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COVID, Creativity, and Connecting Through Change: Reviewing the Literature on How Art Therapy Can Help Children and Adolescents Cope with Pandemic-Related Grief

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**COVID, Creativity, and Connecting Through Change:
Reviewing the Literature on How Art Therapy Can Help Children and Adolescents Cope
with Pandemic-Related Grief**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Art Therapy

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most significant global events in the past century, both resulting in massive casualties and significant mental health outcomes across the world. Some of the most impacted populations are children and adolescents whose lives have been interrupted during their formative years. The purpose of this literature review is to explore how art therapy has been used during the COVID-19 pandemic to address the grief experienced by children and adolescents through their losses of stability and peer support surrounded by uncertainty. This literature review seeks to understand exactly how the pandemic has affected the mental health of young people, the definition of grief beyond death, and what art therapy can do to begin healing from these losses. Findings of this review reveal that there is more research to be done on this specific subject, but the work of grief art therapy so far has laid a foundation for further exploration. Meaning construction theory paired with developmentally appropriate directives may be most effective with this population.

Keywords COVID-19, pandemic, art therapy, children, adolescents, non-death grief, loss, meaning construction theory

Introduction

During the early lockdown stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, people turned to art in all its forms as a way of entertainment and connection during dark and difficult circumstances (Chan et al, 2022; Drake et al, 2022). Art has been used to reflect on the global atmosphere surrounding the pandemic as well as gain an understanding on a micro-level about how the pandemic has affected the people who have survived it so far. As art therapists we know about the healing power of creation and how it can transform trauma and grief into deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us (Allen, 1995; Levine, 2019; McNiff, 2004; Rezenbrink 2021). This work continues by exploring more deeply how art therapy can help heal from COVID-related grief and loss. This literature review delves into how art therapy can help children and adolescents cope with COVID-19 related grief and non-death loss. The goals include understanding the specific mental health effects of the pandemic on children and adolescents as well as how art therapy has explored this topic so far, defining grief beyond bereavement of an individual as it relates to the pandemic, and exploring how we can apply grief art therapy methods as a way to heal from the trauma of COVID-19 losses in the lives of young people. This paper will also touch on how isolation and the need for technology has affected our ability to do this work from perspectives of social connection and multicultural consideration.

We are now three years into what is possibly the most influential global event in many of our lives, and although many people are returning back to some semblance of normal, the COVID-19 pandemic's lasting effects and continued spread is not over. As of January 2023, the White House in the United States announced a plan to end the national public health emergency in May of 2023, removing COVID restrictions and reducing access to testing and vaccines (Luhby et al, 2023), while pandemic researchers assert that we should “remain vigilant

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(Westcott, 2023, para 13)” about the disease. At this time, there have been nearly 7 million COVID-19 deaths and over 760 million cases and counting (World Health Organization, 2023). The early stages of the pandemic saw worldwide shutdowns affecting daily life; businesses closed, children had to stay home from school, and access to essential resources diminished. New strains of the disease are still appearing and despite the desperation to return to normal life, COVID is continuing to create both tangible and intangible loss in the lives it touches.

While the many deaths are the most obvious widespread cause of COVID-related grief in the last three years, it is important to address the non-death causes of grief during the pandemic such as losses of stability, sense of safety, and social connection that have contributed negative mental health outcomes. Researchers found that COVID-19 created an uptick in negative mental health outcomes globally (Metzler et al, 2022) and that symptoms of PTSD, insomnia, anxiety, and depression increased across people of all ages (Olf et al, 2021). Children and Adolescents are among the most severely affected when it comes to non-death loss and COVID-19. They are living and learning in continually developing brains and bodies that have little control of the world around them which makes them especially vulnerable. During lockdown, their social circles were confined to their family members, caregivers, and guardians who may or may not have had a grasp of their own coping skills in the midst of the pandemic. This was made worse in circumstances of abuse or neglect and in communities and families that lack the resources to ensure that the children and adolescents in their care were able to attend to their physical, mental, and emotional needs.

For purposes of this literature review the word loss will refer to any person, place, or thing taken away from an individual or community’s living experience, grief will refer to the

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reaction to a loss, and bereavement will refer specifically to the experience of losing someone to death.

I come from a white, middle-class background, and am continuing to explore my identity but acknowledge the extreme privilege I have in my origins which allowed me to become a full-time graduate student at the beginning of the pandemic. My experiences of the pandemic echoed the uncertainty and feelings of isolation that touched others, which also helped provide a renewed appreciation for art as a way of healing. I also spent my first graduate internship in an after-school urban community garden program with 5-11 year old children and witnessed firsthand how the pandemic affected this group of under resourced young people.

Method

Research for this literature review began with the search for articles from peer reviewed journals accessible through the Lesley University's library database. Search terms included combinations of art therapy, COVID-19, pandemic, children and adolescents, grief, non-death grief, loss, grief therapy, and grief art therapy. Search parameters expanded to looking through Google Scholar and searching Lesley Digital Commons for recently archived graduate capstone theses that included subjects of grief, art therapy, and/or COVID. Finally, the search for literature concluded with book sources on grief and art therapy. The gathered resources were reviewed for relevance, eliminating research on bereavement or death-related grief and more generalized works on art therapy with children and adolescents unrelated to grief or COVID. The literature on mental health outcomes comes from several countries including Sweden, India, Israel, Kurdistan, Australia, Canada, the United States, and other parts of Western Europe. The literature on grief largely comes from western cultures but attempts to acknowledge its limitations.

