

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY
AND COUNSELLING
(IJEPC)

www.ijepc.com



EXPRESSIVE ART THERAPY APPROACH IN REDUCING SELF-HARM AMONG ADOLESCENT

Wan Puteri Nurul Izzah Zakaria¹, Noorlila Ahmad^{2*}

¹ Department of Educational Psychology & Counselling, Kulliyah of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)

Email: izzahzakaria999@gmail.com

² Department of Educational Psychology & Counselling, Kulliyah of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)

Email: noorlila@iium.edu.my

* Corresponding Author

Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 01.10.2023

Revised date: 23.10.2023

Accepted date: 17.11.2023

Published date: 13.12.2023

To cite this document:

Zakaria, W. P. N. I., & Ahmad, N. (2023). Expressive Art Therapy Approach In Reducing Self-Harm Among Adolescent. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 8 (52), 189-200.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.852016

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Abstract:

Adolescent self-harming behavior is a complex and concerning issue which require a comprehensive and holistic understanding. Expressive art therapy serves as a therapeutic approach to address self-harm among adolescents in which they can express and explore their emotions, thoughts, and experiences in a non-verbal manner by utilizing various art forms. This research aims to explore in-depth self-harming behaviour among adolescents and the implementation of expressive art therapy approach to reduce self-harming behaviour among adolescent. This research employed an action research approach whereby the entire cycle process starting from planning stage to the reflecting stage were completed using one sample as participant engaged in expressive art therapy. Referral volunteered adolescents participated after claiming to involve in self-harm activities. The action research cycle involved nine sessions in a six weeks period. The results found that the adolescents developed self-resilience and could regulate through a suitable personal coping skill thus reducing self-harm behavior. The results also showed that expressive art therapy approach is effective in helping adolescents from relapsing into self-harm behavior. Moreover, the creative process in expressive art therapy approach provided a safe and supportive environment for the adolescents to externalize their distress and develop alternative coping mechanisms.

Keywords:

Self-Harm, Behavior, Expressive Art Therapy, Adolescent

Introduction

Self-inflicted injury without suicidal intent is a significant concern among adolescents and the prevalence of self-harm has been increasing recently (Clarke et al., 2019). Adolescence is a crucial period characterized by rapid physical, cognitive, and emotional development, making it a susceptible period for the onset of self-harming behaviors. Addressing self-harm among adolescents requires innovative and effective therapeutic approaches.

A multitude of approaches were proposed by previous scholars and one of it is using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in regulating the emotion. It promotes cognitive flexibility and reduce the number of self-harming behaviors (Sinyor et al., 2020). Mittal and Mahapatra (2022) stated that expressive art therapy has emerged as a promising intervention that promotes flexibility in expression by providing a non-verbal and creative platform for emotional expression. Additionally, art therapy interventions are associated with more positive outcomes such as regulating emotions, improving coping skills, and fostering a sense of empowerment and self-discovery. This is because it allows adolescents to explore and process their emotions in a safe and supportive environment, leading to decreased self-harm behavior.

Ogden and Bennett (2015) stated self-harm means to manage the participant's private self through the expression of negative emotions and a sense of venting. They further mentioned that self-harm often serves as a way to regain control and combat emotional numbness, providing a temporary release from pain. For some people, self-harm become a coping method that allow them to regain control by allowing them to choose when and how they would harm themselves.

Logrieco et al. (2021) elucidated contributing factors indicating that exposure to self-harm behavior can be influenced by social media platforms, particularly TikTok. The normalization and glamorization of self-harm on social media contribute to its adoption as a coping skill and it worsens when there is no exposure and a lack of knowledge about healthy coping skills. Furthermore, Knightsmith (2018) mentioned the taboo nature of self-harm discussion and the motivation behind self-harming behaviors also contribute to the increase in self-harming behavior. The stigma surrounding self-harm discourages individuals from seeking help from school counselors or parents, leaving them without the necessary support systems.

