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## How can Art Therapy Help Individuals with Chronic Illnesses? A Literature Review

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# **How can Art Therapy Help Individuals with Chronic Illnesses? A Literature Review**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 5, 2024

Emily Heidler

Art Therapy

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### **Abstract**

This literature review examines the influence of art therapy on the self-esteem of individuals who suffer from chronic pain. The research question was: How can art therapy help individuals with chronic illnesses? Through an exploration of the topics of art therapy, chronic pain, parenting style, and self-esteem, it was noted that there is a gap in literature about art therapy's influence on self-esteem resulting from chronic pain. However, an analysis of the literature reveals that art therapy can influence the self-esteem of individuals who suffer from chronic pain. Art therapy can influence this population by providing a sense of belonging, another form of communication, self-expression, and navigating their experience of pain.

*Keywords:* art therapy, chronic pain, chronic illness, self-esteem, parenting style

*Author Identity Statement:* The author identifies as a cisgender, white person with a mixed European ancestry in New England who has a chronic illness.

### **Introduction**

The topic of this study is one that has had a big impact in my life. There were multiple research questions that came to mind, but there was one that I kept going back to. How can art therapy help individuals with chronic illnesses improve their self-esteem? To answer this question, I decided to conduct a review of the literature on the topic. Data was collected from Lesley University's library database by searching words such as chronic pain, chronic illness, self-esteem, self-worth, art therapy, and expressive arts therapies. Through these searches, I was able to find articles that stood out to me. I'd then read through the data and see which parts would help aid in answering the research question.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2018), over half of the United States adult population has a chronic illness with 51.8% of the United States' adult population has at least one chronic illness and 27.2% of the United States' adult population has multiple chronic illnesses (Boersma, et. al., 2020). Chronic illnesses can be triggered from a genetic factor, an external factor such as a traumatic experience like abuse or a car accident. Chronic illnesses can present in different ways, with chronic pain can causing physical and mental side effects to the people who suffer from them. Self-esteem is a universal experience and an area that is often impacted by those with a chronic illness is self-worth. Each person on this planet has a perception of themselves and how they perceive themselves. Self-esteem is developed at an early stage in life and is continuously influence by internal and external factors, including the people who surround us and our lived experiences.

The topic under consideration for this study was initially centered around chronic pain. Early into this program, I realized that I wanted to focus on chronic pain because it consumed a

big portion of my life. When I was fourteen years old, I started to develop intense stomach pain accompanied by nausea. It soon resembled symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome with intense stomach pain, nausea, acid reflux, and irregular bowel movements. I couldn't stomach any food down. I was eventually sent to Boston Children's Hospital where I had to collect stool samples, try different medications each visit, have MRIs, CT scans, endoscopies, and colonoscopies. My first endoscopy and colonoscopy were at age 16 and I would soon have up to three. When the tests came back within normal limits, my doctor told me it was anxiety and requested therapy. Through four different gastroenterologists, I finally received a diagnosis at 22 years old. Navigating chronic pain dismissed as anxiety symptoms as a teenager growing into an emerging adult had a big impact of my self-worth and who I turned into as an adult. I constantly missed school due to the immense pain I was in as well as doctor's appointments including the hour commute to and from Boston Children's Hospital from New Hampshire. Missing school frequently resulted in me having a handful of friends. I have frequently lost friendships due to having to cancel plans because I was in too much pain, but they didn't understand that. My self-esteem has been impacted through countless doctor's appointments where I was prescribed different medications that caused negative side effects as well as not being able to attend school or spend time with friends.

Through examining relevant literature, I discovered how art therapy can help individuals with chronic illness improve their self-esteem. I learned from the literature that art therapy can help individuals with chronic illnesses navigate their treatment plans and help them explore themselves for more than their illness. I found that through the expressive arts that individuals with chronic illness can communicate non-verbally to address their pain and concerns as well as have an outlet to release their experiences of pain. This topic is important for further study

because there is limited research on how art therapy can improve the self-esteem of individuals who suffer from chronic pain. The findings of this study can inspire others in this field to further explore this topic in future research.

