness meditation skills with photography, producing images from which clients later produced mixed-media collages. This 8-week program, featuring a MBAT

intervention dubbed by the authors as “Walkabout: Looking In, Looking Out,” included a combination of MBSR trainings with mindful phototherapy and group art therapy sessions (Meghani et al., 2018). According to Meghani et al. (2018) the study aimed to measure the “symptom burden, sleep, spirituality, sense of coherence, and HRQoL” in cancer patients (p. 1196). In the beginning of the study, participants were given an opportunity to mindfully explore the art materials, with an invitation to embrace playfulness as they created a multi-media collage. In later sessions, patients were equipped with digital cameras and provided time to mindfully explore the natural spaces surrounding the cancer treatment clinic, with instructions to document what captured their attention (Meghani et al., 2018). Participants were then provided support and guidance in constructing collages based upon their photographs, creating meaningful layered artwork with varying degrees of complexity.

The results of Meghani et al.’s (2018) study showed a significant decrease in depression from week one through week eight, a moderate decrease in anxiety, no change in sleep quality, moderate effects in emotional and social functioning, a highly significant increase in comprehensibility and highly significant increases in spiritual factors, including peace, meaning and faith. Meghani et al. (2018) fully acknowledged the inherent limitations of their small pilot study where the majority of subjects were educated women. In future research of MBAT, Meghani et al. (2018) encouraged a larger study to measure the improvements of physical symptoms such as fatigue, nausea, pain and appetite. Importantly, Meghani et al.’s (2018) pilot study documented the ability of MBAT interventions to reduce psychological and spiritual distress among populations with chronic illness, ultimately helping to alleviate the symptoms that are so common among patients.

Jalambadani and Borji (2018) designed a semi-experimental, randomized controlled MBAT study with a group of 124 women with breast cancer. Women in the study were randomly assigned to either a MBAT group or a control (wait list) group, with the MBAT group meeting once a week for twelve consecutive weeks in 90-minute sessions. Art therapy components included both directed and spontaneous art making prompts in a variety of art media, with a focus on exploring the present moment and building on the mindfulness curriculum that accompanied each session (Jalambadani & Borji, 2018). Each session also included time for group discussion and the sharing of member's experiences.

Jalambadani and Borji (2018) stated that the goal of their MBAT intervention was to promote "self-awareness through directed observation (mindfulness practices) and creative expression of internal thoughts and emotions (art therapy) and by enhancing self-acceptance through verbal and nonverbal bonding and social support (group therapy)" (p. 196). The authors hypothesized that their intervention would help to decrease the patient's level of stress while improving their quality of life (Jalambadani & Borji, 2018). Consistent with similar research models, this study resulted in significant decreases in distress symptoms among participants in the MBAT intervention. Measures of stress management, mental health, vitality and sleep all showed significant improvements among MBAT participants. Improving quality of sleep is a notable benefit of this study, as this has the potential to alleviate levels of fatigue among cancer patients, a common and often disabling symptom (Jalambadani & Borji, 2018). Jalambadani and Borji (2018) noted that future research studies are needed to examine the precise impact of MBAT on decreasing fatigue among cancer patients, along with testing the effectiveness of each modality separately to assess whether the synergy of the multimodal therapies is indeed advantageous.

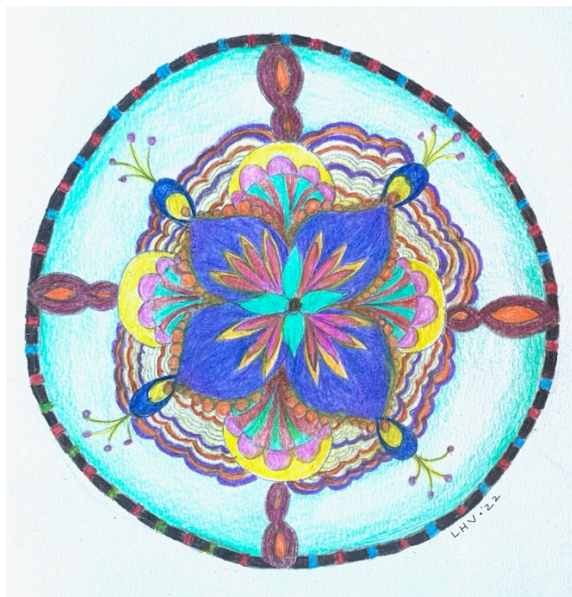
In addition to cancer-related studies, a recent study by Choi et al. (2021) documented the impact of a MBAT intervention on patients with chronic widespread musculoskeletal pain (CWP). In a randomized, controlled study of 36 participants with documented chronic pain, Choi et al. (2021) pointed to the effectiveness of previous studies, including MBSR, to reduce pain, stress, depression and anxiety. The benefits of combining art making with mindfulness are described by the authors as a means of increasing the patient's relational attachment with the therapist, while also providing psychosocial support in group art therapy sessions (Choi et al., 2021).