Understanding these factors is vital in developing prevention and intervention strategies to address the rising prevalence of self-harm among adolescents, promote healthier coping skills, and encourage help-seeking behavior. Without effective coping mechanisms, adolescents may resort to self-harm to regulate overwhelming emotions. Therefore, this study aims to help reduce self-harm behavior among adolescents by finding suitable healthy coping skills particularly using expressive art therapy. Thus, the research objectives are as follows:

- a. To explore in-depth self-harming behavior among adolescents.
- b. To apply the expressive art therapy approach to reduce self-harming behaviour among adolescent

Literature Review

Prevalence and Contributors Factors of Self-Harm

Cases reported the prevalence of self-harming trends in schools (Hall & Melia, 2023). Most of the student cases reported are coming from lower secondary which are from Form 1 and Form 2 students. This coincides with one research that concludes non-suicidal self-injury is more common in mid-adolescence which ages from 13 to 15 (Hetrick et al., 2020). The trend of self-harming behavior is rapidly increasing when peer pressure is involved. Resulting, student is urged to teach and encourage their friends to harm themselves using scissors, the knife of a sharpener, or glass. The trend also increases when students do not have enough exposure and knowledge about healthy coping skills in managing and handling life problems. This concern raises a need for researchers to explore further thus conducting a proper and suitable intervention in assisting students to reduce self-harm behavior.

Various factors are linked to self-harm behavior as a coping skill. Shao et al. (2021) stated self-harm behavior among adolescents with depression tends to originate from the struggles of coping with traumatic events such as abuse and the loss of a parent. Individuals with low self-confidence and a sense of worthlessness are at heightened risk. In fact, students with challenges in forming and maintaining healthy relationships can also worsen self-harm behavior tendency as a maladaptive coping method. It is because maintaining a relationship such as a friendship or family relationship is vital and meaningful process during adolescence.

Expressive Art

Expressive art has emerged as a potential intervention that promotes flexibility in expression by providing a non-verbal and creative platform for emotional expression (Mittal and Mahapatra, 2022). Additionally, art therapy interventions are associated with more positive outcomes such as regulating emotions, improving coping skills, and fostering a sense of empowerment and self-discovery because it allows adolescents to explore and process their feelings in a safe and supportive environment which will lead to decreased self-harm behavior. Expressive art can relax the brain's fear center, called the amygdala and generate mindfulness and quietness and act as a distraction (Health & Dang, 2016).

Methodology

In this study, the research procedure employed the counseling classroom action research method as per Fig. 1 (Ananda et al., 2015). Action research procedures allow the researcher to understand and improve cases through intervention in school. The interventions are applied to the participants through counseling sessions. In this study, there are nine sessions involved.

This study utilized purposive sampling based on the criteria or qualities established. The criteria are set based on behavior, appearance, attitude, level of consciousness, and speech. A Form 1 student with self-harming behavior observed from a relief class was recruited as the research subject. The student exhibits signs of anxiety, depression, slight dishevelment, and frequently speaks with a slow pace. At first, the student hesitated but later after being convinced that there are many alternative ways to cope with her problem which are healthier, the student willingly come to the counseling session.

The intervention will be evaluated through Self-Harm Habit Tracker from how many days the participant did not relapse to self-harm behavior and through the interview session with the participant on the effectiveness of art therapy

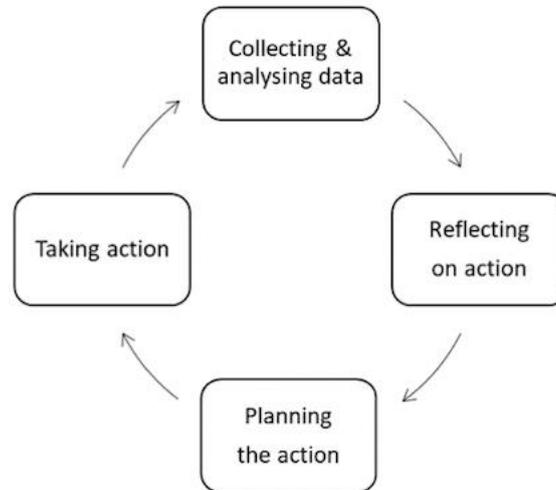


Figure 1: Cyclic Procedure

Results and Discussion

Stage 1: Planning

When the researcher went to the participant's class for relief, the participant keeps looking at the researcher, puzzled with questions. The researcher approached the students a few times in class to build rapport. After a little conversation, the student finally asked the researcher, "Is it a sin if someone does self-harm?". The student initially inquired about the question on behalf of others. Nevertheless, subsequent to the researcher's response, she began to touch her arm and disclosed her engagement in self-harm using a sharpener's knife. The participant was then selected, fulfilling the criteria needed for the research and volunteered to participate in the research, going through multiple counseling sessions.

