

## **Expressive Arts Therapy Techniques as Part of Psychological Counseling: Perception of Medical Students in the Sultanate of Oman**

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**Abstract:** The college environment is considered a universally stressful period. The need for counseling services among college students is well-documented. Expressive arts therapy is the use of creative arts in the form of therapy. Though the efficacy of expressive arts therapy in the management of stress has been validated, data on the perception and acceptability of expressive arts therapy in the process of psychological counseling is limited. The aim of the present study was to explore medical students' perception of including expressive arts techniques as part of the psychological counseling process. Students were required to complete a questionnaire that assessed their knowledge and acceptance of expressive arts therapy as part of the counseling process. Results indicated that students were open to including expressive arts techniques as part of the counseling process. They were also convinced with the effectiveness of expressive arts techniques. Incorporation of this therapeutic approach in the modules offered at the institution's Student Counseling Center will enhance the outcomes of the counseling process.

**Key words:** Expressive Arts Therapy, College Counseling, Client preference.

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### **I. Introduction**

Expressive arts therapy is the use of creative arts in the form of therapy. McNiff (1981) observes that expressive therapies are those that introduce action to psychotherapy and that "action within therapy and life is rarely limited to a specific mode of expression". While talk is still the traditional method of exchange in therapy and counseling, practitioners of expressive therapies know that people also have different expressive styles—one individual may be more visual, another more tactile, and so forth <sup>[1]</sup>. The common expressive arts techniques include Art and Painting, Dance and Movement, Drama, Music, Creative Writing and Storytelling <sup>[2]</sup>. Art therapy uses art media, images, and the creative process, and respects patient/client responses to the created products as reflections of development, abilities, personality, interests, concerns, and conflicts <sup>[3]</sup>. Music therapy uses music to effect positive changes in the psychological, physical, cognitive, or social functioning of individuals with health or educational problems <sup>[4]</sup>. Drama therapy is the systematic and intentional use of drama/ theatre processes, products, and associations to achieve the therapeutic goals of symptom relief, emotional and physical integration, and personal growth <sup>[5]</sup>. Dance and movement therapy is based on the assumption that body and mind are interrelated and is defined as the psychotherapeutic use of movement as a

process that furthers the emotional, cognitive, and physical integration of the individual <sup>[6]</sup>. Creative writing- Poetry therapy and bibliotherapy are terms used synonymously to describe the intentional use of poetry and other forms of literature for healing and personal growth <sup>[7]</sup>.

Expressive arts therapy is predicted on the assumption that people can heal through the use of imagination and the various forms of creative expression <sup>[8]</sup>. Expressive arts therapists usually blend a passion for art to their established skill of counseling <sup>[9]</sup>. When therapists are able to include these various expressive capacities in their work with clients, they can more fully enhance each person's abilities to communicate effectively and authentically <sup>[10]</sup>. There are sufficient findings to indicate the benefits of expressive arts therapies. Effectiveness is indicated in physical and psychological conditions including asthma, dementia, coping with cancer, terminal illness, depression, schizophrenia, stress, anxiety, eating disorders and behavioral disorders <sup>[2, 11]</sup>.

With the advent of brief forms of treatment, many therapists find that the expressive therapies help individuals to quickly communicate relevant issues in ways that talk therapy cannot do. For this reason and others, psychologists, counselors, and other health care professionals are turning to expressive modalities in their work with individuals of all ages <sup>[2]</sup>. Expressive therapies add a unique dimension to psychotherapy and counseling because they have several specific characteristics not always found in strictly verbal therapies, including, but not limited to, self-expression, active participation, imagination, and mind-body connections <sup>[2]</sup>.

Depending on the practitioner and the setting, expressive therapies may be used as a primary form of therapy, requiring the therapist to have a deeper understanding of how various modalities can be applied in response to a wide range of disorders. Often, expressive therapies are integrated within a psychotherapy or counseling framework. For example, Gladding and Newsome (2003) highlight the integration of visual art activities into counseling treatment plans with adults and emphasize that a quick client drawing or collage can move a client forward when talk therapy is resisted or ineffective <sup>[12]</sup>. Also, many expressive therapy techniques have been used to complement a wide range of psychotherapy and counseling theories, including psychoanalytic, object relations, cognitive-behavioral, humanistic, transpersonal, and others <sup>[13]</sup>. Creativity in therapy has the potential to impact clients in memorable ways that traditional interventions do not <sup>[2]</sup>. Research has also indicated that counselling and therapy using expressive arts supports the processing of emotions, finding balance and building resilience <sup>[14]</sup>. The application of expressive arts therapy has been described as a significant support for positive change within counselling <sup>[15]</sup>.

