

## Art therapy: an alternative to psychotherapy

Lina BELAL: \*

Lecturer A, Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University, [Lina.belal@univ-mosta.dz](mailto:Lina.belal@univ-mosta.dz)

Phone : 00213 793112416

### Abstract:

In the realm of academic psychological advances, art therapy is a branch of psychotherapy that allows the patient to express those feelings that they can't find words to explain, the present article exposes a conceptual initiation to art therapy in general, and its utilities with patients who have mental disabilities in particular. Our general end view is to come up with an appropriate understanding of the concept of art therapy.

We conducted a theoretical research with a descriptive methodology, in which we reviewed some of the most recent scientific papers, analyzed and synthesized these works. We resorted to reading the university formation programs of psychologists. We accompanied these readings with observations and synthesis. We highlighted in this article some misconceptions about art therapy in Algerian universities, and we provided an update of information that's recent, and that would facilitate for students research on several aspects of art therapy.

**-Key words:** art; art therapy; mental disabilities; psychotherapy;

### Introduction:

According to the American psychology association, psychotherapy can be defined as: “involving communication between patients and therapists that is intended to help people:

- Find relief from emotional distress, as in becoming less anxious, fearful or depressed.
- Seek solutions to problems in their lives, such as dealing with disappointment, grief, family issues, and job or career dissatisfaction.
- Modify ways of thinking and acting that are preventing them from working productively and enjoying personal relationships.

Psychotherapy begins with some discussion of a person's background and the concerns that led him or her to seek help. Following this initial assessment, the patient and therapist come to an agreement, called the treatment contract. The treatment contract specifies the goals of treatment, treatment procedures, and a regular schedule for the time, place and duration of their treatment sessions. Sometimes this treatment contract is written down explicitly, but more often it is discussed between patient and therapist.” (APA, 2017)

For us psychotherapy is a relationship between a patient and their clinical psychologist or psychotherapist, that is built to achieve a certain number of goals -

about understanding the meaning of mental health (feelings, thoughts, emotions..) and the bridges between physical and mental health. And this human relationship brings the patient to work on maximizing their mental health. This means for us that psychotherapy builds self awareness and resilience to go overcome life challenges.

In psychology there is a myriad of psychotherapies, and every psychotherapy program has its own techniques, tools, and exercises. The European federation of psychiatric trainees recognizes; Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) Rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT), Interpersonal Psychotherapy, Mindfulness therapy, Client-Centered Psychotherapy, Psycho education, Cognitive Remediation Therapy, Psychoanalysis, Institutional Psychotherapy, Psychodrama, Family Therapy, Supportive psychotherapy. All these therapies are used by therapists according to their trainings and the needs of their patients; this choice is clearly mentioned in the therapeutic contract.

What heals in psychotherapy? Much research was done indeed to provide an answer to this problematic ( like the Diderot Forum in December 2000), some authors say that words have a liberating power, while others consider that psychotherapy is the art of healing through words. Words are a form of expression used by humans, but there are a lot of ways of expressions such as: drawing, dancing, singing, playing roles...etc. These expressions of inner world of human beings are called "Arts".

### **1-Problematic:**

Intellectual disability "involves problems with general mental abilities that affect functioning in two areas: Intellectual functioning (such as learning, problem solving, judgement), and adaptive functioning (activities of daily life such as communication and independent living). Additionally, the intellectual and adaptive deficit begin early in the developmental period. Intellectual disability affects about 1% of the population, and of those about 85% have mild intellectual disability. Males are more likely than females to be diagnosed with intellectual disability". (American psychiatric association, 2021)

Intellectual disabilities remain to this day a complex handicap which overwhelms the life of the child or the person but also their family by completely changing its present and its future. Different therapy programs are proposed to improve the quality of life of a person suffering from mental handicap, so that they can gain autonomy, and can flourish in daily life.

The therapies offered must take into consideration all aspects of the life of a mentally disabled person, including social and emotional abilities, cognitive and reasoning capacities. The therapy programs should establish and continually evaluate the communicative abilities of the patient with intellectual disabilities, which can be via speaking, writing, using images, or using any other medium.

In these therapeutic programs we must develop varied and multiple ways of expression so that the person with intellectual disability can express their affects, emotions and different states of mind. In the light of what has been mentioned, art

therapy becomes an essential part within the development of the intellectually disabled people, because it is both a means of emotional and affective expression but also a means of developing personal abilities in general.