### **Method**

The collection of relevant, peer-reviewed literature is the primary form of data for this study. The research question guiding this inquiry was, “how can art therapy improve the lives of individuals who experience chronic pain? After the topic for research was established, I used search engines, such as Lesley’s library database and Google Scholar and collected suitable articles. I would place them in a personal research assistant application. Having my sources in this personal research assistant was beneficial due to only having to search in one location. Since Zotero is an app, I also have access to it on different platforms. I could add to it on my laptop or on my phone if I were not able to have access to my laptop. This created a more flexible and accessible way of collecting sources.

When collecting literature there were multiple words to use to search for resources. Categories searched for included ‘chronic pain,’ ‘self-esteem,’ ‘self-autonomy,’ ‘parenting style,’ ‘art therapy,’ ‘expressive arts therapy,’ and ‘chronic illness.’ Other topics that were reviewed in this paper include self-esteem in various areas of life, art therapy, parenting styles, how chronic pain impacts self-esteem and how art therapy influences self-esteem and symptoms of chronic pain. There was also a search in the history of art therapy as well as parenting perspectives of chronic pain. Although it was difficult to find data based on the research questions, these categories provided adequate literature that supported similar topics. Various research from other articles were utilized to support the topic for research. I placed an emphasis on qualitative and

quantitative literature for this study, and what emerged from the data was that art therapy can potentially influence the self-esteem of individuals who suffer from chronic pain.

### **Literature Review**

The following review of literature discusses the topics of chronic illness and how this population's daily lives are impacted through their symptoms. Literature about art therapy is also explored to support the research question.

#### **Defining Chronic Pain**

Chronic pain has many definitions. Incorporating multiple definitions from various resources will create a deeper understanding of the topic. A definition that stands out is, chronic pain serves as a broad category covering various disorders characterized by enduring and subjective pain sensations (Larsen et al., 2018). Chronic pain can have an immense impact on the life of the person who experiences it. Chronic pain is described as persistent pain that occurs for longer than three months and is associated with significant emotional anguish and immense pain which can lead to disability (Shaygan & Karami, 2020). Continuous chronic pain can impact the lives of individuals who suffer from chronic pain by missing extended periods of time from work, school, and other commitments (Shaygan & Karami, 2020). According to Lou et al., (2022) "Up to a third of the global population lives with persistent pain, and one in 10 individuals are diagnosed every year as having persistent pain" (p. 712). With a third of our population having a diagnosed chronic illness, there are many people struggling with pain. Of this number, 19.4% of children in the United States suffer from a chronic disease (Rollins et al., 2023).

#### **Navigating Healthcare**

Navigating the healthcare system is difficult for many people in the United States due to limited access to health insurance. Without health insurance, receiving testing, diagnostics, and medication can become very expensive. In today's economy, people with accessible health insurance are privileged as it is difficult to afford continuous care for chronic pain. With low accessibility, there are people going without diagnostics and who are living with chronic pain without treatment. Bryl et al., (2021), addresses the power of a privileged community and their health benefits, noting that patients from lower socioeconomic statuses are at an elevated risk for developing chronic pain and are less likely to have the opportunity of accessing sufficient treatment. Bryl et al., (2021) writes that lower economic standing communities have a higher risk of developing chronic pain due to higher stressors and limited access to healthcare. These communities are often prescribed addictive prescriptions painkillers to mask pain which leads them to develop addictions to the prescription without truly treating the symptoms, just masking them (Bryl et al, 2021).

### **Chronic Pain's Influence on Self-Esteem**

Every human being has self-esteem and chronic pain can severely impact one's self-esteem in a negative way. (Aydin & Kes, 2022). Self-esteem is where an individual can objectively accept and view himself, establish self-worth through self-awareness, self-respect, and self-appreciation (Liu et al., 2023). Individual perspectives of self fall in a varying spectrum between low and high, with people who have low levels of self-acceptance being more susceptible to reduced self-esteem and social withdrawal (Liu et al., 2023). Self-esteem is consistently developing and evolving and is made up of a variety of factors including self-confidence, a sense of belonging, feelings of security, and identity.