Choi et al.'s (2021) intervention consisted of a mindfulness-based mandala coloring (MBMC) made within a natural forest setting, combining MBAT with nature-based therapy. A mandala is an ancient Buddhist art ritual dating back thousands of years and typically consists of complex geometric patterns within a circular design (Choi et al., 2021). In choosing to combine mandala making with a nature-based setting, the authors noted previous research that documented the benefits of regular exposure to nature for those recovering from illness, pain, surgery or other mental health conditions (Choi et al., 2021). This study included 39 adults experiencing pain for more than three months, ranging in age from 19 to 64. Individuals were divided into an experimental and a control group, and measurements of pain, fatigue severity, stress response, and cortisol levels were gathered (Choi et al., 2021). The control group spent the same amount of time in an urban setting on a bus tour, while the experimental group was led through a mindfulness and nature-based mandala directive in a recreational forest outside of Seoul, South Korea (Choi et al., 2021).

Choi et al. (2021) determined that the MBMC intervention was far more effective in relieving pain and psychological symptoms compared to the control group. While this study is

limited by its small sample size and novel design, the results were promising. Somatization, anger, depression symptoms and stress response scores all showed significant improvements among participants in the experimental group (Choi et al., 2021). When the participants had their saliva measured for the presence of cortisol (a stress hormone), the level was significantly lower after completing the directive, pointing to the effectiveness of MBAT interventions to decrease physiological and psychological stress (Choi et al., 2021). Choi et al.'s (2021) inclusion of a nature-based component in their MBAT intervention provides an incentive for further intermodal studies that combine mindfulness, nature and art therapies. Clearly, MBAT has gained solid footing among medical based therapies, with its documented ability to promote well-being and decrease stress-related symptomology among patients with chronic illness.

I experienced the positive benefits of a MBMC intervention by partaking in a modified version. I found a quiet sitting spot in my backyard, which is adjacent to a private, wooded area. Beginning with a five-minute guided meditation that I played on the mindfulness app Headspace, I then proceeded to draw a free form mandala design in pencil on a sturdy piece of watercolor paper. After completing a pencil design, I added color using colored pencils (see Figure 2). While I was drawing and coloring, I noticed the sounds of birds chirping, the wind rustling some leaves, and the sensation and temperature of the cool air on my skin. When my mind would inevitably wander to thinking of past or future-oriented thoughts, I tried to notice and gently return my mind to the present moment. Having a mandala (circle) to work within provided a soothing and relaxing container, and the process felt familiar to me as I often work with mandalas. The repetitive nature of coloring in shapes within my mandala was a grounding and comforting experience. After finishing the design, I observed that I felt more relaxed, peaceful and at ease within my mind and body.

Figure 2*Abstract Mandala Drawing in Colored Pencil***MBAT for Youth**

Art therapy has a lengthy history of aiding in the therapeutic healing process for children and adolescents, and the addition of mindfulness to the treatment plan is gaining momentum. In the past, adult populations were most often correlated with high levels of stress, however recent studies indicate that youth are increasingly vulnerable to stress-related symptoms (Lindsey et al., 2018). The Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the mental health crisis looming over adolescents, as major disruptions to daily life and social isolation have negatively impacted children and teens across the globe (Kock et al., 2021).