Unfortunately, art therapy is rarely taught to future psychologists in Algeria given that it remains a subject of choice offered only once in the second year of masters in psychology (school and clinical specialties), we need to raise awareness of art therapy, clearing out certain misconceptions on art therapy, and the feasibility of the creative process of art therapy with intellectually disabled persons.

In the light of what has been previously mentioned, the present article is intended to tackle the following questions: what is art therapy? To what extent is it effective with intellectual disabilities?

## **2-What is art therapy?**

Art is defined as: “the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting, sculpture and producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power” .

Art therapy allows you to express those feelings that you can't find words to explain. “You talk through the image with your therapist and communicate through it, taking the pressure off. The connection with your therapist becomes even stronger.”

Art therapy is known in the British Association of Art Therapists as: “a form of psychotherapy that uses art media as its primary mode of expression and communication. Clients referred to art therapists are not required to have experience or skills in the arts. The art therapist’s primary concern is not to make an aesthetic or diagnostic assessment of the client’s image. The overall goal of its practitioners is to enable clients to change and grow on a personal level through the use of artistic materials in a safe and convenient environment” (British Association of Art Therapists, 2015)

Masoumeh Faroukhi (2011, p.2088) considers art therapy as: “a form of expressive therapy that uses art materials [...] art therapy combines traditional psychotherapeutic theories and techniques with an understanding of the psychological aspects of the creative process, especially the affective properties of the different art materials”.

And we can distinguish two principal ways of conception of art therapy:

**Table N°1.** Theoretical ways of conception on art therapy

<b>The creative process of art therapy has a healing power</b>	<b>Art is a symbolic communication</b>
<p>Hence, making art is a possibility or an opportunity to express the inner world of the patient; it is a way to discover their imagination spontaneously and authentically.                      This experience can lead (over time) to emotional well-being and personal recovery.</p>	<p>Therefore, art becomes a way of expression, and their products (drawing, painting...) emphasize communication especially about emotions and conflicts.                      Art production enhances verbal expression between the patient and psychotherapist and in this way they manage to resolve conflicts and achieve the insight of the patient.</p>

To be very clear and synthetic, Faroukhi said that art therapy is : “a process by which individuals can gain a clearer understanding of themselves by exploring difficult thoughts and feelings through the use of art materials” (Farokhi, 2011, p. 2089).

**3-Background:**

In this section, a brief sketch of the historical evolution of art therapy is provided;

The value of art has appeared historically for centuries, and in many cultures and peoples art has been used as a means of self-expression. I remember the era of the hieroglyphs in ancient Egypt or drawing on stone in the Stone Ages.

Art therapy has its origins in antiquity with catharsis: according to Aristotle, in the theater, catharsis consists in purging oneself of one's emotions by identifying oneself with the characters on stage.

We find the concept relating to the association of Art and Medicine appeared in the 1900s in France. A thesis defended in 1903 at the Faculty of Medicine of Lille clearly attests to the emergence of art therapy.

However, in scientific world in general art therapy emerged and developed as a profession in the post-war era in Britain and the U.S.A. Many of the pioneers of Art Therapy came from the field of art education and the psychoanalytic profession and it was on the turn of the century. (Farokhi, 2011, p. 2089)

**4.Art Therapy in treating illnesses:**

When a person is afflicted with a disease, he embarks on a journey in search of recovery, and this journey has several doors, some of which are medical and others are alternatives to medicine. In many cases, especially when modern medicine is unable to relieve the pain of patients, they find in creative processes and art in its broad sense the comfort that was taken away of them due to illness.

In their article entitled ‘role of art therapy in the promotion of mental health’, Shukla pointed out that : “Art therapy is used most commonly to treat mental illnesses and can aid in controlling manifestations correlated with

psychosocially challenging behaviors, slowing cognitive decline, and enhancing the quality of life. Art therapy can help people express themselves more freely, improve their mental health, and improve interpersonal relationships” (Shukla A, 2022, p. 2).

Research is underway to reveal the effectiveness of art therapy and the contribution of art therapy on different areas, including “depression, dementia, schizophrenia and psychosis. More extensive studies have examined topics like overall wellness or everyday anxiety” (Montag C, 2014, p. 3).

