

Healing the Mind through Art Creation: The Role and Mechanism of Art Therapy in College Students' Mental Health Education

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Abstract

College students are a group with a high incidence of psychological problems, and their mental health education has attracted widespread attention from all walks of life. As art has unique visual expression, figurative emotional release and high inclusiveness, integrating it with mental health education is of great significance to promote the physical and mental health and comprehensive development of college students. Art healing is a dual process of art creation and mental health education, which uses art works as a bridge to establish a safe and trusting relationship between teachers and students, and healing occurs in physiological, psychological and aesthetic aspects through the constant interaction and feedback among the three elements. Under the "triadic interaction" relationship formed by teachers, art works and students, the art healing activities consisting of the three phases of pre-creation, creation and post-creation corresponding to "scrutinizing-practicing-reflecting" can comprehensively improve the mental health of students.

Keywords

Art Creation; Therapy; Healing; Mental Health; Role; Mechanism.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of society and the increasingly fierce competition, the psychological pressure on college students is increasing day by day, and their mental health problems have gradually become the focus of society. The construction of effective mental health education and the strengthening of psychological education and guidance for students have become an important part of student management in higher education. Historical studies have shown that the use of artistic methods could treat psychological disorders and enhance mental health. This use of artistic production as a healing treatment is known as creative therapy. This use of artistic production as a healing treatment is known as creative therapy. creative therapy helps to relieve students' psychological stress and promote their physical and mental health and overall development.

There are many types of creative therapies, such as art, dance, drama, expressive, music and writing, that used in the treatment of mental illness. This among others, art Of these, the images created by art convey a richer message than words, and reading pictures is the easiest and most direct way to understand people's inner world. Any doodle of the creator, the size of the painting, the lightness of the brush, the spatial configuration, the color, the composition, etc. all have a specific representative meaning, and all of them are conveying his individual message. Therefore, in college students' mental health education, art therapy can show more significant effect than other creative therapies.

2. The Special Characteristics of College Students' Mental Health Education

Compared with students of other age groups, the psychological pressure and needs faced by college students have their special characteristics, which are mainly reflected in the following aspects:

2.1. Academic Pressure and Career Anxiety

Unlike primary and secondary school students who mainly face academic and peer relationship problems, college students are in an important transition period in their lives when they are changing from adolescents to adult roles, a period often accompanied by academic pressures, uncertainty about their future careers, and the challenges of independent living. Art creation provides a healthy way of emotional release and coping with stress, which helps to relieve college students' anxiety and stress.

2.2. The Need for Self-exploration and Self-recognition

The university stage is a critical period for self-exploration and identity, as well as career development, so college students have a stronger need for self-exploration and self-knowledge. They need to better understand and express their emotions, thoughts and values to help them maintain their mental health when facing complex social environments and interpersonal relationships. Fine art creativity helps students to know themselves more deeply and develop their personal creativity and critical thinking skills, which has a long-term positive impact on their academic and career development[1].

2.3. Independent Living and Decision-making Skills

At the university level, students begin to live independently, and they need to make important life and career decisions, which require them to have the ability to solve complex problems and innovative thinking. And art creation not only involves emotional expression, but also requires creative thinking and critical thinking. Through art-making, college students can develop these skills and build decision-making and self-regulation skills that are important to their academic and professional development.

3. The Unique Role of Art Creation in College Students' Mental Health Education

Art education has its unique role in the mental health of college students and plays an important role in students' mental health education. Compared with other creative therapies, art has the advantages of unique visual expression, figurative emotional release and high inclusiveness, which make it a powerful and effective intervention tool for students' mental health.

3.1. Immediacy and Immediacy of Visual Expression

Fine art creation allows students to communicate their emotions and thoughts immediately through visual expressions, such as painting and sculpture. During the process of creating art, students are constantly making choices, such as the use of color, line, and shape. These choices are not only technical art decisions, but also reflect their emotional and psychological responses. Students are constantly evaluating and adjusting their work during this process, and this immediate and direct feedback mechanism makes art a powerful tool that can quickly and effectively reveal students' deepest emotions and issues.