Lindsey et al. (2018) studied the impact of a MBAT group therapy intervention for youth to facilitate greater stress management and relieve levels of anxiety and depression. The importance of equipping children and teens with stress-relieving coping skills cannot be understated, as high levels of unmanaged stress may have deleterious effects on brain development, often leading to emotional or physical disorders (Lindsey et al., 2018). One notable

strength of an arts-based intervention is its emphasis on non-verbal communication, a natural fit for children and adolescents who may struggle to verbalize their feelings. Lindsey et al. (2018) measured the effectiveness of MBAT for adolescent populations in a study designed to improve levels of self-efficacy while also relieving anxiety, stress and depression. Six eighth-grade students were selected for this quantitative study from a public middle school in the U.S., and the group met after school for a total of six two-hour sessions (Lindsey et al., 2018).

Lindsey et al.'s (2018) study incorporated mindfulness by providing psychoeducation for the students about stress management and practicing relaxation exercises at the opening and closing of each session. Visualizations, guided meditations, controlled breathing exercises and mindful journaling were among the tools utilized to impart a sense of calm and relaxation for the youth (Lindsey et al., 2018). The arts-based task for each student was to create an over-sized mask from an array of materials, to serve as an external "totem of calmness" (Lindsey et al., 2018, p. 292). Despite a very small sample size, the authors found the youth benefited from increased awareness of the effects of stress, increased confidence levels, improved behavior in school and reductions in self-reported anxiety and stress levels (Lindsey et al., 2018). As with most existing MBAT studies, larger-scaled studies would be highly beneficial to provide further evidence of the positive benefits of an arts-based MBI for adolescent populations.

Another promising study that measured the effectiveness and benefits of mindfulness and art-based interventions for youth featured a 12-week group program for vulnerable children. The authors predicted that these youth, with backgrounds in the child welfare or mental healthcare system who have faced adverse circumstances, would benefit from increased resilience and self-esteem, while also improving their levels of emotional regulation, mood, coping skills, confidence, empathy and ability to focus (Coholic & Eys, 2015). Recognizing the difficulty

children with traumatic histories may experience when learning to practice traditional mindfulness strategies, Coholic & Eys (2015) developed a program adapted to the unique needs of this population, which they referred to as Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP). HAP utilizes arts-based techniques to help children learn mindfulness skills in a more active and engaging manner. For example, HAP participants were provided clay and directions to sculpt shapes of what they are feeling or imagining while listening to a guided imagery script (Coholic & Eys, 2015). This provides the youth an opportunity to learn the mindfulness skill of focusing, while allowing for a tactile experience that activates the child's ability to engage with their present-moment thoughts and feelings.

Coholic & Eys (2015) asserted that the HAP program is an innovative and strengths-based program with goals of "learning mindfulness skills and concepts, improving self-awareness, developing self-compassion and empathy and shoring up strengths" (p. 2-3). Using a qualitative research method called interpretive theme analysis, Coholic & Eys (2015) gathered data from parents and youth in a systematic manner. Overall, their findings revealed HAP participants were better able to regulate their emotions while also communicating their feelings more clearly, expressed happier and less frustrated or anxious moods, developed stronger coping and social skills, displayed improvements in confidence and self-esteem, showed increased empathy for others and improved their focus and attentional skills (Coholic & Eys, 2015). The program's success was not solely due to its mindfulness focus, however, but Coholic & Eys (2015) explained that participants also benefitted from it being a strengths-based curriculum in a group format, with an emphasis on arts-based methods- a process that the youth found enjoyable and engaging.

A qualitative research study explored the benefits of MBAT interventions for children raised in foster care (Coholic et al., 2009). Children in the foster care system often face histories of abuse and trauma and are more likely to suffer from poor self-esteem and feelings of guilt. According to Coholic et al. (2009), this population is at risk of higher rates of suicide and other mental health issues. To promote posttraumatic growth and resilience among foster care youth, Coholic et al. (2009) designed a holistic arts-based group therapy program to encourage participants to develop self-awareness, the ability to “pay attention” while improving resilience and self-esteem (p. 66). Posttraumatic growth, or the positive changes that an individual may experience due to adverse life events or trauma, has not been widely studied in children, lending further importance to this research (Coholic et al., 2009).

With goals of developing self-awareness and higher levels of self-esteem, the authors provided youth in their study with six weekly two-hour long sessions. Group sessions began with a short interactive game intended to encourage fun while fostering listening and communication skills. Participants were then guided in a variety of arts-based prompts intertwined with mindfulness and relaxation exercises. A closing exercise helped to solidify the group’s unity and provide emotional closure (Coholic et al. 2009). Using the grounded theory strategy, Coholic et al. (2009) interviewed both the children and foster parents following the completion of the group.