In addition to the initial search for literature, some resources also led to discovery of more relevant works through the references cited therein. The references were annotated through Zotero's web-based organization program and organized within a spreadsheet on Google Sheets for a more visual representation of the literature to keep track of common themes, notes, useful quotes, and any specific theoretical backgrounds or art therapy interventions used in the studies (Figure 1). Once the literature was gathered and entered into the spreadsheet, cells were color coded to visualize the overlap where keywords such as children, adolescents, COVID, grief, and meaning making appeared. To further make sense of the literature, this artist-art therapist-researcher created response art pieces based on the themes discovered. The ideas from these artistic responses were then synthesized into a polyptych painting.

Literature Review

Defining Grief Beyond Death-Related Loss

Throughout our lives, we all experience losses in some form or another as it is probable that the longer our lives, the more people we know and love will age or fall ill and die, the more personal life changes we have, and the more social tragedies and natural disasters will occur. While death and bereavement of a loved one is perhaps one of the most common forms of loss, it is important to understand how other types of loss can trigger a grief reaction that needs to be treated just as seriously. Most literature on grief focuses on death of loved ones, but thankfully research on non-death grief is expanding to all types of loss. Irene Rezenbrink, an expressive arts therapist who has dedicated her career to grief work describes grief as the rupture of attachment, experience of separation, and change of circumstance that make life feel vastly different than it was before the loss (2021).

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These grief experiences coincide with what people dealing with the mental health effects of the pandemic are encountering. Research in these last few years since the beginning of the pandemic seems to agree that COVID-19 is a widespread source of grief. Beasley et al (2022) proposes that it is important to look at the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of grief and loss, especially when looking at individuals without pre-existing mental health conditions. Due to the still developing research on the pandemic's effects on mental health, the emerging symptomology similar to depressive disorders, anxiety, and trauma-related disorders need to be placed in context with the losses people are experiencing including the lives of family and friends, employment, and social connection. Much of the literature on grief is from a Western perspective and may overlook multicultural experiences and expressions of grief. Grief and loss are universal experiences, but the reactions to grief and societal views on the way people grieve are varied depending on cultural and community beliefs about death and loss. Rezenbrink recognizes that grief reactions vary across age, gender, and cultural backgrounds but are usually designated by “shock, numbness, and disbelief followed by what is often referred to as an ‘emotional roller coaster’ and a profound disruption to the pattern of everyday life (2021, p 28).”

In attempt to understand and describe different experiences of grief, several sub-terms have been used to specify the social and emotional implications of grief, such as complicated grief which refers to the long-term symptoms after a loss, disenfranchised grief which refers to losses that may not be seen as socially acceptable to grieve which may vary across cultures, ambiguous loss which refers to losses that bring uncertainty, and cathected loss which is the void created when a person loses an important part of their lives (Bertolini, 2021; Kim & Ali, 2022; Neimeyer et al, 2014; Rezenbrink, 2021). Bertolini describes the complicated grief experienced by survivors of natural disasters who are dealing with tangible losses such as their home,

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personal possessions, and employment as well as intangible losses such as their sense of safety and control over their circumstance (2021). These natural disaster-related losses are comparable to the losses that have been experienced worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic and may fall into the other specific grief categories described above as people have similarly lost employment, social interaction, and their senses of safety and control in relation to the pandemic. Bertolini names COVID-19 as a source of non-death grief and agrees that there is “no doubt of the incredible degree of loss that the worldwide community has experienced (2021, p 34).” Kim & Ali (2022) explain how different kinds of loss lead to different kinds of grief in relation to COVID. They describe multiple attachment loss which creates secondary grief as the loss of one important part of someone’s life such as employment directly causing other loss like the social circle among work friends. Anticipatory grief is also described by Kim & Ali as the reaction to an anticipated loss, including the worry that a person might lose their job or fall ill as a result of the pandemic. Children and adolescents also experience these different types of grief through witnessing their caregivers’ losses as well as experiencing their own, with even more lack of control over their lives as minors. It is imperative that we understand the mental health effects of COVID in these children and adolescents’ lives and treat it through the lens of grief and loss to give their mental health symptoms context.

Understanding Non-Death Grief through Artistic Reflection

To understand all these different kinds of grief that are often ignored, I thought about the losses experienced by children and adolescents whose worlds were turned upside down during the pandemic as well as the losses I experienced throughout the last few years, big and small, from the loss of opportunity to meet my cohort in person as we began our grad school experience, to the death of my paternal grandmother, to the cancellation of a big trip to Ireland

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with my mother and maternal grandmother which would have been the last opportunity to travel while my grandmother was physically able to take on an intensive sight-seeing vacation.

Kenneth Patchen wrote in a poem, “there are so many little dyings that it doesn’t matter which one of them is death” (1997, as cited in Rezenbrink, 2021, p. 117). This reference to “little dyings” inspired the thought of mourning all grief as we mourn death. In my family’s cultural tradition, burial with a preceding viewing and funeral service is the most common practice in caring for and remembering our deceased. With this in mind, I created a very small coffin of black polymer clay (Figure 2) with brass jump rings as hinges so that it can open and close. I coated the inside with metallic leaf, giving it an illuminated effect, perhaps highlighting the richness and importance of all losses, no matter how small. The miniscule nature of this coffin also represents the disenfranchisement and uncertainty experienced by those whose grief is caused by ambiguous and intangible loss.