Many studies have proven that the emotional impact of the disease on a person may be mitigated and reduced by using artistic and creative means, which allow the person to enjoy the rest of his vital functions and not engage in a vicious cycle of thoughts and guesses about his illness, which are usually accompanied by negative emotions. Faroukhi’s study in (2011) demonstrated Placing artistic paintings in the rooms of patients with cancer in hospitals may reduce the need for painkillers, and at the same time reduce the time required for recovery, and this is through the patient contemplating these artistic paintings throughout his stay in the hospital. We can clearly recognize here the coping role that art-therapy plays in this perspective.

### **5. Art therapy and mental disabilities:**

We present in this section a summary of the article of Jingxuan Hu et al, which is entitled “Art Therapy: A Complementary Treatment for Mental Disorders” in this study the authors presents a theoretical analysis of about 413 literature review on art therapy, with the objective of bringing out the theoretical bases but also the clinical practices of art therapy and the future prospects of the latter, the authors arrived at different results but the main idea is that: “art therapy has been gradually and successfully used for patients with mental disorders with positive outcomes, mainly reducing suffering from mental symptoms” (Hu J, 2021, p. 2) .

The Rainbow study showed that art-based interventions have multiple and diverse effects on the patient. Perhaps the most important of these effects is on the patient’s feeling of happiness. Art therapy-based interventions develop a sense of comfort and develop positive thinking in the patient, as we notice, for example, that the use of colors develops positive emotions in the patient. (Rainbow T. H. Ho, 2020, p. 1)

These findings suggest that art therapy can be served as a useful therapeutic method to assist patients to open up and share their feelings, views, and experiences and particularly when the patient are non verbal or has no other way of expression yet.

## **6-Types of art-therapy:**

There are several sorts of expression, and also many forms of arts, but the person who chooses to experience an art therapy session does not need any art skills or any art training to (gain or profit ) benefit from art therapy benefits.

The most known forms of art therapy are; visual art therapy, dance therapy, music therapy, drama therapy...etc. the application of art is a process named creation, and every kind of art-therapy has its own techniques including Drawing, coloring, painting, finger painting, collage, doodling, photography, sculpting, working with clay...etc.

- **Visual art therapy:** we classify under this name all the forms of art therapy which lead to a visual artistic production such as: drawing, painting, finger painting, doodling, sculpting, coloring, collage, working with clay, clay...etc. But in this kind of art therapy we can also use digital media, such as photos or videos.

The British association of art therapists defines visual art therapy as: “a form of psychotherapy that uses visual and tactile media as a means of self expression and communication. Art therapists aim to support people of all ages and abilities and at all stages of life, to discover an outlet for often complex and confusing feelings, and foster self awareness and growth.” (BAAT)

- **Music therapy:** we call music therapy all sessions during which we use music instruments, we do not need to do a music performance or to use an instrument very well to do music therapy, and we just need to express our feelings with an instrument or our voice. So in music therapy sessions “Interactive music is created by patients and therapist using a variety of instruments. The therapist may use an instrument or his/her voice to acknowledge and support the client's music” (Farokhi, 2011, p. 2091)

The British association of music therapy defines it as “an established psychological clinical intervention, delivered by HCPC (The Health and Care Professions Council, in UK) registered music therapists to help people whose lives have been affected by injury, illness or disability through supporting their psychological, emotional, cognitive, physical, communicative and social needs.”

- **Drama Therapy:** involves using different types of drama and performance activities that might be helpful for patients. In drama therapy a theatrical performance is produced, under the direction of a therapist, of a lived or imaginary scene, intended to exteriorize the springs of a conflict that the subject updates in his relationship with the other actors in the scene it can be in an individual way or in a collective one. The methods used in Drama therapy include “spontaneous and dramatic play, drama games, mime, role-play, scripts, masks, myths, stories, metaphor and symbolism” (Farokhi,

2011, p. 2090). The role of the Drama therapist is to develop a program with appropriate aims, objectives and structures to meet the needs and abilities of the clients.

The British association of drama therapists defines drama therapy as “a form of Psychotherapy. Drama therapists are both clinicians and artists that draw on their knowledge of theatre and therapy to use as a medium for psychological therapy that may include drama, story-making, music, movement, and art; to work with any issue that has presented itself. Drama therapists work with their clients using a very wide range of dramatic techniques in verbal and non-verbal ways. Though vocalisation, storymaking and talk are integral parts of drama therapy, the practice does not necessarily rely on spoken language alone to resolve what a pupil, client, or patient may wish to address, explore or to seek support with. Embodiment and movement are also vital in our practice.” (BAD, 2020)

- **Dance therapy:** also called dance movement therapy, it is found on the principle that movement reflects an individual's pattern of thinking and feeling.