Based on the issue, the researcher decided to devise a few interventions. The core intervention for the session was based on expressive art therapy. The application of art therapy can improve cognitive functioning by developing effective communication, regulating emotions, and encouraging social interaction and person-centered interaction (Mittal & Mahapatra, 2022). Since the participant's speech is slow and she is often seems lost in her feelings, using art therapy can help explore self-harm behavior particularly when verbal communication is unachievable. It can help people communicate what they cannot put into words because art was an expressive and meaningful path.

To track and assess the progress and success of the intervention, the participant's self-harm behavior were tracked by the Self-Harm Tracker before and after the sessions were conducted. The evaluation form was also given and the participant will be interviewed verbally regarding the feedback of the interventions.

Stage 2 & 3: Action and Analyzing Data

In this section, there are four areas of activities identified to explore in-depth self-harming and the implementation of expressive art therapy to reduce self-harming behavior.

Exploration of Self-Harm Behavior

My Home

Exploring family background is a vital element in the exploration phase and in building rapport with the participant. This activity uses only crayons as the main art material to portray what color exist in their house on a piece of template house paper. A few crayon colors are required to reflect each emotion and event of what is happening in the house. For example, black symbolizes sadness, blue symbolizes criticism, pink signifies love, and purple represents safety. Talking about family issues that can cause self-harm behavior might be challenging to be put into words. However, art therapy provides the exploration of traumatic memories and emotions differently than verbal approaches (Haeyen & Staal, 2021). Images or artwork can give meanings mainly through the colors used, the number of objects in the image, and the placement of the image objects (Maria Putri Agung, 2021).

The My Home activity involved expressive art therapy. Before giving the template paper, the researcher asked the participant to share her family issues outlining the main reason why she self-harm but she admitted that she did not know where to start. Using the My House template paper, the participant successfully divided the big issues into multiple smaller issues, allowing her to share the stories one by one. When questioned about her choice and utilisation of numerous black and chocolate colours, which symbolise emotions like sadness and fear, she responded by openly addressing the underlying matter. This expressive art activity helped the participant and the researcher explore the issue more deeply.

Life Timeline

Discussing life timelines especially when the storyline is traumatic can be very intense for most people. However, it is necessary to dive into the core issue that leads to the onset of self-harm behavior. Using a colorful animation sticker to portray a life journey can be the best way to let the participant feel more relaxed and calmer in expressing the traumatic event in life compared to the traditional therapy method which only uses talking. While the participant arranged and glued the stickers, the researcher asked a few suitable questions to investigate the issue. A previous study by Mittal & Mahapatra (2022) found that this approach focuses on strategies that separate individuals from their challenging emotional status through telling stories from different perspectives, thereby expanding their mindsets towards their identity. It allows adolescents to tell or retell stories to encourage deep self-exploration.

Putting a lifelong journey onto a piece of paper can provide a clearer and bigger picture of what happened in life. The participant found it easier to arrange the life event in smaller pieces and discuss the event individually. When there were too much happening, one cannot see and share the issue clearly. During this activity, the participant's intense and traumatic life journey was told to the researcher in a more relaxed manner because of the usage of the colorful stickers. The participant gave a good cooperation in sharing straightforward details on what has happened before and how it triggered her at those times, which then lead to the onset of self-harm behavior.