Effects of COVID-19 on Children and Adolescents’ Mental Health

Saturated by the changes that upended ways of life all over the world, children and adolescents have been especially impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to school closings, confinement to home and those within it to satisfy self-isolation orders, and developing understanding of COVID in the community, increased mental health issues appeared among this population of young people, including decreased sense of safety, increased fearfulness about getting sick, trauma symptoms, grief reactions, and growing risk factors for suicidality (Eales, 2021; Guessoum et al, 2021; and Hussong et al, 2021; Schmidt et al, 2021; Shoshani & Kor, 2021; Vasileva et al, 2021). While the pandemic’s mental health effects are still a relatively new phenomenon, the literature on how it has affected children and adolescents is of the same mind; that kids who had not previously shown mental health symptomology are now expressing

negative psychological outcomes and kids who were already diagnosed with a psychological disorder are faring worse than they were prior to the outbreak of COVID. These outcomes are largely due to social isolation from the lockdown and attunement to the stress experienced in the adults around them. Meherali et al explains:

Children and adolescents are experiencing a prolonged state of physical isolation from their peers, teachers, extended family, and community networks. Social distancing and school closures therefore increase the mental health problems of children and adolescents, who are already at higher risk for developing mental health problems compared to adults at a time where they are also experiencing anxiety over a health threat and threats to family employment/income (2021, p 2).

Meherali et al goes on to explain that school routines and social connections are crucial for maintaining mental health in children (2021). These mental health outcomes vary by age group and are heavily influenced by their confined social circles due to their caretakers' own emotional reactions to the pandemic as well as socioeconomic status and risk for abuse (Hussong et al, 2021). Although at this point, children are mostly back in school without social distancing restrictions, the long term effects of mental health decompensation during lockdown may linger, and with new waves of the virus continuing to appear, additional lockdowns may be in our future.

Age-Related Mental Health Outcomes

Research on the mental health affects specific to age showed that different age groups showed varied results in symptomology, but general increase in symptoms across all ages (Schmidt et al, 2021; Shoshani & Kor, 2021). Schmidt et al.'s cross-sectional survey of three

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groups of 1-6 year olds, 7-10 year olds, and 11-19 year olds across Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland showed that the youngest group showed increased oppositional defiant behaviors and the middle childhood group showed increased aggression, while the adolescent group showed increased anxiety and depression (2021). Schmidt et al. acknowledges the limitations of caregiver-reports and self-reports through survey and that vulnerable groups are underrepresented in their research. Shoshani and Kor (2021) used pre-COVID data and a later post-lockdown survey to gather data on mental health symptoms and general wellbeing among Israeli children and adolescents from the beginning to the end of the 2019-2020 school year. Their research did not indicate age-related differences in mental health outcomes but did show a general increase in depression, anxiety, with reported decrease in positive emotions, decreased life satisfaction, and lack of peer support. This study also showed that those with more peer support and stable daily routines were less likely to show an increase in these symptoms. Shoshani and Kor also name a substantial increase in screen time and internet use with a decrease in use of social media among those surveyed, highlighting the lack of social supports even with access to virtual connectivity (2021).

Studies specific to adolescents agree that the decrease in peer support due to social distancing guidelines led to increased loneliness and anxiety, affecting adolescent social development (Guessoum et al 2020; Hussong et al, 2021). Hussong et al. name struggles with academics during online learning, social isolation, and suicidal ideation as prevalent outcomes among adolescents and recognizes higher risk among disadvantaged youth who may not have the resources to seek academic assistance or social connection through technology that their more privileged peers enjoy (2021). This study points to strengths-based interventions to mitigate the social losses experienced by youth during COVID-19. Guessoum et al.'s research on adolescent

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psychiatric disorders during COVID show increased post-traumatic symptoms, depression, anxiety, suicidality, addiction, and grief as outcomes to pandemic-related stressors among children who previously had no psychological diagnoses, and even more difficulty among those previously diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder (2021).

Home Life and COVID Mental Health Outcomes

Children and adolescents' mental health outcomes during COVID were also dependent on the people integral to their home lives. Abdulah et al. assert that children "observe the environments and peoples. In this regard, they react to the stress of their parents and other caregivers, peers, and community members (2021, pp 761-762)." Vasileva et al., surveyed parents of preschoolers to explore their children's reactions to COVID, which showed increased preoccupation with the illness, increased attention-seeking behavior, and recognized the influence of the parents' own reactions to COVID on their child's understanding of the pandemic (2022). Eales et al. provide mixed method analysis on COVID's effect on family psychological distress showing that evolving family dynamics during lockdown influenced child mental health outcomes (2021). This research acknowledges that although more privileged families are less likely to suffer from the physical effects of the pandemic, the psychological effects were present in families across socioeconomic backgrounds. However, due to the self-selected nature of their sample, Eales et al. was unlikely to gather data on situations where abuse or neglect are present. Guessoum et al., however, does name intrafamilial violence as a prominent issue with increased reports of domestic violence throughout the pandemic in several countries (2021). Podder et al.'s research on children in India also names abuse as a pandemic-related issue that children are exposed to as well as an increase in school dropouts, child labor, and child marriage during the lockdowns (2022).