3.2. Self-expression and Emotional Release

Images and symbols are considered the carriers of emotions and feelings[2]. In contrast to talk therapy, art creation provides a safer, non-verbal way for students to freely externalize

intangible and abstract inner feelings and thoughts, or even subconscious-level psychological problems, and to materialize them into visible works of art. This is especially important for students who have difficulty in expressing their emotions through language, words, and gestures, and art creation provides them with an effective alternative way to convey their inner feelings through colors, shapes, and patterns[3]. Through art creation, it is easier to explore and release students' deepest emotions, stresses and anxieties, thereby helping them to face life's challenges more positively.

3.3. Highly Inclusive and Long-term Emotional Records

Compared with art education, art therapy is less focused on artistic skills and usually does not require students to have specialized skills or experience. It focuses more on authentic creative expression and the ability to create more freely according to one's immediate state of being. Even unconscious scribbling is a form of expression in art therapy, and is therefore highly inclusive of all students. This universal applicability, as well as the fun nature of art itself, makes it a more easily implemented and widely accepted mental health intervention for students.

The finished artwork is more likely to serve as a long-term record of the student's emotional state, helping mental health professionals to better track and understand the student's psychological changes and progress. Such visual records that can be preserved and reviewed over time can provide professionals with important insights to aid in professional psychological interventions[4].

4. The Healing Mechanism of Art Creation

The creation or appreciation of art is used to help people explore emotions, develop self-awareness, cope with stress, boost self-esteem, and work on social skills. Let's see how the art therapy works.

4.1. Mechanism of Art Therapy

Physiological instinct is the fundamental driving force of human behavior. Although art is a high-level spiritual activity of human beings, it implies people's physiological needs. The results of modern medical experiments have verified that art activities will have an impact on people's physiology, and good art activities can make people produce and maintain good emotions. For example, the red color in the color will make people's blood pressure rise, improve appetite, and have the effect of enhancing human immunity; while the green color can make people's thinking active, relieve tensions, and have the auxiliary therapeutic effect for mental depression.

The mechanism by which art therapy works lies in physiology, psychology and aesthetics, as shown in Figure 1.

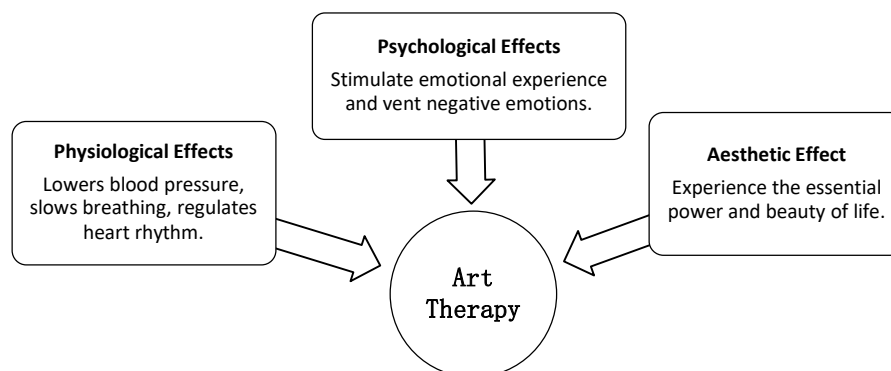


Figure 1. Mechanisms of Art Therapy

From the point of view of physiological needs, art creation can activate the brain's reward system and enhance the brain's functional connection[5]. When art creation activities are carried out and art works are appreciated, people's blood pressure will be lowered, breathing and heart rhythm will be slowed down, so that the body and mind are in a state of relaxation, which leads to the individual's reaction potential being mobilized, the individual's nervous system being regulated, the blood supply to all the physiological organs being unobstructed, the right brain starting to secrete endocannabinoid morphine, and people's moods starting to become pleasurable and triggering a virtuous cycle and renewal of the whole body and mind system.

From the psychological point of view, art creation activity is an individual's behavior of expressing psychological impulses and emotions in images, through which the individual's fantasy and reality, unconsciousness and consciousness are integrated[6].

From the perspective of aesthetic needs, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory points out that people have aesthetic needs in addition to basic needs. Art can satisfy people's needs from the perspective of aesthetics and enrich people's real life.

4.2. The Ternary Interaction of Art Therapy

Different from the traditional monolingual mental health education's binary interaction (teacher-student), Art therapy is a safer "ternary interaction" formed by the teacher-artwork-student, including the interaction between the student and the artwork, the interaction between the teacher and the artwork, and the interaction between the teacher and the student. interaction between the student and the artwork, the teacher and the artwork, and the teacher and the student. The artwork plays a bridging role in the psychotherapeutic process, connecting the student's inner world with his/her external expression, and enabling the teacher to better understand and support the student.