It is difficult for individuals who suffer from chronic pain to navigate their daily lives as it can severely impact an individual's satisfaction with their life. There can be limitations to being able to complete daily tasks due to chronic pain whereby daily tasks can be a daunting and difficult effort (Shaygan & Karami, 2020). Living with chronic pain can negatively impact an individual's self-esteem and directly impact anxiety and depression levels with adolescents (Aydin & Kes, 2022; Shaygan & Karami, 2020). When a child enters adolescences, they begin to develop themselves as an individual. Self-esteem is an important factor of their development in their journey to adulthood and their identity.

Self-esteem can be influenced by social dynamics such as school, employment, and family. Meyer et al., (2020) examined if somatic symptoms worsen between fatigue and quality of life in children with chronic pain. To support their study, the authors reference the participants and their activity levels in playing sports or physical games with other children and how they influence social development and physical health. Children who were able to participate in physical movement with their peers were founded to have a higher self-esteem. Continuous pain and anguish among people can result in a decrease in attendance of school or work and limited participation in social activities (Shayman & Karami, 2020). Studies have found that higher intensity and frequency of pain have been related to a decreased psychosocial quality of life in children with a variety of chronic pain conditions (Meyers et al., 2020). Children with chronic pain were limited to how much time and effort they were able to put into the activity with some unable to participate due to their pain levels, thereby limiting their social interactions and decreasing self-esteem. Individuals with chronic pain are limited to the social interactions they have due to their pain dictating their mobility (Meyers et al., 2020). These children with chronic pain had a lowered level of self-esteem (Meyers et al., 2020). In a controlled non-blind study, Liu

et al., (2023) examined the relation between self-acceptance and anxiety levels in children with osteosarcoma. The authors examined a study that explored the effects on anxiety and self-acceptance through group art therapy of children with osteosarcoma. Liu et al., (2023) report that children who have cancer are typically reported to have lower levels of self-acceptance and higher levels of anxiety. They were discovered through screening for children's anxiety disorders (SCARED) and a self-acceptance questionnaire (SAQ).

### **Describing Art Therapy**

Art therapy involves mental health services with creative techniques to help facilitate healing through self-expression, processing emotions, and expressing internal feelings and experiences. According to the American Art Therapy Association (2017), art therapy can be defined as an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of people through “active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experiences with a psychotherapeutic relationship.” Art therapy can be used in many settings in individual or group counseling and benefit most participants. Art therapy can be an essential component of healing for individuals who have difficulty expressing their emotions as art can represent an alternate form of communication. Art therapy can encourage positive self-esteem and self-awareness, increase problem-solving skills, increase emotional distress tolerance, and elevate the expressive therapies continuum opportunities (American Art Therapy Association, 2017). Through utilizing art therapy, individuals engage in interventions verbally and nonverbally to promote the healing process.

### **Person-Centered Art Therapy**

Carl Rogers and his daughter, Natalie Rogers, are influential researchers in the expressive arts therapy community. Natalie Rogers has woven the person-centered approach to empower

therapeutic growth through the expressive arts (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007). Person-centered expressive art therapy is a modern approach that is heavily influenced from Carl Roger's person-centered approach (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007). In person-centered therapy, the relationship between clinician and client is one of the most important factors for the healing process (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007). Carl and Natalie Rogers both believed that the client knows themselves the best and they should lead their sessions which results in emotional and psychological healing (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007). Natalie Rogers' belief that the expressive therapies open the client up to be less rigid in their healing journey (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007). Approaching the healing journey with an open mind and flexibility can create an opportunity for growth and a solution to rigidity (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007).

### **Parenting Style's Impact on Self-Esteem**

Another impacting factor of self-esteem on individuals with chronic pain is how their parents use authority with them. Each parent takes on a role that dictates how they interact with their children. Shaygan & Karami (2020) identified three different patterns of parental authority which are authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. Authoritarian parenting authority is characterized by more demands from parents and less responsiveness of parents (Shaygan & Karami, 2020). Authoritarian parenting expects a lot out of their children without giving a reasoning or providing them with feedback (Shaygan & Karami, 2020). These parents can punish very harshly with little to no explanation. Authoritative parenting is appropriate levels of independence between parent and child as well as mutual relationships between the child and parents by a combination of skills and high emotional support (Shaygan & Karami, 2020). These parents may punish their children or hold them to higher standards but will also provide them with an explanation or resources for them to succeed (Shaygan & Karami, 2020). Permissive