Understanding the Pandemic's Impact on Children Through Artistic Reflection

I wished to further explore the feelings of frustration, isolation, and uncertainty experienced by children during the pandemic. I thought of myself as the shy, highly emotional, undiagnosed neurodivergent child that I was in elementary school and how it would have felt to be torn away from my friends who were so important to me, expected to learn through a computer screen, and grapple with understanding why all this is happening. As a graduate student during the pandemic, I have been able to embrace the nature of online schooling, being able to work independently, but I will admit that the time spent synchronously with my peers has been the most meaningful to my learning. As a child of the 90s, the technology would have been lacking, but time traveling my young self to 2020 would look much different. I fear that larger elementary school class sizes and set curriculum learning expectations all while constrained to online learning platforms would have meant I wouldn't have gotten the support I needed. Missing out on the social aspects of school would have left me ill prepared to interact with my peers upon returning to in-person settings. I recognize that I come from a privileged family that values education and would have done their best to help me through and that I potentially would have fared better than kids in under resourced communities.

To reflect on all of this, I started with a photograph of myself as a 5 year old, and from it created a digital collage depicting a young student fading into the static of a Zoom screen (figure 3). The student wears a paper mask, representing the loss of interpersonal interactions. The zoom screen is filled with glitchy static, representing what is missed in the learning material when vital aspects of educational support are lost. The student cries gold tears, representing the uncertainty and richness of grief that need to be recognized in kids as the pandemic continues.

Meaning Making, Grief Work, and Grief Art Therapy

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The many types of loss can undo our understanding of the world around us. Neimeyer et al. (2014) explain the vastness of loss and need to attend to them:

“With the many unwelcome losses of life—of people, places, projects, and possessions in seemingly endless succession, we are called on to reconstruct a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss, at every level from the simple habit structures of our daily lives, through our identities in a social world, to our personal and collective cosmologies, whether secular or spiritual (p. 486).”

Rezenbrink describes the earlier historical theoretical models used in grief work as the mental health community has developed its understanding on the nature of grief beginning with Sigmund Freud’s mourning work that encouraged the bereaved to let go and move on from their loss, to Gerald Caplan’s crisis theory which attempted to understand mental health responses to disaster and illness, to use of Bowlby’s attachment theory to describe the context of loss, and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s well-known stages of grief experienced by the dying; denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance that are understood as a linear process in which to work through grief (2021). Rezenbrink also covers the more helpful and recent milestones made in grief work, namely, Robert Neimeyer’s meaning construction theory, and Stroebe and Schut’s dual process model or oscillation theory. Meaning Construction Theory asserts that healing from grief requires the grieved to make sense of the loss through conversations about the loss event, personal identity, spiritual beliefs, and lessons learned by the loss event. The dual process model or oscillation theory recognizes the complexity of grief as a non-linear process where people will oscillate between an orientation of loss and an orientation of restoration. Loss orientation is defined as focus on the loss itself while restoration orientation is a focus on the adjustments a person faces after loss, such as the necessity of adapting to a new lifestyle or reassessing identity

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in new circumstances (Rezenbrink, 2021). The dual process model validates that working through grief is not a singular event, not something that can be cured, but looks at healing as a process without a quota.

In the context of art therapy, these more recent theoretical models go hand in hand with the concept of poiesis, the process of making, which refers to the ability of art to shape our lives and remake the world in the face of tragedy (Levine, 2019; Rezenbrink, 2021). Pat Allen, describing her own experiences with grief states, “there is no way around grief, no waiting it out; it doesn’t go away on its own, or with time. I know I have to travel into it, and the only way I know how to do that is through the art process (2014, p.130).” Art is a way to dig deeper into understanding the parts of life that don’t make sense, no matter how universal they might be.

Michal Lev writes about the themes that came up when practicing grief related artmaking with her community of students and colleagues who were researching resilience after bereavement in the midst of COVID-19 (2022). Three themes that emerged when exploring building resilience through grief were faith, observation of pain, and the support circle. These tie back into Niemeyer’s meaning construction theory requiring examination of spirituality and talking about the grief event. Kim & Ali’s quantitative research with essential workers during the pandemic pointed to the dual process model and meaning-making as essential to healing from non-death grief (2022). Beasley et al.’s mixed methods research sought to help older adults create meaning amid grief and loss during the pandemic through social connection and found that community-based programs benefitted the participants physically, socially, and emotionally and helped them find meaning (2022). The literature largely supports the dual process model as a way to understand grief work and that construction of meaning is necessary for healing after a grief event.

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Other theoretical positions have been used in cooperation with these accepted models and art therapy is regularly named as an effective healing tool for people experiencing grief and loss, especially children who may not have the words to describe their losses. Robert Neimeyer himself refers to narrative therapy as a helpful process in the creation of meaning (Neimeyer et al, 2014). He states:

Mourning, in both its private and public moments, draws heavily on narrative processes to establish meaning of the deceased's life and death, as well as the post-mortem status of the bereaved within the broader community concerned with the loss (p 487).

Neimeyer goes on to explain that neurologically, humans are built to respond to loss by attempting to “[make] sense of it in storied terms (2014, p 487).” Rezenbrink's book, *An Expressive Arts Approach to Healing Loss and Grief*, while covering the many types of loss also regularly highlights narrative therapy as an effective approach to meaning making (2021). Through vignettes of her work as an expressive arts therapist and her research on grief, Rezenbrink discusses the efficacy of art to heal and build resilience in directives involving creation of symbols and metaphors to represent pain and the healing journey.