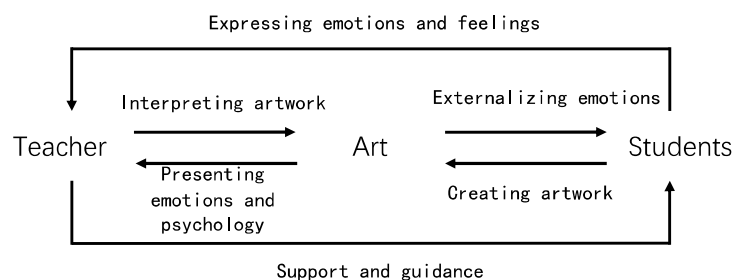


Figure 2. Relationship among Teacher-Art-Students

This "triadic interaction" is one of the core mechanisms of art therapy, and the effectiveness of art therapy depends on the combination of these factors:

(1) Teacher and student

The relationship between teacher and student is the basis for building trust and security. In this relationship, the teacher provides support and guidance to help students express their inner feelings and thoughts through art[7]. The teacher's role is to understand and interpret the student's artwork so that he or she can better understand his or her inner world and emotional state.

(2) The student and the work of art

The relationship between the student and the art work is a central part of art therapy. By creating works of art, students are able to express complex emotions and inner experiences in a non-verbal way. The artwork becomes an externalized embodiment of the student's emotions, enabling them to see and understand their feelings and problems more clearly.

(3) Teachers and Works of Art

The relationship between teachers and works of art involves observing and analyzing students' work. Teachers gain a deeper understanding of their students' emotional and psychological states by interpreting the symbols and imagery in artworks. This interpretation not only helps the teacher to understand the inner world of the student, but also provides valuable feedback and guidance for the therapeutic process.

The dynamics and effects of the "triadic interaction" relationship are reflected in three aspects, one of which is the interaction and feedback loop: in the process of art therapy, all aspects of the "triadic interaction" relationship are constantly interacting and providing feedback, which is the key to the success of art therapy. The student creates the artwork, the teacher interprets and gives feedback, and then the student creates and expresses further based on the feedback. This cycle of interaction and feedback allows for self-exploration and emotional expression in a safe environment. Second, the establishment of safety and trust: through the creation and interpretation of artworks, a safe and trusting relationship is established between the teacher and students, enabling students to express and explore freely in a supportive environment. Thirdly, integration of emotion and cognition: art works serve as an externalized carrier of emotion and cognition, helping students integrate their internal emotion and cognition to promote mental health and self-understanding.

4.3. Implementation Process of Art Therapy

The process of art therapy is the process of students' psychological and emotional expression, which is both a process of art creation and a process of mental health education. It is a multi-layered process consisting of "scrutinizing-practicing-reflecting" in the relationship of "triadic interaction", and then obtaining gains (i.e., healing).

The implementation process of art therapy in college students' mental health education usually includes three stages: the preparation stage, the creation stage, and the end stage, each of which has different roles for teachers, student activities, and psychological healing effects.

Stage 1 Review: Goal Setting and Planning Before Creativity Begins

Before starting to create, teachers can guide students to set goals and plan their creations through reflection. This pre-creation review stage is actually a time for students to 'listen' to their hearts. Teachers can help students engage in a series of reflections to clarify the themes and intentions of their creations, such as thinking about their physical reactions and emotional changes in the face of anxiety and uncontrollable events, as well as thinking about how they can express their feelings and thoughts. Through this way of looking inside, students are able to reflect on their true needs and emotional states.

Stage 2 Exercise: Feedback and Guidance in the Creative Process

The art creation process is a multi-sensory process that requires students to coordinate their brain, eyes and hands. When practicing, students' minds will focus on the creation of the artwork, at which time their psychological defenses will be lowered and their emotions will be more easily expressed. During the creative process, the teacher can act either as a spectator or as a supporting participant. When the teacher appears in the latter role, he or she can provide timely guidance based on the students' behavioral feedback, and help the students adjust and improve their works according to their own inner feelings. This kind of interaction between teachers and students can enhance the effect of art healing. The implementation of art healing activities not only improves students' art skills, but also promotes their self-reflection and expression of inner feelings, so as to alleviate their inner closedness and frustration.