Ways Of Self-Harm

The Place Where Self-Harm Occurs

Previous studies reported that art therapy allows individuals to bypass awful defense mechanisms especially pervasive dishonesty (Mittal & Mahapatra, 2022). On a piece of paper, the participant was required to draw using crayons a place where she would self-harm. One's unconscious beliefs, desires, memories, and thoughts will come out unconsciously by doing spontaneous expressive art. In addition, the researcher questioning skills during the session also plays an essential role in helping the participant to express the unconscious perspectives. It is significant to explore the hidden issue which can be the onset of self-harm behavior.

The Body Part Involved

Asking the participant to show the self-harm scars has the same effect as taking away dangerous equipment they use to harm or injure themselves. The act establishes the insensitivity of the researcher because someone who self-injures may, in private, express affection for their scars yet experience fear and worry when others see them (Kendall et al., 2021). Also, self-harm scars are part of an individuals' privacy because they signify more than just a healed wound; they tell stories and hold memories (Kendall et al., 2021). Therefore, in this activity, the researcher provided the participant with clay to mold the body parts involved during self-harming. It will ease their anxiety and fear of showing the real scars.

Throughout the sessions, crayons and clays were used for practical purposes. At first, the participant's focus was mainly on the sensory qualities, treating the crayons and clays as auto-stimulating objects. After a few moments, the researcher watched how the participant slowly became unconscious and focused on doing the art. That was the time when the researcher asked about which body part she used to self-harm, how she did it, what items were used, and where was the place, she often did it. The participant answered right away with a relaxed body gesture. This shows that using clay to make a mold of the body part involved in self-harm behavior helps the participant to be more open in sharing about her self-harming experience.

Alternative Strategies Using Expressive Art Therapy

Learning the Trigger Awareness

Through this activity, the participant was asked to identify the trigger signs that usually happen when there is an urge to self-harm. Using crayons to draw herself, helped the participant to dive into their unconscious mind. Then, she needs to write or draw the trigger signs near the body. In this context, it could be any signs including physical or emotional. According to Hetrick et al. (2020), frustration, anger, and a sense of isolation were described as triggers. The study also reported that identifying immediate triggers of the urge to self-harm will prepare one for helpful strategies to manage the urge. Thus, learning what are the triggers is the first step to overcome this issue.

The researcher briefly told the participant about trigger awareness and its benefit. Then, the participant started to draw herself. While drawing, the researcher tried to develop a discussion with the participant about her triggering signs and symptoms. The participant seemed to be more aware of what is happening when triggered. For instance, her hands were shaking and sweating, she felt thirsty, she felt pain in her chest, and she felt like bursting into tears. This activity has gave her a safe place to share about the signs openly thus offered a chance for both

the researcher and the participant to discuss more healthily about other coping mechanisms besides self-harm.

The researcher also educated the participant about the presence of physical signs on body parts when experiencing emotions such as anger, sadness, or disappointment. This happens due to the overwhelming nature of emotions, reaching a point where physical control becomes challenging. For example, hands shaking might result from unexpressed anger lacking proper verbal or non-verbal outlets. Consequently, these emotions accumulate within the body. The participant displayed a good understanding, nodded her head many times, and expressed astonishment at the influence of emotions on the physical body.

Journaling

Self-harm often occurs when one cannot manage emotions like stress, anxiety, and depression and individual need to be aware of and keep track of their emotions (Mahsa Honary et al., 2020). During the session, the researcher gave psychoeducation about journaling and taught the participant how to do it according to the participant's preference and interest. The main aim of journaling is to track the moods in order to prepare for any trigger signs. Notably, previous research has shown that increased negative emotions precede self-harm engagement and it occurs hours before (Mahsa Honary et al., 2020). Journaling also helps to distract from self-harming by forming artwork using stickers, markers, highlighters, and other art materials. The participant can also write or draw feelings if necessary. The researcher did not interpret the art piece and the participant was free to share the meaning of the art chosen. The activity allowed the participant to notice that keeping herself busy is one of the effective ways to cope with the urge to self-harm.

This activity consisted of two parts. First, tracking the mood so that she can prepare for the trigger signs and second, distracting herself using arts in the journaling book. She used markers, highlighter, stickers, and a pen based on her interest and preference. The researcher introduced the participant to a journaling technique that she was already practicing. During subsequent sessions with the researcher, she often eagerly shared her journaling book's embellishments. She effectively committed to tracking her moods, equipping her to identify any negative patterns in her mood trends. She also noticed that engaging in artworks without written words in the journaling book helped to distract her from the urge to self-harm.