Relational therapy has also been used to develop sense of safety and emotional connection with those experiencing grief and loss. Gil (2014) provides a case study on an adopted child who struggled with the loss of her birth mother through the child protective system and the transition into her new family. Through regular art therapy, Gil provided consistency and safety to help the child build new attachments. Le Count (2000), who worked with children whose grief caused emotional and behavioral issues at school, used art therapy as a way to teach the children to communicate and work through their loss. Although working through the viewpoint of Kubler-Ross's outdated stages of grief, Le Count asserts that art therapy creates “a

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safe place for an emotional discharge, at other times pictures or play may enable the expression of the struggle and confusion surrounding a loss or multiple losses which the child may only be able to express non-verbally (2000, p 18).” Former Lesley student Catherine Johnson developed a method for working with bereaved children and adolescents using existential art therapy, developed by Bruce Moon, which allows individuals to focus on the larger themes of life (2019). Johnson facilitated a layered painting directive to help the children express the timeline of their grief journeys, but discovered that her method was most effective for older children and adolescents as the concept of existentialism and the act of layering on top of previous work proved developmentally inappropriate for young children.

Gaining Understanding on Meaning Construction Through Artistic Reflection

Meaning construction theory is the foundation of grief therapy that stuck out to me the most in reviewing the literature. Finding the answer to how loss shapes our lives helps us understand a purpose behind the grief event. Depending on philosophy and personal beliefs, meaning making like this can have a variety of outcomes. Rezenbrink’s (2021) explanation of meaning construction theory lists talking about the loss, personal identities, spirituality, and what can be learned from the loss as the ways to make sense of grief events. Lev’s (2022) discovery of similar themes of observing pain, faith, and social connection in her work synthesized these ideas for this writer. Images and ideas surrounding spirituality, faith, or cultural belief arose to help me examine what kind of meaning I could derive from my own pandemic-related losses. I thought about ritual in mourning and the use of altars across cultures as sacred spaces to contemplate what is important, what has been lost, and what has been gleaned in the experience of grief. I created my own altar on my living room coffee table where it would be in my daily life. I took time to add to it, take away from it, sit and observe it, and collect items and writings related to

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my experiences of COVID-19. I kept the altar for a month to let it evolve and took a photograph of the end result (Figure 4). I ended up with a collection of COVID-specific items such as masks, a used test, thermometer, scrap papers with things I've lost and found during COVID, and representations of things I gained such as my greater appreciation for nature and the ways I am fortunate to be able to connect with those I love when we can't be physically present in each other's lives. The creation of this altar brought up more gratefulness and love than pain. It allowed me to contemplate my losses, but it also showed me the abundance of blessings I gained when I was forced to slow down.

COVID-19, Art Making, and Art Therapy

The relative novelty of the COVID-19 pandemic provided some difficulty in finding comprehensive research on the specifics of doing art therapy with children and adolescents coping with pandemic-related losses, but the few arts-based research studies used to seek insight on the pandemic's effects on young people revealed general insecurity and uncertainty among those studied. The data on COVID's casualties changes daily and the tertiary consequences contain many unknowns. We are still learning about the long-term mental health effects of the pandemic and developing our understanding of non-death grief. The literature so far on art therapy during COVID-19 focuses mostly on the draw to the arts during lockdown, understanding the impacts of the pandemic through art, and how the way we do art therapy has developed out of the necessity to adhere to social distancing guidelines.

Studies revealed that people turned to creating art in the wake of COVID-19 shutdowns to emotionally connect with one another and provide mental health relief in an uncertain time and that this artmaking was integral to cope with the stressors of the pandemic (Chan et al, 2022; Drake et al, 2022). Whether it was out of boredom and need for something to do, a way to reach

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out to the world, or to learn a new skill, the arts seemed to gain a great appreciation during COVID lockdowns. The making and consumption of art in all modalities from drama to music to visual and culinary arts felt like an essential part of the human experience. One study in Australia shows that creation of art in conjunction with community engagement enhances community wellbeing (Hancox et al, 2022). This arts-based research study looks at two community projects, one online that involved a crowdsourced newsletter of people sharing what art means to them and their community, and the other was a series of artist-created billboards inspired by letters from community members about their experiences during COVID. The study asserts that the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns created “an urgency to find new ways of authentically continuing to engage with communities using arts-based methods” (Hancox, 2022, p 72).

Using Art Therapy to Interpret COVID Outcomes

In researching the effects of COVID-19 on the mental health of children and adolescents, many arts-based research studies surfaced, using art as a way to interpret and communicate kids’ experiences, emotions, and worries surrounding the pandemic. Vasileva et al.’s study on preschool aged children mentions observations of the children’s artmaking as a way to understand their negative thoughts and feelings about COVID (2022). The observation of children’s art indicated the children’s worries about their families and themselves contracting COVID-19. Abdulah et al. used guided drawing and painting exercises with 6-13 year old children in Iraqi Kurdistan who had been confined to their homes for a month or more at the beginning of the pandemic (2021). They were asked to draw their reflections and feelings about COVID-19 and were asked about their mental health symptoms. The results of this study and the way the children talked about their drawings and their COVID experiences revealed themes of

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worry about infection, insecurity about the world outside their homes, and a change in dynamics among family members (Abdulah et al, 2021). Tishelman et al.'s study in Sweden with 13-15 year olds' drawings similarly revealed themes of disrupted relationships, negative emotions, and the perception of having to adjust to an uncertain dystopian world (2022). Jurasek and Stransky led a student documentary photography project with older adolescents who captured pandemic life in the Czech Republic (2022). Their photographs of empty street corners, mundane family interaction, and meals read as isolated and disconnected while also providing opportunity for new rituals in home life. These arts-based inquiries into the experiences of children and adolescents during the pandemic are not all-encompassing, but reveal some truth to the human experience that so heavily relies on social connection. Artmaking has provided a way for these kids to tell their part of the story of COVID.