At the same time, the art creation process involves a great deal of decision-making and problem-solving, which helps students to be more flexible and strategic when facing life's challenges.

Stage 3 Reflection: Presentation and Discussion of Works after Creation

At the end of the creative process, the teacher can organize a presentation and discussion session for students to share their experiences and feelings about their creative work. This process can include both self-evaluation and interpretation of the artwork, as well as external feedback and interaction.

When students have finished their works, teachers can encourage them to evaluate and interpret their own works, both in terms of judging the techniques and forms of creation as well as sharing the emotions and thoughts expressed in the works. In this way, students can revisit their creative process and gain a deeper understanding of the messages and emotions conveyed by their creations. When students present their work, they usually receive feedback from their teachers and peers. This external feedback provides students with an opportunity to view their work from the perspective of others and to empathize with the viewer, thus gaining a deeper understanding of their own creative intent and emotional expression.

Art creation provides a social platform for students. The process of presenting and discussing their works not only gives students the opportunity to express themselves, but also further enhances their self-awareness and emotional regulation from the feedback from teachers and peers, especially positive feedback such as recognition and appreciation of their works. This kind of social interaction helps students to increase their confidence in their own abilities, which in turn promotes their mental resilience and mental health. At the same time, during the communication and experience-sharing sessions, the distance between students will be narrowed, which will relax their bodies and minds and help them establish good interpersonal relationships, thus reducing their sense of loneliness and isolation.

It can be seen that the process of art healing consists of two parallel processes of art creation and psychological healing, which need to be accomplished by both teachers and students in order to achieve a better healing effect. Through continuous art creation and sharing, students are able to deeply understand and express their emotions and thoughts, thus promoting their self-identity and psychological health.

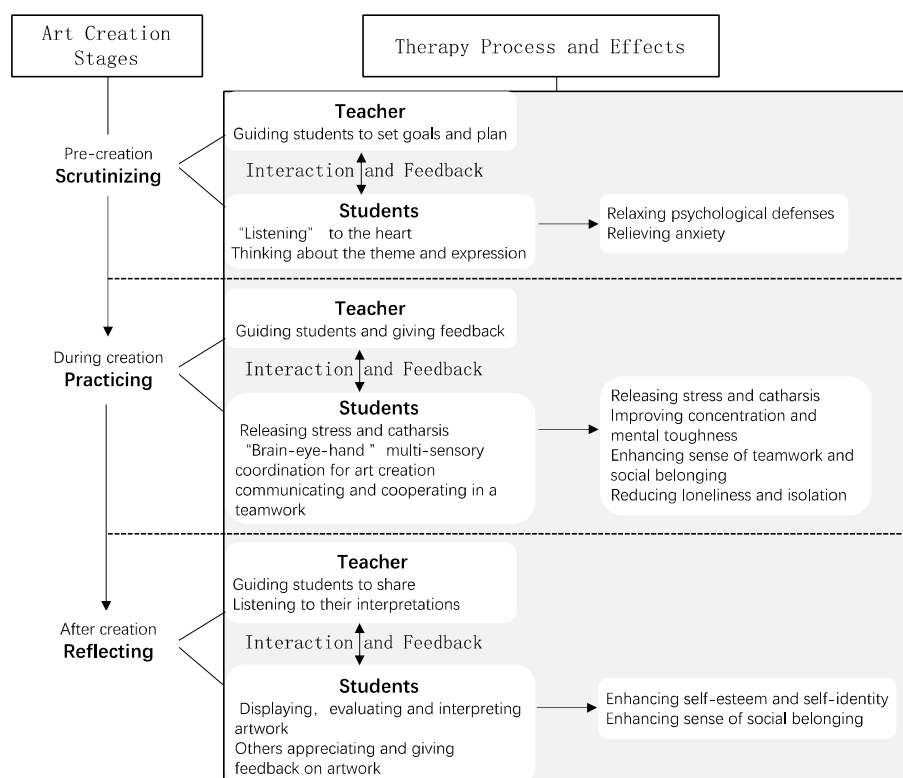


Figure 3. Art Creation and Psychological Healing

4.4. The Healing Effect of Art Creation

Through the above analysis, it can be seen that the integration of art creation and mental health education can achieve a good psychological healing effect. The effect of art healing on college students' mental health can be mainly reflected in the following aspects:

Firstly, enhance concentration and mental toughness

Mentally unhealthy students are often prone to fall into a negative thinking cycle that cannot be extricated. Participating in art activities, such as painting or sculpting, requires students to focus their attention on details and calmly and consistently engage in the creative process, i.e., enter into a state similar to meditation. This highly concentrated and relaxed state of mind can effectively divert the creator's attention from negative thinking to the picture, sculpture, etc., allowing them to temporarily forget their pain and gain a moment of peace. In this way, students can not only externalize and deal with complex emotions, relieve their anxiety and stress, and improve their ability to concentrate on other academic and life tasks[8], but also increase their self-efficacy and positive self-perception through the successful experience of creativity, thus enhancing their ability to cope and mental toughness in the face of setbacks[4].

Secondly, to stimulate creativity and improve independent decision-making ability.

Self-exploration and reflection in the process of art creation are very important to the mental health of college students. Art creation is an art activity full of creativity. In the process of creation, creators need to constantly try new methods of expression and explore new themes, which helps to stimulate their creativity and imagination. For students with mental health problems, the stimulation of creativity can help them explore themselves, find new hobbies and life goals, and enrich their spare time and expand the circle of interpersonal communication, so as to divert their negative emotions and improve their psychological state.

Meanwhile, students can reflect on themselves by recording their thoughts, feelings and choices during the creative process. Through these records, students can reflect their emotions, perceptions and psychological processes more clearly, so that they can gain a deeper understanding of their own interests, values, inner needs, etc., and find new ways to cope with challenges[9].

Thirdly, to enhance self-awareness and sense of value.

As a personalized means of healing, art creation is not only a process of emotional catharsis, but also a process of self-knowledge. Students with mental health problems, such as those with depression, often feel depressed, and art creation provides them with a way of emotional catharsis without words. Through brushes, carving knives and so on, they can transform their inner pain, anxiety, loneliness and other negative emotions into pictures, sculptures and other works of art, thus achieving the purpose of emotional release. In a painting, the choice of colors, the size of the composition, the length and arrangement of the lines, the urgency and weight of the brush strokes, and the intensity of the ink used can all reflect the differences in the inner emotional world of the painter. For example, heavy colors and messy lines can express the creator's inner chaos and pain; dark and desolate scenes can reflect the creator's heavy and depressing state of mind. Through these expressions, the creator's negative emotions can be released.

Through long-term art creation practice, students' self-knowledge will be significantly improved. In the process of creation, creators have to deeply reflect on and dig into their own emotions and thoughts, which helps them to recognize themselves and understand their emotions and needs more clearly. Depending on students' individual circumstances, such as differences in age, gender, cultural background and needs, teachers can guide the selection of different creative themes, materials and expressive techniques, and formulate personalized creative plans and goals. This personalized treatment can better meet students' individual needs and enhance the healing effect.

In addition, it often takes a lot of effort and time to complete a satisfactory work of art, so when they see themselves creating a piece of artwork from scratch, students will feel their self-worth increase and experience a strong sense of accomplishment, satisfaction and self-identity. This sense of achievement not only enhances their self-esteem and self-confidence, but also inspires their courage and confidence in facing life's setbacks, which in turn brings positive effects to their overall mental health, as well as to their studies, life and future work.

Finally, enhance the sense of teamwork and social belonging

Fine art creation can also be used as a social activity to help students enhance their social skills. Fine art activities, especially those projects or group activities that require cooperation, such as mural creation or group sculpture, require students to communicate and interact with their team members, learn from each other and make progress together. Through these teamwork and social interactions, students can build up mutual trust and support among themselves, thus reducing loneliness and social anxiety, and enhancing their sense of social connectedness and belonging[3]. Such interactions can also help to develop their social skills, communication abilities and teamwork spirit, which will have a positive impact on their future professional work.

Appreciation of their own work or the work of others at the end of the creative process can also give students a sense of pleasure and enhance their aesthetic ability and aesthetic experience. It is also a way to relieve psychological stress and anxiety.

5. Conclusion

Art creation can heal the mind, and integrating art teaching with mental health education can, on the one hand, stimulate students' interest and improve the quality of art teaching; on the other hand, it can help college students cope with daily stress and emotional challenges, and then improve their mental health in an overall way, providing them with an important way to grow and develop. In addition, through the implementation of art healing, it can also motivate teachers to innovate the teaching mode and realize the teaching reform with positive significance.

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