The response from the youth was overwhelmingly positive, with participants calling the group “fun” and noting that they learned to “express your feelings” (Coholic et al., 2009, p. 68). Foster parents also reported many positive benefits, including the enthusiasm and increased confidence the youth displayed. Incorporating the arts and encouraging creativity had an important impact among the youth as well. One participant stated, “The group helped with my imagination. I didn’t really use my imagination all that much, so now I use it” (Coholic et al.,

2009, p. 69). To solidify this research and eliminate excess variables, a controlled, quantitative study modeled after this group format should be performed in the future.

Bullying is a topic of major concern among youth and caregivers, with many impacts on the mental health and well-being of affected children. Recent research indicates that adolescents who experience bullying are at greater risk for developing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Other troubling effects of bullying include anxiety, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, low self-esteem and poor academic performance (Sosin & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2016). In order to support the therapeutic needs of this population, Sosin and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2016) developed their “Creative Exposure Intervention,” an arts-based, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) mindfulness tool designed to address bullying-induced PTSD. The authors adapted an evidence-backed CBT method called “in vivo imagery” (also known as imagery rescripting), a process which allows clients to recall, modify and reframe traumatic images in order to reduce symptoms of distress (Sosin & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2016). Combining in vivo imagery with art therapy and focusing techniques, the major goals of creative exposure for youth include reestablishing attachment security, talking about the impact of their bullying experience, reframing their narrative and beliefs “to a story of courage, resiliency and hope,” setting goals and planning for a hopeful future (Sosin & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2016, p. 394).

Mindfulness skills and grounding techniques are among the vital tools implemented in this study to assist youth in relaxing and calming their bodies. Sosin and Rockinson-Szapkiw’s (2016) intervention included psychoeducation and guided imagery to imagine a safe, calm “all fine place,” (a focusing technique) followed by the opportunity to draw their imaginary safe scene on paper. Exposure to the disturbing bullying memories is followed by a brainstorming session in order to encourage new insights, feelings, information and thoughts to emerge- all of

which can be captured in a new set of drawings (Sosin & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2016). The authors have used this intervention successfully to treat a variety of PTSD symptoms in individual, couples and group sessions, although this approach has not been empirically evaluated as of this writing, warranting further research on the topic (Sosin & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2016). Sosin and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2016) note that a secure attachment to a parent or guardian figure is an important consideration before undertaking this intervention with a young client, and the client should possess adequate insight, cognitive and verbal abilities in order to participate.

Thus far this literature review explored creative mindfulness interventions for youth who were served in outpatient settings. A recent qualitative study by Coholic et al. (2020) draws on their success with previous studies providing MBIs to youth but offers a different perspective with a MBAT group program for teenagers with mental health challenges in a short-term hospital setting. Coholic et al. (2020) designed an inclusive, voluntary, strengths-based group program that was offered daily for three consecutive hours. Art-based interventions such as “Me as a Tree,” directs youth to draw themselves as a tree, helping to engage and develop insight and self-awareness among participants, while appreciating diversity among the group (Coholic et al., 2020).

Following their release from the group, the authors conducted a series of interviews with youth using the interpretive thematic analysis approach. The results pointed overwhelmingly to positive feedback from youth, who found the program to be enjoyable and effective in improving their self-awareness, mood, coping skills and confidence (Coholic et al., 2020). Along with those benefits, the authors noted that the sessions fulfilled the youth’s longing for relationships and

imparted a sense of belonging, important features of MBAT groups that should not be underestimated (Coholic et al., 2020).