Art Therapy with Other Groups During COVID-19

Though the literature this writer has focused on highlights working with young people, the research shows that children and adolescents have not been alone in reaping the benefits of using art therapy to cope with COVID-19. Becker et al. (2022) writes about an arts-based inquiry with young adults during lockdown and found that artmaking in a community setting was integral to process the pandemic and find solidarity in their uncertainty. This study covers a series of online maker-sessions where the participants gathered virtually to make art and talk about their lives, giving them an “opportunity to work through their complex feelings through art, share their feelings with the group, be heard and seen and feel a sense of community” (Becker et a, 2022, p. 56). Creative arts therapists challenged with their new pandemic lifestyles also conducted personal research, interviewing their colleagues and providing reflections on their

own experiences and experience of other arts therapists during the pandemic (Marcow-Speiser & Speiser, 2021; Mandalaki & Daou (2020).

Art Therapy and Telehealth as Necessity

The pandemic had a substantial effect on how we do art therapy, limiting physical interaction to habitat-restricted quarantine bubbles and vital inner social circles. COVID-19 necessitated the use of technology to communicate with anyone outside of those limits. People adjusted to working from home, attending school online, and seeking social interaction via Zoom, Facetime, Google hangout, and other virtual means. Former Lesley graduate student, Brenna Cole, explored the efficacy of using telehealth in art therapy with adolescents experiencing grief in a 2022 capstone thesis literature review that concluded the benefits of art therapy continue through virtual means although the delivery, materials, and ethical implications are altered. Cole asserts that online art therapy is most affective with the adolescent age group due to their upbringing and comfort within a technological world (2022). Although this move to virtual art therapy may be more accessible for some, questions arise as to what kinds of materials clients have access to and at whose expense, what other clients might share a comfort with technology, and what nuances of human interaction are we missing when we meet online instead of in person? Gladowska who writes about the benefits of art therapy in post-pandemic schools, contends that the reliance on online interactions heavily contributes to the negative mental health outcomes in children due to increased screen time, lack of other sensory stimulation, and exposure to negative social connections such as cyberbullying (2021). Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., however, maintain that online art therapy benefits schoolchildren's emotional regulation abilities (2021). Although there are conflicting opinions over the helpfulness of virtual connection in the context of art therapy, the majority of the literature that has been discussed in this thesis asserts

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that social connection, in whatever form is available, is vitally important to maintaining mental health. In-person experiences may be preferable for some but online art therapy expands accessibility to those who may not be able to access it otherwise. In the context of COVID-19 lockdowns, virtual art therapy resources were essential to continue the work and if there are any more lockdowns or social distancing guidelines in the future of this pandemic it will continue to be necessary.

Reflecting on Technology as Connection

The desperation to maintain meaningful relationships outside of one's quarantine bubble was a struggle that I experienced deeply. With technology already being such a huge part of current life, necessary in almost every work and school environment, it also became necessary to maintaining a personal social life as well. I acknowledge that I am fortunate enough to have regular access to a smart phone, computer, and wireless internet connection and that this reliance on technology is not universal, which probably made this ability to seek social connections impossible for some. I also acknowledge Gladowska's (2021) wariness of the over-use of technology and its potentially negative outcomes. However, in the desolate social-scape that was the pandemic or in any other situation that can cause someone to feel lonely, even around the people they live with, I understand that the social connection technology provides is an oasis for those seeking meaningful relationships. Reflecting on this, I created a painting of a surreal sort of desert landscape, a computer in the distance and one in the foreground, with wiry hands reaching out of the computers towards one another (Figure 5). Arms in the foreground reach to the near computer, while a figure in the distance reaches towards the far computer; two people desperately looking for connection in an otherwise desolate world.

Synthesizing the Literature through Artistic Response

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To understand the whole of the literature, focusing on how to find meaning in the context of COVID and how children and adolescents have been effected by the pandemic through a lens of grief and loss, this writer used art as a means of responding to the themes that emerged. These themes circled around disruption and uncertainty without human connection, the need for community in grief recovery, validation of the different kinds of grief, and how technology has shaped the way we live—for better or worse. Images came to mind of social distancing, zoom calls, grief rituals, and symbols of our attempts to connect via the internet; some of these were explored in the initial artistic reflections mentioned previously. I wanted to use these separate pieces to inspire one final piece that synthesizes the ideas explored through the art. What came together was a 4-panel polyptych painting (Figure 6); the child at the center with the many nuances of COVID-related grief and meaning making swirling around her, traveling through the panels. Beginning with the bottom right panel, an impressionistic crowd queues into the distance like a receiving line at a funeral, flowers and mementos litter the ground along the pathway as a memorial to what has been lost. Into the top right panel, the crowd disperses into virtual windows, isolated from one another as life is confined to two dimensions. These windows grow hands in the top left panel, reaching out to one another as they did in figure 5, desperately looking for ways to be in community. In the bottom left panel, connections are made through this network of technology, for better or worse.