My Safe Place!

Toussaint et al. (2021) said that "guided imagery is a method for treating stress and anxiety in which one replaces disturbing memories with positive mental imagery". A safe place is a guided imagery work that can be used to prevent and manage impulses to self-injure (Kress et al., 2013). In this activity, the participant was taught about how imagination can help provide a sense of safety. Then, the researcher gave a piece of blank paper and crayons and asked the participant to draw a place or multiple places that give her a sense of safety and security.

The drawing is an act of putting a visual image into a physical one. It is an opportunity to confront the present moment using an art-based directive (Tripp et al., 2019). Furthermore, in a study investigating the effects of 20 minutes of guided imagery on preoperative anxiety, it showed that guided imagery significantly reduced anxiety and cortisol levels (Gray & Brown, 2020). This intervention places a strong emphasis on sensory and contextual involvement. The instructional guidance and the intense focus on participant engagement aid in gaining better

perceptual detail of the artwork formed, resulting in a more realistic mental representation during the relaxation exercise.

The researcher started the session by asking whether the participant had a place where she feels safest and calmest – a place she might want to live. The place could exist in reality or purely within her imagination. She nodded in response and said yes: the ocean. She agreed to draw the ocean with a few animals surrounding and before her. The participant was asked to close her eyes and imagine the place. The researcher then engaged in a discussion with the participant about the potential benefits of conjuring this image when she feels overwhelmed with emotions and the urge to self-harm. The open-ended question was asked to encourage the participant to establish a reliance on this safe place whenever the urge to self-harm arose.

Mandala Coloring

This session started by psycho-educating the participant about the benefits of mandala coloring. Then, the participant was given multiple templates to bring back home. She needs to color the blank mandala template whenever she feels the urge to self-harm. This activity relates to the importance of distraction (Hetrick et al., 2020). According to Kendall et al. (2021), coloring mandalas as a coping skill helped people with self-harm behavior to be calmer and supported them to stay in the present moment. Coloring or another sort of expressive art therapy is one of the ranges of distraction techniques. This is because coloring allows us to take a mental break and let go of external things that have been bothering us throughout the day. It produces the same results as meditation.

This activity showed an effect as the participant consistently applied the template whenever there were problems within her household, triggering urges to self-harm. She said that she enjoyed doing the art and she would bring all the mandala template papers to the subsequent session, showcasing her work to the researcher. She loves coloring the mandala and it serves as a mean to control and manage her emotions, especially in situations where she couldn't respond to issues at home. She discovered that this technique is a tool for distraction and channeling her emotions by coloring using a marker, pencil color, highlighter, and colored pen. It helped the participant to calm down, grounding her in the present moment, and helped her to stay mindful. During the session, when asked about her self-harm tendencies, the participant revealed that coloring mandalas now is a reminder that she does not need to self-injury and she can get through and overcome the moments of intrusive thoughts and urges.

Psychoeducation: Body Parts, Its Function and How to Take Care

This psychoeducational activity involves students creating a detailed mold of their body parts, a task that could be carried out through conventional counseling conversations. However, relying solely on verbal communication might raise anxiety and uncomfortable moments. Thus, using clay into this session will enhance participant engagement and openness. While shaping each body part with the clay, the researcher takes the role of discussing with the participant on how to take care of each body part. This includes understanding the functions of each body part and how to take care of them. This can increase the awareness to love and appreciate one's self unconditionally. It significantly reduces self-harm behavior once they reconnect and appreciate their body (Gosling et al., 2022).

During the activity, the participant was given clays and she started sculpting each of her body parts. As she began to mold her face, the researcher asked, "How can we take care of our face

and head?”. Then while shaping her fingers, the researcher posed another question, “What are the ways for us to take care of our nails?”. The participant responded by stating, “by always cutting the nails, wearing lotion, and washing our hands”. Then, as she worked on the arms, the researcher asked how can she take care of her arm. She paused for a while then answered, “not to do self-harm”. In addition to these discussions, the participant and the researcher explored the functions of each body part. Throughout the session, the participant seemed to cooperate well and showed a good understanding.