parenting is described as less demand from parents, and they are more responsiveness. Parents have less expectations of their children due to providing more attention to their children. (Shaygan & Karami, 2020). This parenting role treats their children more as friends than children. They are not held to high standards and are given little to no rules or guidelines in life (Shaygan & Karami, 2020). Each parenting style has an impact on the development of an individual's self-esteem (Shaygan & Karami, 2020). In a study to observe self-esteem and chronic pain connection in relation to parenting style, they found that there was a higher score of authoritarian parenting style in adolescents with chronic pain compared to healthy adolescents (Shaygan & Karami, 2020). The adolescents whose parents used authoritative and permissive parenting styles were deemed healthier whereas the adolescents with authoritarian parents faced chronic pain (Shaygan & Karami, 2020). When parents give guidance to their children in a nurturing, respectful and non-violent way, the children will have an increase self-worth (Mateos et al., 2021). This is known as positive parenting. The approach on positive parenting embraces an ecological perspective on parenthood by considering it as the endeavor of nurturing a child while exploring both the capabilities and constraints of parents, as well as those of the broader environment (Mateos et al., 2021). Positive parenting can create a healthy balance in a parent-child relationship. While fostering mutual respect and dignity, the parents may create a space for their child to grow into confident individuals (Mateos et al., 2021). From this perspective, children are regarded as naturally competent and capable individuals, and parents are entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding their rights by providing appropriate guidance and support tailored to their evolving skills. When integrated into family interactions, values like mutual respect, equal dignity, authenticity, integrity, and responsibility serve as the cornerstone for cultivating strong parent-child relationships that prioritize the rights of children (Mateos et

al., 2021). In positive parenting, the parent is viewing their child as another human being who will eventually navigate the outside world on their own terms. Parenting is setting up their children for success when they enter the outside world. When you treat other individuals with respect and provide them with responsibility, they may feel more secure in themselves as individuals. Emerson et al., (2019) address how securely attached adolescents have the freedom to experiment with various roles until they establish an identity that aligns with their self-perception. Also, they are more inclined to develop independent problem-solving skills and productive social skills. In contrast, insecurely attached adolescents show less exploration, leading to delayed identity formation and delayed adaptation to adulthood. When parents are providing a positive parenting style, they are allowing their children to develop lifelong skills such as problem-solving and how to interact with the social world.

### **Art Therapy's Impact on Chronic Pain**

Utilizing art therapy can help aid in the healing process and pain management of an individual's journey of chronic pain (Lou et al., 2022). Art therapy can help individuals explore their symptoms and how they respond to them. Participating in art therapy can act as a means of communication which allows for an individual to express themselves with the potential of coping with their life experiences around pain (Lou et al., 2022). By using art therapy as part of a treatment plan for pain, an individual can begin to be hopeful. Experiencing chronic pain not only impacts the physical parts of a human, but also impacts the mind, body, and perception of pain (Raudenská et al., 2023). While engaging individuals with chronic pain in arts-based interventions, art therapy has been linked with the opportunity to learn how to cope with their symptoms, improve pain reduction, develop emotional regulation skills, and learn acceptance while restoring their sense of self (Raudenská et al., 2023). Other treatment options are available

such as medications, surgeries, psychical therapy, behavioral therapy. But they do not offer satisfactory relief for individuals who suffer from chronic pain. However, treatment plans that incorporate different strategies, such as art therapy, can coordinate care that has been shown to be effective (Bryl et al., 2021). Incorporating the expressive arts into a patient's treatment plan can help aid them in regaining their self-worth and relieving pain.