Discussion

The purpose of this literature review is to gain insight into how art therapy can be used through the lens of non-death grief and loss to help children and adolescents in the wake of COVID-19. By analyzing the literature available on expanding definitions of grief, how COVID has affected young people, as well as literature on grief art therapy, I sought to make connections

with how art therapists do grief therapy and how they might approach children and adolescents who have experienced loss through the pandemic. Three main themes arose from this analysis: 1) the pandemic's effect on the mental health of children and adolescents, 2) effective grief art therapy methods for children and adolescents, and 3) telehealth and technology.

The Pandemic's Effects on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents

An initial finding is that the mental health outcomes experienced by children and adolescents are akin to grief reactions, and that the COVID-19 pandemic has been named as a source of grief that mental health workers will be addressing in the years to come (Abdulah et al, 2021; Eales et al, 2021; Gladowska, 2021; Guessoum et al, 2020; Hussong et al, 2021; Jirasek & Stransky, 2022; Malboeuf-Hurtlebise et al, 2021; Meherali et al, 2021; Podder et al, 2022; Rezenbrink, 2021; Schmidt et al, 2021; Shoshani & Kor, 2021; Tishelman et al, 2022; Vasileva et al, 2021). The literature on negative mental health outcomes during the pandemic is generally consistent, showing themes of increased distress and uncertainty, strained familial relationships, and feelings of isolation due to decreased social connection. The studies show a mixture of quantitative, qualitative, and arts-based research, but admit limitations when it comes to the self-selected quality of survey-based data. Research is also missing from many parts of the world and is widely from a Western perspective so the results can't be considered totally comprehensive, but I believe it is likely that children and adolescents are having similar experiences globally, and maybe worse in developing countries without as much access to mental health resources and heightened stigmas surrounding psychological issues. The experiences among children and adolescents call for age-appropriate mental health interventions specific to the losses suffered during the pandemic, including art therapy which can be especially beneficial for those who may not be able to verbalize their thoughts and feelings (Podder et al,

2022). The research does not overtly point to any particular theoretical background, but the convergence on the issues of isolation and loss of social connections could be relevant to attachment and relational theories.

Effective Grief Art Therapy Methods for Children and Adolescents

Overall, the literature seems to converge on meaning making as a popular and effective basis for grief art therapy work (Beasley et al, 2022; Kim & Ali, 2022; Lev, 2022; Neimeyer et al, 2014; Rezenbrink, 2021), although different therapists will have various secondary theoretical approaches to the work depending on the type of loss and the appropriateness of a theoretical position for the individuals or groups who are healing from loss. These approaches provide insight into what art therapy methods may be most effective in helping children and adolescents cope with COVID-related loss. I understand that the lenses of meaning construction theory and the dual process model are the most appropriate with which to look at the grief experience, while a combination of attachment, relational, and narrative therapies may be most useful with children and adolescents depending on developmental ability. Existential therapy as used by Johnson (2019) may be appropriate for older children and adolescents, but is developmentally inappropriate for younger children who have not developed a concept of personal identity and responsibility in context of a larger world.

Telehealth and Technology

Use of technology and the internet is increasingly important in an ever-developing world. This has both positive and negative effects on individuals, with question to accessibility issues, addiction issues, appropriate social behaviors, and even the physical effects of staring at screens or slouching in front of a computer for extended periods. Gladowska (2021) names some of these

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issues against the use of telehealth with children. However, telehealth and other uses of technology as a way to connect to others professionally and socially became totally necessary during lockdown. I believe that telehealth platforms, social applications, and other services provided via the internet will only continue to develop and may continue to be necessary in event of another lockdown and in circumstances where in-person meetings are not accessible. Social connection is imperative and sometimes technology use is the only way to achieve those connections, though availability of devices and internet connection may be difficult based on culture or socioeconomic status. It is up to communities to make sure telehealth and other necessary access to technology is available and it is up to the adults in the lives of children and adolescents to teach appropriate behaviors and monitor their children's internet usage.

Limitations and Implications

The niche subject of doing grief art therapy with children and adolescents coping with non-death COVID-related losses is still developing. The literature specific to this subject is lacking, with very little overlap in the search terms used for this review. The limitations in this review call for future methodological studies on art therapy and COVID-related grief, as well as research on some of the longer-term mental health outcomes in this generation of children.

The resources are also primarily from Western perspectives, creating a gap in understanding for other worldviews. A more comprehensive look at multicultural understandings of grief experiences during COVID. This might look like researching whether or not quarantine and self-isolation in collectivist societies is experienced similarly to self-isolation in individualist societies, or what striving for social connection in a pandemic looks like when you don't have access to technology.

Conclusion

I have witnessed young people in my community experience profound losses as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and through the literature found evidence that they and other children worldwide are grieving. The healing power of art creates new sense of life after such losses as evidenced by the data provided in this literature review. As the pandemic continues, whether our governments assert that it's still a threat or not, art therapists should continue the tradition of grief art therapy as applied to losses suffered from COVID-19 with individuals of all ages. Rooted in meaning construction theory and the dual process model, art therapists can use their theoretical knowledge to layer their approach to their specific populations, creating appropriate directives for individuals or groups of children and adolescents coping with COVID-19 related grief and loss.

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Figures

Figure 1.