I tested a variation of one of the youth MBAT interventions, drawing on the strengths-based curriculum that Coholic et al. (2020) proposed. Beginning with several minutes of a sitting meditation with peaceful, ambient music playing in the background, I practiced paced breathing until my body felt calm and my mind was quiet. Using oil pastels, I began drawing myself metaphorically as a tree, modeled after the “Me as a Tree” directive (see Figure 3). While drawing, I reflected on my strengths as an individual and the ways in which my identity has shifted and morphed over the years, all the while remembering experiences, family, friends and places that have helped to shape who I am today. Relaxing music in background helped to create an atmosphere conducive to introspection while keeping my attention on the present moment. The kinesthetic quality of pressing the pastels into the paper to blend colors was another tool I found to be a calming, mindful technique. When finished with the drawing, I took a few moments to look at the picture from a distance and observed my thoughts about the experience. I noted that my body felt more relaxed after completing the exercise, and I found the intervention to be both meaningful and soothing. Though my experience is obviously different from the group situation that the youth in Coholic et al.’s (2020) study encountered, it gave me another perspective of MBAT that draws on themes of metaphor, strengths and identity- all relevant topics for adolescents to explore.

Figure 3

“Me as a Tree” drawing in oil pastel



MBAT for Adults with Trauma

Kalmanowitz and Ho (2016) conducted a qualitative, phenomenological study to measure whether a multimodal studio-based approach combining art therapy and mindfulness meditation can enhance resilience levels of asylum seekers suffering from trauma. Although most individuals exposed to trauma from political violence do not develop PTSD, refugees frequently endure a substantial amount of suffering. Kalmanowitz and Ho (2016) noted that mindfulness is now a key component in treatments of trauma, as it assists the client in increasing their acceptance and awareness of emotions, rather than attempting to escape or avoid it. According to Kalmanowitz and Ho (2016) art therapists have also begun to treat trauma in a more holistic manner, exploring the connection between mindfulness, CBT and arts-based directives.

Due to the transient nature of refugees, this study sought to provide a short-term intervention that was modeled after an “immersive art therapy studio” (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016, p. 58). The art room, dubbed by the authors “The Inhabited Studio,” provided an authentic space for creativity and self-expression to emerge, allowing participants to choose from an array

of art materials in unstructured artmaking, while also offering instruction in mindfulness practices. Engaging in art and meditation within a group has an added benefit of allowing individuals to feel “seen, witnessed and heard,” fostering a sense of camaraderie and trust among group members (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016, p. 59). The authors concluded that the participants benefited on many levels- emotionally, sensorially and cognitively- with improvements in coping ability and resilience. Despite these promising results, further large-scale studies based on this studio MBAT model are necessary to produce more quantifiable data (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016).

Rappaport (2010) examined the application of focusing-oriented art therapy (FOAT) in the treatment of individuals diagnosed with PTSD. Integrating Gendlin’s six-step focusing method with art therapy, trauma-informed FOAT emphasizes the importance of body awareness and safety. Trauma expert van der Kolk (2006) explained, “Traumatized individuals, first and foremost, need to learn that it is safe to have feelings and sensations ... To deal with the past, traumatized people need to activate their medial prefrontal cortex, their capacity for introspection. Therapy needs to help them develop a curiosity about their internal experience” (p. xxv-xxvi). Modeled after Herman’s three-phase model of trauma treatment, Rappaport (2010) incorporated art directives to imbue clients with a greater sense of safety, including depicting a “safe place,” drawing a “protector” and decorating a container to help capture difficult emotions. “Clearing a space,” a focusing technique, was useful as a next step to guide the client toward setting distressing issues aside, building self-regulation and distress tolerance abilities (Rappaport, 2010).

In the second stage of Rappaport’s model (2010), the client is directed to notice the “felt sense” within, and is gently led through their traumatic memories, symbolizing in their artwork

whatever images and feelings may arise. Clients are asked focusing-oriented “Life Forward” questions such as, “Imagine what it would be like...” or “Ask inside, what else is needed?” (Rappaport, 2010, p. 135). These types of questions can help to invite a friendly, curious and accepting mentality, essential elements in FOAT for creating inward and outward change in the client’s life (Rappaport, 2010).

In the third and final stage of Rappaport’s (2010) model, the client reconnects with their ordinary, everyday life issues, dealing with the lingering anxiety, depression and fear that often accompanies PTSD sufferers. FOAT sessions work on bolstering the client’s resilience and strengthening the “witness” and “other parts of self that could stand outside of the trauma” (Rappaport, 2010, p. 139). Rappaport (2010) summarized that FOAT is an effective therapeutic tool for clients with PTSD by promoting empathic attunement, separating the trauma from the person, allowing the client to find distance from the trauma, bearing witness, allowing for a catharsis experience, building resilience and establishing a life forward direction. Furthermore, FOAT fosters an “inner knowing” by connecting to the felt sense within, empowering the client to be the “author of her [or his] own recovery” (Rappaport, 2010, p. 141). While Rappaport’s (2010) case study provides anecdotal evidence to support their intervention, further qualitative or quantitative research is necessary to fully support the effectiveness of this therapeutic approach.

