

Application of Expressive Arts Group Therapy in Enhancing Subjective Well-being of College Students

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Abstract: This study explores the application of expressive arts group therapy in enhancing college students' Subjective Well-Being (SWB). It elaborates on this therapy's concept, theoretical basis, development process, and application areas, analysing its unique advantages in self-exploration, emotional regulation, interpersonal communication, and creative thinking. Practical cases reveal the significant effectiveness of expressive arts group therapy. Suggestions for future practice work are proposed, including strengthening theoretical research, paying attention to individual differences, enhancing counsellor training, and establishing long-term tracking mechanisms. It aims to optimise this therapeutic model further and provide lasting support for enhancing the SWB of college students.

Keywords: Expressive Arts Therapy; Group Therapy; Subjective Well-being; College Students; Mental Health.

1. Introduction

College students are in a crucial period of life development, facing multiple challenges such as academic pressure, interpersonal conflicts, and emotional issues, which attract considerable attention to cultivating and enhancing their Subjective Well-Being (SWB). High levels of SWB can help students cope with these stressors more effectively with less risk of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety[1]. As an innovative psychological treatment method, expressive arts group therapy provides college students with a unique space for self-expression and growth through art creation and group interaction[2]. This study systematically discusses the connotation, theoretical basis, and practical application of expressive arts group therapy, evaluates its effectiveness in enhancing the SWB of college students, and proposes optimisation suggestions. It also aims to provide new ideas and practical guidance for college students' physical and mental health development.

2. Overview of Expressive Arts Group Therapy

Expressive arts group therapy is an innovative psychological treatment method that integrates the advantages of art therapy and group therapy. During expressive arts group therapy, therapists guide group members to explore and express their inner emotions, thoughts, and experiences through various forms of artistic expression. EAT includes painting, music, dance, and drama[3]. Unlike traditional verbal therapy, expressive arts therapy emphasises non-verbal communication methods, allowing members to express themselves more intuitively and symbolically meaningfully[4][5]. At the same time, the supportive environment of the group provides a safe and accepting space for members, facilitating emotional release and practising interpersonal interaction. The theoretical basis of expressive arts group therapy mainly stems from humanistic psychology, aiming to awaken the inherent healing power within individuals and help them achieve integration and growth through artistic and interpersonal

interaction. This therapeutic method originated in early 20th-century Europe and developed in mid-20th-century America. It is initially used for the rehabilitation treatment of psychiatric patients, and later, with the rise of humanistic psychology, began to be used to promote the psychological growth and self-improvement of individuals, and has been further promoted and applied in the 21st century[6].

3. Application of Expressive Arts Group Therapy in Enhancing College Students' Subjective Well-being

3.1. Self-Exploration and Self-Understanding

In expressive arts group therapy, college students explore and express their inner worlds through various artistic media, such as painting, sculpture, and dance, to name a few, deepening their understanding and understanding of themselves. A 8-week, weekly expressive arts group therapy study discovered that students' self-knowledge levels improved significantly, as did their self-acceptance rates when comparing pre and post-treatment[7]. Accordingly, these studies suggest that expressive arts group therapy can effectively promote college students' self-exploration and self-knowledge, laying the foundation for improving their SWB.

3.2. Emotional Expression and Regulation

Expressive arts group therapy provides college students with a unique environment to freely express and explore various emotions within a safe and supportive atmosphere. This therapeutic approach particularly emphasises releasing and regulating negative emotions through creating art pieces. Research indicates that this not only helps students effectively cope with anxiety, depression, and other negative emotions but also significantly enhances their emotional regulation abilities [8].

Additionally, expressive arts therapy has been acknowledged for its capacity to enhance emotional expression, self-image, autonomy, insight into internal

experiences, and vulnerability management in individuals with personality disorders[9]. While substantial evidence supports the benefits of expressive arts therapy on emotion regulation, some studies have emphasised the necessity for further research and validation. For example, research has stressed the significance of considering the quality and structure of group arts therapies to maximise their effectiveness, proposing strategies like smaller groups and longer sessions for improved outcomes[10]. Group interactions during expressive arts group therapy further enhanced member communication, and the support and understanding between group members provided a more tolerant space for each individual to explore and express their emotions. As a result, expressive art-making can be an effective tool for emotional regulation, especially in a supportive group setting.