Dance Movement Psychotherapy (DMP) recognizes body movement as an implicit instrument of communication and expression. DMP is a relational process in which client(s) and therapist engage creatively using body movement and dance, as well as verbal and non-verbal reflection.

Dance Movement Psychotherapists offer “embodied interventions that take into account the client’s lived experience in the context of the social system they live in, how they experience living in their body and relationship to their body, how they think about themselves and their relationships, as well as emotional responses that may be hard to put into words. Each Dance Movement Psychotherapist’s approach will be individual and underpinned by their own education and philosophical stance, but at the heart of this is the intrinsic belief in the inter-relationship between psyche, soma, and spirit”. (BADMT, 2021)

### **7-Goals of Art-Therapy:**

We work in sessions of art therapy on reducing emotional pressure and discomfort by facilitating the expression of feelings, but also on developing faith and expectancy for change and working on changing the wrong habits of the patient. But objectives of art therapy are many and varied depending on the context and their uses by the clinical practitioner or the psychotherapist; it can be (Sundberg & Tyler,1962):

- Strengthening the patient’s motivation to develop their own abilities, and to take care about their mental and physical health.
- Gaining self-knowledge, and providing more information about themselves, and releasing their potential for growth.

- Changing the social environment of the patient, and facilitating interpersonal relations and communication.
- Fostering Insight and encouraging catharsis.

### **8-Effectiveness of art-therapy:**

Does art therapy work? Several studies were done with the issue of the effectiveness of art therapy some of them focused on qualitative methods others on quantitative ones. Some research focus on art therapy with disabilities populations, others on age group. We decide in this article to present a synthetic reading of the last search performed on the effectiveness of art therapy, which were done by Dafna Regev and Liat Cohen-Yatzif from creative art therapy school in Haifa's university, a study that were published on frontiers of psychology and who were untitled by: "effectiveness of art therapy with adult clients in 2018- what progress was been made?" (Dafna Regev, 2018, p. 15)

During their research, the authors were incredibly surprised to constat the number of articles and research which were published and appear as art therapy interventions, while there was not, such as the establishment of one single session of art therapy, and this kind of misconceptions highlighted the poor knowledge or the erroneous ideas on art therapy which, let us recall, is a therapeutic program with two main objectives; psychotherapeutic and expressive ones through the creative process.

### **9-The course of an art-therapy session:**

Sessions ideally take place once a week, they generally last 60 to 90 minutes (to be defined). The workshop offers a space for expression and creation without moral or aesthetic judgment. During the sessions, the person is invited to explore various techniques and materials of their choice, according to their needs and desires.

The person is invited to revisit their works during the assessments, this allowing them to take stock of the evolution of the care and to identify elements for the continuation of their journey.

The creations are the property of the person and remain in the workshop until the end of the therapeutic contract. All art therapy sessions are subject to professional secrecy.

The therapist won't judge the art of their patient or tell him what it means. The art therapist will help their patient to explore what it means to him and how he felt about making it.

The creative work allows, through formatting, in images and words, to exteriorize what needs to be revealed through the created object. The objective is to develop a symbolic language giving access to one's emotions and feelings, to gradually integrate them. The work is done step by step, adjusting to the needs, pace and problem of the person.

At the end of the creation time, comes a time for dialogue and reflection on the process of developing the work, the content of the journey. The place of



words, like silences, is in accordance with the needs of the person. The work is apprehended more in its evolution, as a reflection of what is being transformed, rather than in the result.

For example, the patient may talk about why they chose a particular color or material in their art work. But not everything he makes will need to have a meaning. In music therapy there is no right or wrong way of using music to communicate your feelings. The emphasis is not on performance but on the experience of the group or of the person. (Farokhi, 2011, p. 2092)

### **Conclusion:**

The present paper yielded a general presentation on several aspects of art therapy including the historical development, kinds of art therapy, and their effectiveness with mental disabilities in general and intellectual disabilities in particular, we also highlighted some misconceptions on art therapy in the academic university programs.

Our general end view was to come up with an appropriate understanding of the concept of art therapy.

We suggest doing more justice to art therapy by establishing it as a fundamental form of psychotherapy in clinical practice and as one of constituting modules in the future academic programs. Subsequently, art therapy will be accessible, as a psychological practice, among future clinical therapists.

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