### **Art Therapy's Impact on Self-Esteem**

With a low self-esteem, individuals who suffer from chronic pain symptoms can find comfort in the creative arts. The creative arts may increase self-esteem through increasing self-autonomy, providing an opportunity for control, as well as provide a purpose for individuals (Raybin et al., 2022). Raybin, et. al, examine the correlation between arts-based activities and pain reduction. The goal of their study is to explore how the creative arts can improve the quality of life of children with cancer from the perspective of guardians. These participants were evaluated through different quality of life scales such as, resilience scales, PedsQL 3.0, Faces Scale, and Patient/Family scales, etc. The participants were split into groups and received different amounts of expressive arts exposure. After repeating the study three times within 30 days +/- 2 weeks, the researchers found that the groups who were exposed to more expressive arts activities had reported improvement of their quality of life (Raybin et al., 2022). Utilizing the creative arts to express experiences can be used to promote self-esteem. Art therapy has many benefits. Creating through art therapy refers to a non-verbal psychotherapeutic approach where an individual's ability, personality traits, interests, concerns, and inner and outer conflicts are expressed through artistic interventions. This method can be used to enhance an individual's cognitive functioning, cultivate self-esteem and self-awareness, strengthen emotional resilience, facilitate insight, increase social skills, and decrease emotion conflict and psychological distress.

(Liu et al., 2023). Some of art therapy's benefits include improved cognition levels, increase self-esteem and self-autonomy, and reduce psychological pains. In a comprehensive examination of literature exploring the effectiveness of art therapy in pediatric oncology, Aguilar (2017) discovered that art therapy gives the opportunity of enhanced communication among children, their families, and their healthcare providers by utilizing an artistic approach. Additionally, it acts as a means for children to emphasize their emotions and sentiments, assists in the learning and using coping mechanisms, alleviates symptoms and problematic behaviors, and ultimately improve the patient's quality of life and treatment plan strategies (Rollins et al., 2020). Participating in art therapy can provide an individual with the feeling of accomplishment and a sense of belonging when creating art. Creating artwork can give people a sense of accomplishment because they are using the art materials themselves to create an artwork that represents the experiences they are facing while always facing pain. Utilizing art therapy can promote self-expression and coping skills, progress symptoms and behaviors, and improve quality of life.

### **Art Therapy Improving Communication**

Art therapy can benefit individuals who suffer from chronic illnesses by acting as another form of communication. Pain can be consuming in ways that not many people could understand (Kozłowska & Khan, 2011). The expressive arts can be utilized as an alternative vessel in research with child to replace verbal communication, feelings and thoughts that would remain unspoken (Mateos et al., 2021). Kozłowska and Khan (2011) describe non-verbal communication allows for young children to act out or create a representation of how they feel instead of verbally addressing this information. The arts can give an opportunity for people who do not know how to verbally express themselves have the chance to show others how they feel

through the art that they make. Non-verbal methods engage neural pathways specialized in non-verbal processing and are more effective than verbal thinking in recognizing and comprehending somatic experiences (Kozłowska & Khan, 2011). There are some situations where you don't know how to formulate a comprehensive explanation, verbally (Kozłowska & Khan, 2011). Word-based thinking and communicating is not always the best course of action. Pieri et al., (2023) describes a pressing demand for person-centered art therapy that is based in less verbal communication and can foster well-being. This kind of approach relies less on verbal communicating skills and more on holistic approaches which target the individual as a whole being. Art therapy can be used as a well-being therapy through person-first approach. Using art therapy can utilize non-verbal communication to better communication experiences of an individual.

### **Art Therapy and Mindfulness**

Art therapy can promote the usage of mindfulness. According to Lee, et al, (2023), mindfulness is an open-minded, receptive focus on and awareness of both internal and external experiences in the present moment. Practicing using non-judgmental awareness of an individual's inner and outer world can improve self-esteem (Lee et al., 2023). Additionally, practicing mindfulness with art therapy can mitigate against the stresses of a diminished life satisfaction. If mindfulness reduces perceived stresses, it could result in a more favorable appreciation of one's life (Lee et al., 2023). With a decrease in stress symptoms, a person is more likely to perceive their life in a positive manner. In a study that examined the extent of which mindfulness and life satisfaction accounted for the relationship between mindfulness and life satisfaction, the researchers found that trait mindfulness was positively correlated with life satisfaction, and this correlation was significantly accounted for by a highly improved self-



esteem and reduced perceived stress (Lee et al., 2023). Utilizing mindfulness in art therapy can help aid in an increase in self-esteem.