Lubbers (2019) presented their doctoral research studying the effectiveness of integrating art therapy and focusing for adults with a history of trauma. Using a treatment method called the “Bodymap Protocol” (BMP), nine adults with histories of trauma were studied and interviewed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The BMP is a one-time treatment modality that uses a full-sized, body-shaped outline drawn or painted to contain and visually express the client’s “felt sense impressions” (Lubbers, 2019, p. 86). Trauma researchers

have emphasized the importance of implementing treatment methods that integrate somatic and nonverbal expression, with neurobiology pointing to the potential benefits of a FOAT approach (van der Kolk, 2006).

Participants in Lubbers' (2019) study were adults currently in psychotherapy who had a history of trauma and were deemed psychologically stable. Adults in the study were provided several safety measures to ensure their comfort and ease, including orienting to the space and grounding exercises such as breathing and noticing their bodily sensations. A warm-up exercise featured drawing one's real or imagined "safe place," helping to bolster their sense of security (Lubbers, 2019). The BMP began with "Clearing a Space," followed by "Healing an issue," where the client selected a pressing issue they wished to focus on (Lubbers, 2019, p. 91). Finally, participants created a bodymap, a full-sized visual and artistic depiction of their body, including the "felt sense" of their healing issue. Clients worked in a variety of art media, with encouragement to check-in, or be mindful of their bodily felt sense during the session. Spontaneously adding colors, shapes, symbols, textures and images to their bodymap, participants continued back and forth between sensing internally and expressing visually, until they felt their bodymap was complete. After finishing, clients were directed to observe the bodymap and then write down any immediate reactions in response to their artwork (Lubbers, 2019). A semi-structured interview was scheduled within the next day to capture additional reflections and insights that emerged following the experience.

Lubbers' (2019) findings revealed that participants experienced the BMP as "deeply healing," with "shifts in awareness" and "unconscious material" often emerging as they created their bodymap (p. 95). Research benefits among participants included greater self-regulation, embodiment and self-awareness, abilities that trauma often takes away from the individual. The

bodymap essentially became a “healing image,” both in the process of creation and afterward as a symbol of empowerment and resilience (Lubber, 2019, p. 97). Lubbers (2019) noted that the BMP acts as a safe container for feelings to be expressed, making it a particularly beneficial exercise for individuals with dissociation. The BMP appears to be a useful tool for psychotherapists to utilize with appropriate clients, serving as a cost-effective timely intervention for clinicians who have training in art and somatic therapies. Further research is necessary to expand on this study in order to produce more statistical and quantifiable data.

I experienced a variation on the BMP by creating a smaller-scaled version of my body outline. After spending a few minutes engaged in a body scan and deep, mindful breathing, I became still and asked my felt sense what it would like to draw first on the bodymap. As I worked on the drawing, I periodically checked in with my felt sense to ask what else needed to be added. This process of mindful, intuitive drawing allowed me to remain present and focused on the moment, and I felt attuned to my body as I drew. Though I do not have a history of trauma or PTSD, I was able to capture visually the impact of a chronic illness that has affected me emotionally and physically for several years. This process was cathartic and healing, and I imagine that completing a full-sized bodymap would have an even greater impact.

Figure 4.

Oil pastel drawing of the author’s bodymap



In a quantitative experimental research study, Goodarzi et al. (2020) investigated whether combining mindfulness and art therapy can help relieve symptoms of PTSD, such as anxiety, depression and shame in a population of 16 female Iranian sexual assault survivors. The authors described how artmaking transcends the limitations of verbal storytelling and provides a non-judgmental space for clients to tell their story while reducing feelings of shame. Likewise, body-based mindfulness practices provide self-soothing tools that allow for greater emotional regulation and relaxation. Mindfulness tools such as a body scan, diaphragmatic breathing, gentle stretching, and guided meditations were integrated with art therapy directives.