Psychoeducation on Self-Awareness: What I Can Control & What I Can't Control

Self-awareness includes individual's perceptions of their strengths, weaknesses, abilities, attitudes, and values (M. Minev et al., 2018). Developing self-awareness will help individuals to self-reflect, facilitating sound decision-making (Perry et al., 2019). Individuals with higher levels of self-awareness are more likely to be happier because they are more aware of what is happening within themselves and are better informed in addressing challenges within their own abilities. This contributes in reducing emotional turmoil, an enhanced focus on positive aspects, and greater capacity to accept the truth about life, even those aspects that lie beyond their control.

In this activity, the participant was given a watercolor and two pieces of paper with instructions. The first paper consists of sentences within multiple circles, prompting the participant to consider elements within their control versus those beyond it. Examples of such sentences included: “What do others think about me?”, “How do I talk to myself?”, and “What is happening in my surrounding?”. These sentences were designed to raise self-awareness. The participant was required to paint the circle with watercolors and cut the circles. Next, the participant ought to draw an outline of their head on the second sheet of paper. Inside this head drawing, she was asked to put a situation that is within her control while those beyond her control should be placed outside the head drawing. During this process, the researcher engaged in a discussion with the participant, exploring the reasons why certain aspects were considered within or outside the head drawing to reflect the distinction between controllable and uncontrollable factors in life.

This simple activity affected her strongly. By categorizing stickers based on what falls within her control and what does not, the participant understood the differences and develop awareness of her own capabilities and limitations. As they arranged the stickers, the researcher shared with the participant the factors that can be controlled (inside of the body) and those that cannot (outside of the body). This was a new thing for her as at times she would paused when arranging and gluing each stickers reflecting the contemplation of the hard truth. She showed deep understanding of the subject matter.

Stage 4: Reflecting Stage

Reflecting on the smooth running of all the sessions, one key factor that contributed to the success was the participant's talent and love for art. Right from the first session, it was clear that she has a deep passion for artistic expression in any form and with any materials. She consistently displayed a high level of engagement, willingly immersing herself in each activity with enthusiasm. Despite her initial shyness, anxiety, and visible signs of depression, her enthusiasm for creating art gradually emerged. This genuine love for art played a significant role in fostering a positive and engaging atmosphere as she gave full cooperation and participated actively in all activities. Witnessing her transformation from a reserved individual

to someone who actively embraced the artistic process was inspiring and this highlights the power of art in facilitating personal growth and enjoyment.

The remarkable achievement was the participant's successful 26-day streak of abstaining from self-harm behavior, throughout the research duration even though there were times when she was engaged in self-harm particularly at the early stage of the session. This significant milestone demonstrated her remarkable resilience and determination to overcome self-harm behavior. It might be because of the 'Self-Awareness: What I Can Control & What I Cannot Control' activity. The combination of the research intervention and her passion for art was crucial in empowering her to find healthier coping skills.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, self-harm behavior was explored in detail using expressive art therapy. This study explored in-depth self-harming behavior and the implementation of expressive art therapy to reduce it. The results indicate that implementing expressive art therapy assists adolescents in reducing self-harming behavior by finding new art-based coping skills. The participant's innate talent and passion for art greatly influenced the achievement of the research objective and the smooth running of all sessions. Engaging in art allowed her to channel her feelings constructively and expressively, ultimately helping her navigate the challenges associated with self-harm behaviors. This achievement reaffirms the potential of art therapy as an effective intervention for individuals grappling with self-harming behavior and serves as a reminder of the transformative power of art in promoting healing and personal growth.

For future action research, different activities using art materials such as sand therapy and drawing on canvas should be added to the session. In fact, future research might choose another sample with no interest in art as a sample to compare the result. To conclude, self-harm behavior should be curbed from the early stages by exposing them to other alternative coping skills to prevent the worst damage.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank all the respondent for providing cooperation and assistance to this research.

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