### **Caregivers for Individuals with Chronic Pain**

Some people who suffer from chronic pain need to be assisted by a caregiver. Caregivers are people who help take care of individuals' daily tasks who are unable to perform them by themselves. Caregivers can be hired but more often than not are family members who have taken on this role. Being a caregiver can be taxing due to the immense responsibility of taking care of another human being who has more needs than an able-bodied person. Pielech et al., (2013) address of study that sought after an appropriate way to connect parents of children with chronic pain during their children's treatment through art therapy interventions. This study provides the caregivers with support and psychoeducation around their children's experiences as well as their own. It takes a lot of support and energy to promote the healing journey for an individual with chronic pain. It can take a community to ensure a successful treatment.

## **Discussion**

An analysis of the literature noted above revealed examples of how art therapy can be beneficial for people with chronic illness. The findings are centered around four themes: 1) art therapy and its role in pain management, 2) mindfulness in stress reduction, 3) art therapy as nonverbal communication, and 4) community support.

### **Art Therapy and Its Role in Pain Management**

Art therapy is an opportunity for individuals who suffer from chronic pain to learn how to cope and manage the pain which they experience. The expressive arts therapies can provide interventions to develop coping skills, increase self-expression, and encourage alternative forms of communicating. By participating in the creative arts, people with chronic pain can safely

navigate their symptoms, emotions, and experiences. By participating in arts-based interventions there is the potential of creating a higher level of well-being. Individuals who experience chronic pain can utilize traditional pain management plans and incorporate the creative arts in this plan. This can provide the individual who is suffering from chronic pain to develop a sense of control and purpose among their treatment plans and goals. Engaging the mind and body in the expressive arts can increase symptoms manage, develop perception of pain, provide a distraction from the pain, and show improvements in quality of life (Raudenská et al., 2023). Raudenská et al., (2023) provided evidence to support art therapy's pain management for individuals who are suffering from cancer diagnoses. Although cancer and chronic pain are different, art therapy can have similar productive results to chronic pain management.

### **Mindfulness in Stress Reduction**

Mindfulness can act as a way to reduce stress in the lives of individuals who suffer from chronic illnesses. Having chronic pain impacts the physical and spiritual wellbeing of a person (Yildirim & Kes, 2022). As an individual's chronic pain increases, there is a high chance of developing challenges in working life and their personal relations (Yildirim & Kes, 2022). Mindfulness has been shown to reduce stress levels and provide a higher life satisfaction (Lee et al., 2023). Lee et al., (2023) provide research in mindfulness and stress management among college students in the United States. However, college students in the United States are not the only people who experience stressors. Mindfulness can diminish stressors for any person who is experiencing stressful situations. Experiencing chronic pain can be increase stress levels through navigating appointments, taking medication, and having it impact daily life such as work life and social life (Shaygan & Karami, 2020). Thus, utilizing mindfulness practices can help aid in a decrease in stress levels.

**Art Therapy as Non-Verbal Communication**

When participating in art therapy, individuals can learn to express themselves non-verbally. Individuals suffering from chronic pain may have difficulty expressing their pain verbally, but the expressive arts can act as another form of communication to help express what they are trying to communicate (Kozłowska & Khan, 2011). Art therapy gives individuals who don't know how to express their pain verbally the opportunity to express their pain through artistic representations (Kozłowska & Khan, 2011). Utilizing the expressive arts therapies can allow for more comprehensive treatment planning and another form of communication.

**Community Support**

People who suffer from chronic pain can benefit from the support of their families and community. Caregivers can be hired to tend to people but most of the time caregivers are someone in the family (Pielech et al., 2013). When it comes to parents, it can be more difficult to tend for a chronically ill child while working a full-time job and tending to other aspects of life. (Pielech et al., 2013). It is a privilege to have a flexible job that offers good benefits that apply to a child. The expectations of raising a child in today's society is already difficult. Being able to afford to take time off from work to take a child to their doctor appointments and procedures, provide medication and treatment all while affording it is a privilege not many people have the luxury to (Pielech et al., 2013). Having access to a supportive community can help improve self-esteem through a sense of belonging and provide more opportunities of engagement (Pielech et al., 2013). The impact of stress, self-esteem, and community engagement due to chronic pain work together in a system that is going to alter the life of the individual experiencing this pain. This is why having access to a community to support them would be beneficial to their life satisfaction.