Arts-based activities in Goodarzi et al.'s (2020) study included but were not limited to the creation of self-portraits in clay, drawings based on the five senses, drawings depicting a painful memory, drawings depicting self-care, and making a mask of the trauma. The authors found that participant's level of shame was significantly reduced following the 8-week study, and anxiety and depression ratings also showed significant positive outcomes compared to a control group.

The limitations of the study were noted by Goodarzi et al. (2020) as primarily due to the small sample size, inability to randomize the selection of patients, and various cultural factors unique to Iran, notably the stigma around participating in group therapies.

Williams (2018) proposed a MBAT model known as “ONEbird,” integrating self-compassion, mindfulness and creative expression. Inspired by the Buddhist teaching comparing the vital elements of mindfulness and compassion to the two wings of a bird, Williams’ (2018) model goes a step further adding creativity as the “symbolic heart of the bird” (p. 23). Drawing on Neff’s (2011) pioneering research on self-compassion, Williams (2018) noted how contemporary psychotherapy has begun to emphasize kindness and a non-judgmental attitude toward oneself, along with mindfulness, as a means of reducing distress. Client sessions based on the ONEbird model include psycho-education exercises on the topics of self-compassion and mindfulness, followed by direct experiences of mindfulness and the opportunity for creative expression (directed or undirected) in a variety of media (Williams, 2018).

Williams (2018) noted that the primary benefit of compassion oriented MBAT is to provide clients with a greater ability to express and regulate difficult emotions, specifically feelings of shame and self-criticism. The ONEbird model may also prove useful as a tool to prevent burnout among counselors and other helping professionals. Compassion fatigue resulting from secondary or “vicarious” trauma can hinder a counselor’s ability to provide quality care to patients. Williams (2018) noted that studies on mindfulness have shown that self-compassion can decrease levels of burnout and reduce compassion fatigue, allowing for greater amounts of empathy and competency among professionals.

Discussion

The intention of this literature review was to assess the efficacy of combining holistic modalities - mindfulness and focusing with art therapy- to gain a fuller understanding of the impact these intermodal therapies have on specific populations. A thorough review of the current research provided promising evidence that engaging in holistic therapies has beneficial outcomes for a range of symptoms and diagnoses. The widespread appeal of mindfulness may be linked to the abundance of stressors present in our modern-day lifestyles, along with the prevalence of trauma among many populations. Combining mindfulness with the arts appears to improve resilience and self-soothing abilities, while providing a cathartic and relaxing multi-sensory experience. I engaged in many of the mindfulness and arts-based directives to experience the effects of holistic interventions on a personal level, resonating with many of the benefits found in the literature. While this topic is still emerging in the field of psychotherapy, it is gaining momentum and would benefit greatly from the increased exposure of larger-scaled quantitative and qualitative studies.

Patients with chronic illness or cancer diagnoses are among the most researched population in mindfulness-based art therapy studies and were found by Monti et al. (2005) to benefit on many levels. Monti et al. (2005) revealed that female patients in their experimental MBAT group showed vast improvements over the control group – including lowered levels of anxiety, hostility and somatization. Klagsbrun et al.'s (2005) focusing-oriented art therapy intervention for women with breast cancer revealed similar findings. Participants gained emotional strength, courage, lowered their anxiety levels, increased their sense of resilience and reduced stress and physical tension (Klagsbrun et al., 2005).

Meghani et al.'s (2018) mindfulness photography and collage intervention revealed significant decreases in depression, moderate decreases in anxiety and highly significant

increases in measures of well-being, including an improved sense of peace and well-being. Similarly, Jalambadani and Borji's (2018) MBAT study of women with breast cancer resulted in significant decreases in distress, while showing improvements in stress management, mental health, vitality and sleep among participants. Choi et al.'s (2021) research revealed that MBAT interventions are also effective for those suffering with chronic pain. Measurements of stress, somatization, anger and depression were all significantly lowered among participants in the experimental group. The literature overwhelmingly supported findings that patients with cancer or chronic illness increased their quality of life and decreased distress levels after engaging in MBAT and FOAT interventions. These results provide ample incentive to further research this vital topic.