Screenshot of Google Sheet Used to Organize the Literature

Author & Year	Title	Citation	Notes	Useful Quotes	Children	Adolescents	COVID	Grief (Death)	Grief (NonDeath)	Interventions	Art Therapy	"Meaning Making"	Lesley Caporaso	Theoretical Backgrounds	Other Key Phrases
Cole (2022)	Using art therapy with grieving adolescents through telehealth	Art Therapy & Telehealth with adolescents experiencing grief. Covers different kinds of grief but focuses on death.												Choice Theory?	Collective trauma, telehealth
Drake et al (2022)	Gravitating towards the arts during the COVID-19 pandemic	People turned to arts as a means of escape during COVID. Importance of art in emotional regulation.													
Eales et al (2021)	Family Resilience and Psychological Distress in the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Mixed Methods Study	COVID/lockdown's negative and positive effects on family dynamics. How parents' emotions effect children's emotions. Examples of family dynamic changes during COVID.													Family relationships, resilience
Gil (2014)	Art therapy for processing children's traumatic grief and loss	Art therapy with children experiencing grief and loss, trauma. Art can become children's primary mode of expression. Suggests relational therapy is important.												Relational Therapy	
Gladowska (2021)	Education and therapy through art in the reality of a post pandemic world	Returning to traditional learning after COVID. Addressing losses related to missing school during lockdown. Suggests online/digital art does not provide enough sensory input and multisensory interventions are necessary.								Multisensory interventions					Self regulation, social needs, sensory stimulation, internet, online

Figure 2

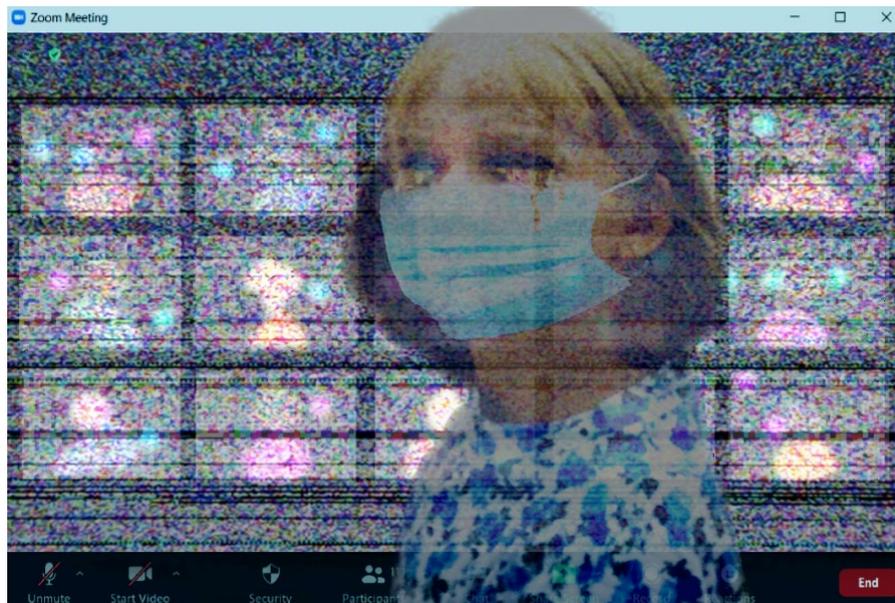
Burial for "Little Dyings"



Note: Polymer clay, brass rings, and metal leaf, 1 x .75 inches, by Lydia Speicher

Figure 3

Valued Student or Glitch in the System?



Note: Digital collage by Lydia Speicher, 2023.

Figure 4.

Altar to Things Lost and Found



Note: Mixed media found object collection by Lydia Speicher, 2023

Figure 5.

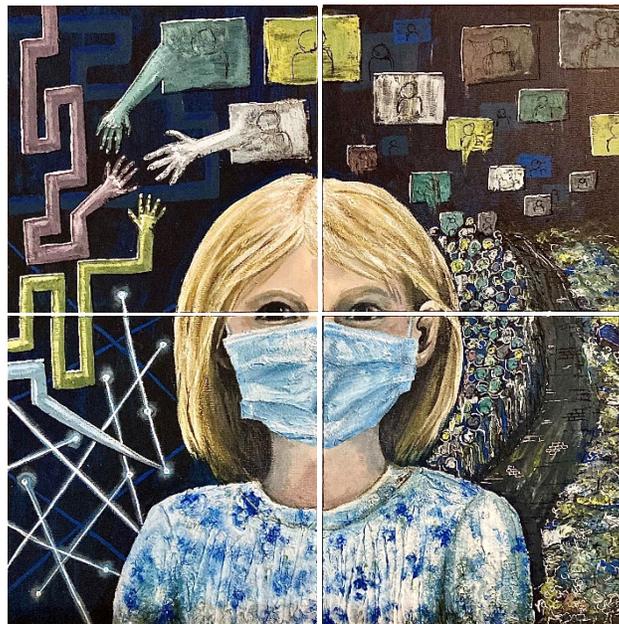
Desperately Seeking Connection in a Pandemic Desert



Note: Mixed media on wood panel, 8x10in, by Lydia Speicher 2023

Figure 6.

Covid. Coping. Connection?



Note: Polyptych painting, acrylic on 4 8x8in panels, by Lydia Speicher 2023

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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

Student's Name: Lydia Speicher

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: COVID, Creativity, and Connecting Through Change:

**Reviewing the Literature on How Art Therapy Can Help Children and Adolescents Cope
with Pandemic-Related Grief**

Date of Graduation: May 2023

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

Thesis Advisor: Raquel Chapin Stephenson