### **Limitations**

A limitation to this topic is gaps in the literature. I was expecting there to be more information available about this topic. I was aware going into this topic that there would be a limited number of resources due to a previous assignment that had a similar topic. However, I was not expecting there to be this limited amount of research. And the research that was investigated is not definite on the impact art therapy has on the self-esteem of individuals who are suffering from a chronic illness. They show that it is elevated than before, but there is not enough evidence to say for certain. The research that I was able to find was based more on individuals suffering from cancer and how art therapy can help them. Through finding this research, I was able to make new connections to fit individuals who have chronic pain.

### **Implications**

The relationship between mental health and chronic illness is significant to the field of art therapy. This research has inspired me to want to help navigate the healing journey of other people. This assignment's intentions were to inspire further research and exploration for myself and for other readers. Another intention was to spark a desire to create change. The American Art Therapy Association has a list of active advocacy campaigns on their website. However, there are not active advocacy campaigns in the state of Massachusetts (where Lesley University is located) and in the state of New Hampshire (where I reside). I think that this study might encourage others to investigate and develop change in the state of Massachusetts and New Hampshire to help advocate for people who are suffering on a daily basis. The encouragement of providing advocacy for this population would give these individuals an opportunity to participate in art therapy settings. My role as a future art therapist will be to provide opportunities for this population to have access to the expressive arts. If there is access, then this population will have

the chance to determine if they want to participate in art therapy group or individual sessions to address their chronic pain and the mental health effects that come along with it. Their lives are being impacted and they deserve to have access to mental health care. Mental healthcare accessibility would encourage people who suffer from chronic illnesses to better manage their mental and somatic symptoms and aid them in their journey to healing their mind, body, and soul.

### **Conclusion**

The creative arts can influence the self-esteem of individuals who suffer from a chronic disease through providing an outlet for people to utilize when facing pain and frustration, increase self-awareness through mindfulness exercise, navigate self-confidence, and promote an improved comprehension of their experiences in a safe and supported environment. Through navigating multiple search engines for significant resources, I was able to find that chronic pain can immensely impact the life of an individual who suffers from it. Although I knew from personal experience that daily life could be impacted, I didn't realize how much could be disrupted. As I was a child without a job when I first experienced chronic illness. I found that chronic pain is a continuous medical bill of testing, medication, and doctor appointment. Without a good health insurance, which is a privilege to have, treatment and management can become very expensive. Chronic illnesses can impact the self-esteem of individuals. With constant pain and not being able to participate in social activities or maintain a job, self-esteem can plummet. Art therapy can introduce better coping skills such as mindfulness to manage the mental health aspect of constantly living in pain. Art therapy can provide opportunities for self-expression in a way that does not have to be verbally expressed. This outlet can be used for the expression and to better navigate the understanding of the individual. Art therapy can provide non-verbal

communications between caregivers as well as doctors if they are unable to verbally express the pain that the individual is experiencing. Through this research, I have discovered a passion for further research and exploration. I have hoped to encourage and inspire others to further explore this topic because half of our country's population is living in pain. It is important to our population to navigate pain management skills as well as have an outlet to express themselves freely and safely. I hope that with continuous research and exploration that accessible mental health care can be provided to this population because of their expenses for treatment is costly. It is a privilege to attend therapy sessions and to have access to affordable healthcare. It would be incredible to have this be a right rather than a privilege.

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**THESIS APPROVAL FORM**

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**Student's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_Emily Heidler\_\_\_\_\_

**Type of Project:** Thesis

**Title:** How can Art Therapy Help Individuals with Chronic Illnesses? A Literature Review

**Date of Graduation:** \_\_\_\_\_May 18, 2024\_\_\_\_\_

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

**Thesis Advisor:** \_\_\_\_\_Raquel C. Stephenson\_\_\_\_\_