MBAT interventions also show promise among child and adolescent populations. Lindsey et al. (2018) explored the efficacy of an arts-based mindfulness group for middle school students by combining mindfulness instruction with a mask-making directive. Students in the study benefited by increasing their awareness of stress, improving their confidence levels and behaviors and reducing their levels of anxiety and stress (Lindsey et al., 2018). Coholic and Eys (2015) developed a 12-week Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP) to assist in teaching vulnerable children mindfulness skills while providing engaging arts-based interventions. Their findings revealed the children were better able to regulate their feelings while improving their communication skills, self-reported happier and less frustrated or anxious moods, and developed stronger social and coping skills. Children in Coholic and Eys' (2015) study also noted improvements in confidence and self-esteem, along with better attention and focus in school.

Coholic et al.'s (2009) research tested whether arts-based mindfulness group therapy can improve resilience and posttraumatic growth for children in foster care. Participants and their

foster parents praised the program for improving the youth's confidence, resilience, ability to express feelings, imagination and self-esteem (Coholic et al., 2009). While this study's qualitative findings are promising, a randomized, controlled study would be beneficial to further understanding the impacts of MBAT on vulnerable youth. Sosin and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2016) tested their "Creative Exposure Intervention," an arts-based, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) focusing-oriented tool for youth to address bullying-induced PTSD. While their current findings revealed successful treatment of trauma symptoms for individuals, families and groups, a more empirical evaluation of this protocol would help to support this treatment model.

Coholic et al.'s (2020) most recent MBAT intervention for youth addresses the need to support teenagers with mental health issues in short-term hospital settings. Qualitative feedback from the participants showed that the intervention had multiple positive benefits, including improvements in self-awareness, mood, coping skills and confidence. The youth in this study's MBAT intervention also benefitted from factors inherent to communal settings- including the camaraderie, trust and sense of belonging that groups can foster (Coholic et al., 2020).

The final population for which I examined MBAT and FOAT studies encompasses adults with traumatic histories and PTSD. At first glance, mindfulness and focusing-oriented art therapies appear well suited to treating PTSD, as they enhance the individual's self-awareness of their mind-body connection, while grounding their senses in the present moment. Kalmanowitz and Ho (2016) studied the effects of a short-term art therapy studio intervention for asylum seekers exposed to trauma. Offering less explicit directives with more choice for freedom of self-expression, their MBAT model resulted in participants improving their ability to cope and increase resilience despite living with uncertainty and stress (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016). Further research is needed in order to provide quantifiable results for this studio-based model.

Rappaport (2010) explored whether FOAT is effective in the treatment of individuals with PTSD. Using focusing techniques such as “Clearing a space” and asking “Life forward” questions, Rappaport (2010) found that their arts-based focusing intervention improved the client’s resilience, promoted empathic attunement, allowed for an authentic and cathartic experience and built resilience. Lubbers (2019) also used FOAT techniques in their intervention dubbed “Bodymapping” to assist clients in integrating their somatic and nonverbal expressions. Clients reported significantly positive results to Lubbers’ (2019) intervention, including improved self-regulation, embodiment and self-awareness.

Goodarzi et al. (2020) found that female sexual assault survivors in their MBAT study found relief from symptoms of PTSD, including anxiety, depression and shame. The author’s research revealed that participants in the study’s level of shame was significantly reduced, along with levels of anxiety and depression. The small sample size and cultural limitations of this study warrant further research to confirm these findings. Williams (2018) noted that their MBAT model (ONEbird) centered on self-compassion was effective in assisting their participant’s abilities to express healthy emotions while regulating emotions such as shame and self-criticism. Additionally, ONEbird showed potential as a tool for counteracting burnout among helping professionals, reducing levels of compassion fatigue while boosting empathy (Williams, 2018).

While the literature on MBAT and FOAT has documented promising benefits, existing studies are still emerging and are currently limited in their size and scope. More quantifiable research is required to fully determine whether the integration of mindfulness and art therapy is more effective than either modality alone. Additionally, multicultural factors should be considered in order to assess whether one’s cultural, religious, socioeconomic or racial background has an impact on the effectiveness or receptiveness to mindfulness-based art therapy.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this literature review suggest that a wide range of ages and populations benefitted from combining the holistic modalities of art and mindfulness. The positive impacts these interventions have on individuals— reducing their levels of stress, while improving resilience and supporting well-being- warrants further investigation and research on this topic.

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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.

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