3.3. Interpersonal Communication and Social Support

Expressive arts group therapy provides a unique opportunity for college students to practice and enhance their interpersonal communication skills in a creative environment while receiving valuable social support from group members. Students naturally learn to listen, express, and cooperate through expressive arts group activities, which are crucial for building and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships [7] 4. This interaction fosters understanding and acceptance among individuals and provides them with a safe platform to explore and express their feelings while receiving feedback and support from others. It was discovered that through expressive arts group therapy, college student's interpersonal communication skills were significantly improved, resulting in more harmonious relationships with others and a significant increase in perceived social support[7]5.

Additionally, expressive arts group therapy offers a crucial cognitive perspective. Through art creation and collective sharing, individuals can better understand themselves and others, promoting social integration and personal growth[11]. In conclusion, expressive arts group therapy is a powerful tool for college students, supporting their mental health, significantly enhancing their interpersonal communication abilities, and providing a supportive environment.

3.4. Creative Thinking and Problem Solving

Expressive arts group therapy can stimulate college students' creative thinking and enhance their problem-solving abilities. Students must break conventional thinking patterns during art creation, express inner experiences, and solve innovative problems. A study on college students participating in expressive arts group therapy exhibited significantly improved students' creative thinking abilities

regarding fluency, flexibility, and originality. Additionally, students could apply more innovative and effective strategies when facing challenges in their lives and studies[7]5.

In summary, expressive arts group therapy has various applications and effects in enhancing the SWB of college students. It includes facilitating self-exploration and self-understanding, aiding emotional expression and regulation, improving interpersonal communication and social support, and stimulating creative thinking and problem-solving abilities. Accordingly, these research findings provide strong support and references for applying expressive arts group therapy in mental health services for college students.

4. Expressive Arts Group Therapy Case Study in Enhancing College Students' Subjective Well-being

4.1. Group Overview

This case study describes a 2-week expressive arts group therapy program held four times to enhance college students' SWB. It consisted of eight college students from various majors and grades, aged between 18 and 22. Note that selection criteria for group members included scoring below 70 on the C-GWBs, voluntary participation in group therapy, and the absence of severe psychological disorders.

4.2. Group Process

Throughout the four times of therapy, the facilitators guided members to explore and express themselves through various art forms. This intervention includes painting, sculpting, and music while receiving support and feedback from the group. Taking the theme "Body Map" for the 4th time as an example, the facilitators invited members to recall their emotional experiences from the past week and then create a "Body Map" using clay or playdough, representing different emotions with different colours and shapes. After completing their creations, members took turns sharing their artworks and discussing the thoughts and needs behind their emotions. The group atmosphere was safe and supportive, with trust and understanding among members deepening over time. Through the four times journey, members experienced significant improvements in self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal communication.

4.3. Group Effectiveness Evaluation

Pre- and post-tests were conducted using the General Well-being Scale (Chinese version) to evaluate the effectiveness of the expressive arts group therapy. After group therapy, the results exhibited a significant increase in members' SWB and a noticeable improvement in their emotion regulation abilities. The following is a comparison of pre-and post-test data:

Table 1. Comparison between means of C-GWB subscales at pre-test and post-test

	Group (Mean± Standard Deviation)		t-value	p-value
	Pre-test(n=8)	Post-test(n=8)		
Depressed or happy factor	3.17±1.44	5.67±0.99	-4.050	0.001**
Relaxation or tension factor	3.25±0.63	4.34±0.58	-3.618	0.003**
General well-being	3.47±0.25	4.20±0.19	-6.629	0.000**

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01

The group showed a 0.01 level of significance (t=-4.050, p=0.001) for the depressed or happy factor, as well as

differences in specific comparisons, with the mean of the pre-test (3.17) being significantly lower than the mean of the post-test (5.67).

The group showed a 0.01 level of significance for the relaxation or tension factor ($t=-3.618$, $p=0.003$), as well as differences in specific comparisons, with the mean of the pre-test (3.25) being significantly lower than the mean of the post-test (4.34).

The group showed a 0.01 level of significance for the general well-being factor ($t=-6.629$, $p=0.000$), as well as specific comparative differences, with the mean of the pre-test (3.47) being significantly lower than the mean of the post-test (4.20).

The group samples showed significant differences on three items: depressed or happy factor, relaxation or tension factor, and general well-being factor.

Observations during the group process and member feedback also supported the quantitative results. Members expressed that through art creation and group sharing, they gained deeper self-awareness, learned to express and regulate emotions, and developed closer and more harmonious relationships with others. Below are excerpts of feedback from some members: Member A described experiencing a magical journey of exploring their inner world through painting. In contrast, Member B felt supported and understood by others in the group, alleviating feelings of loneliness. Additionally, Member C discovered that expressing problems through art brought mental relief and sparked creativity. In summary, this case study, supported by both quantitative data and qualitative feedback, demonstrates the significant effectiveness of expressive arts group therapy in enhancing college students' SWB. This model is worth promoting and applying in college mental health services.

5. Expressive Arts Group Therapy Implementation Recommendations for Enhancing College Students' Subjective Well-being

5.1. Strengthen Theoretical Research and Improve Treatment Plan Design

Expressive arts group therapy has demonstrated promising prospects in enhancing college students' SWB. However, deeper exploration and refinement in theoretical research are necessary to improve its practical effectiveness further. Future endeavours should integrate existing research findings and conduct more systematic and in-depth theoretical studies tailored to the characteristics of college students from different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, it is essential to clarify how expressive arts group therapy affects college students' SWB, exploring the impacts of various factors, such as different art forms, group stages, and counsellor styles, on treatment outcomes. In addition, optimising treatment plan design under theoretical guidance, including setting group goals, selecting activity themes, and utilising art media, can provide more scientific and targeted practice guidance, enhancing the effectiveness and applicability of therapy.

5.2. Pay Attention to Individual Differences Among Group Members and Flexibly Adjust Treatment Strategies

College students exhibit significant heterogeneity in personality traits, artistic preferences, and types of issues.

Therefore, when implementing expressive arts group therapy, it is crucial to consider these differences and flexibly adjust treatment strategies and methods to provide more personalised and targeted therapeutic experiences. Specifically, designing art tasks of varying difficulty and styles in group activities can meet different members' expressive needs and skill levels. Moreover, tailored art intervention plans can address the challenges of interpersonal relationships and emotion regulation. Hence, encouraging members to share their unique experiences and feelings during group interactions can promote mutual understanding and support. Therefore, by valuing and responding to individual differences, engagement and a sense of achievement among members can be enhanced, improving the targeting and effectiveness of therapy.

5.3. Enhance Professional Training for Group Facilitators to Improve Treatment Outcomes

The professional competence of group facilitators is a crucial factor influencing the effectiveness of expressive arts group therapy. Facilitators need solid theoretical foundations in psychology, extensive group therapy experience, professional backgrounds, and skills in art therapy. Therefore, enhancing professional training for facilitators is a crucial measure to improve treatment outcomes. On the one hand, professional courses and workshops should provide systematic training in expressive art therapy knowledge and skills. It includes the selection and use of art media and the analysis and interpretation of artworks. On the other hand, enhancing facilitators' self-awareness and emotional sensitivity can help them capture members' emotional changes and needs during group processes and provide timely and appropriate responses. Therefore, ongoing professional development support, such as continuous professional supervision and peer exchange opportunities, should be provided to improve facilitators' professional capabilities.

5.4. Establish Long-term Tracking Mechanisms to Consolidate Treatment Outcomes

The effectiveness of expressive arts group therapy should not be limited to the short term. Establishing long-term tracking and follow-up mechanisms is crucial for consolidating treatment outcomes and achieving sustained growth among members. Specifically, regular follow-ups (e.g., every six months or annually) should be conducted after the group sessions to understand members' life situations and levels of psychological well-being and provide necessary support and guidance. Notably, encouraging members to continue using art expression and self-exploration methods in their daily lives can internalise the gains from therapy into their personal growth. Moreover, continuous services for group members, such as organising follow-up growth groups and offering individual art therapy, can meet members' ongoing developmental needs. Through long-term tracking and support, positive changes from group therapy can be extended and deepened, achieving more lasting and stable improvements in SWB.

6. Conclusion

This article explores the application of expressive arts group therapy in enhancing college students' SWB. This

treatment modality's unique advantages and significant effectiveness in promoting college students' self-exploration, emotion regulation, interpersonal communication, and creative thinking are revealed through the systematic exposition of the concept, theoretical foundation, development process, application areas, and practical case studies of expressive arts group therapy. Furthermore, recommendations for future practice work are proposed, including strengthening theoretical research, valuing individual differences, enhancing facilitator training, and establishing long-term tracking mechanisms. It aims to optimise the expressive arts group therapy model, provide more effective and lasting support for enhancing college students' SWB, and promote their physical and mental health and comprehensive development.

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