The college environment is considered a universally stressful period where students face many challenges <sup>[16, 17]</sup>. The need for and the effectiveness of psychological counseling services for young adults in this life stage have also been well documented. Studies show that some students express reluctance about traditional psychotherapeutic methods. But, a creative-arts therapy module may offer a compelling alternative with similar benefits <sup>[18]</sup>. Attending to preferences has the potential to open up therapeutically valuable areas of conversation and dialogue between client and therapist <sup>[19]</sup>. Addressing and accommodating client preferences in psychotherapy have been consistently associated with improved treatment outcomes <sup>[20]</sup>. It was also concluded

in another study, that although presently underutilized, arts interventions may be a viable form of anxiety-reduction among college students <sup>[21]</sup>.

Data on the perception and acceptability of expressive arts therapy in the process of psychological counseling, especially among college students is non-existent. Acceptability of expressive arts techniques will enable the delivery of more effective counseling modules, encourage counselor's skill development and change the face of the counseling process. The College of Medicine and Health Sciences, National University of Science and Technology at Sohar, Sultanate of Oman has a Student Counseling Center to cater to the emotional challenges faced by medical students. The proposed study aims to explore students' perception of including expressive arts techniques as part of the psychological counseling process. The study also aims to determine the specific expressive arts techniques preferred by students to be incorporated into the counseling process. Insights from the study will be incorporated into the service delivery modules of the counseling center.

## **II. Materials and Methods**

The present study was conducted among the Year 4 and Year 5 medical students at the College of Medicine and Health Sciences (erstwhile Oman Medical College), National University of Science and Technology, Sohar, Sultanate of Oman. The study was approved by the institutional Research and Ethics Committee. Participants were required to complete a consent form. These students had completed a course in Behavioral Science during which they were exposed to the various counseling and psychotherapy approaches, including expressive arts therapy. 111 students consented to be part of this study. Nearly 90% of participants were female as the college caters predominantly to female students. The mean age of participants was 22.02 years (SD=1.41).

After obtaining consent from the participants, a brief re-orientation module was presented to students on expressive arts therapy. Students were then required to complete a structured questionnaire, with 10 items (*Appendix I*) that was composed to assess the following domains: Openness to receive professional psychological services, Knowledge of Expressive Arts Therapy, Openness to Expressive Arts Therapy, Perceptions about the effectiveness of Expressive Arts Therapy and Intentions to use Expressive Arts Therapy. The average time taken to complete the questionnaire was between 8 to 10 minutes. Participants had to choose one of the following options for each item on the questionnaire- disagree (1), somewhat disagree (2), undecided (3), somewhat agree (4) and agree (5). Data collected was analyzed.

## **III. Results and Discussion**

46% of participants reported that they would prefer to meet a psychologist if they were experiencing anxiety, stress and other emotional difficulties. 26% of students disagreed and 28% were undecided. This is consistent with a previous study among medical students that concluded that students in the College of Medicine

and Health Sciences experienced moderate levels of personal privacy and stigma with regard to help seeking for psychological difficulties, but believed in the effectiveness of counseling and psychotherapy <sup>[22]</sup>.

39% of students were convinced of the effectiveness of Expressive Arts Therapy as part of the psychotherapeutic process. They felt the effectiveness of Expressive Arts Therapy would be higher when compared to traditional Psychoanalysis (35%) or Cognitive Behavior Therapy (26%). A majority of students (75%) felt that employing Expressive Arts Therapy techniques in the counseling process would effectively help individuals with emotional difficulties.

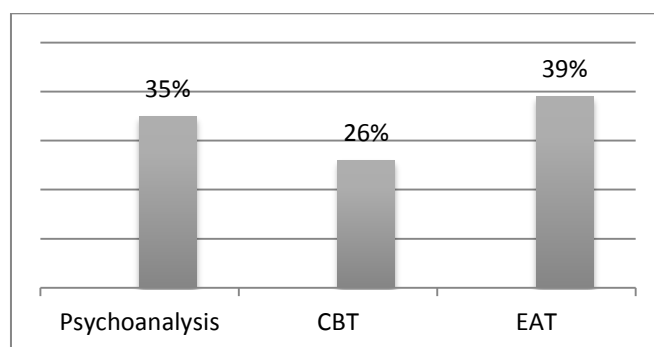


Figure1: Perception of the Effectiveness of Expressive Arts Therapy

Participants felt that incorporating Creative Writing (39%), Story-telling (27%) and Painting and Art (21%) in the counseling process would be most effective. The efficacy of writing therapy has been proven effective in both health and clinical populations. It is perceived as one of the easier and non-threatening methods to express one's emotional difficulties <sup>[23]</sup>.

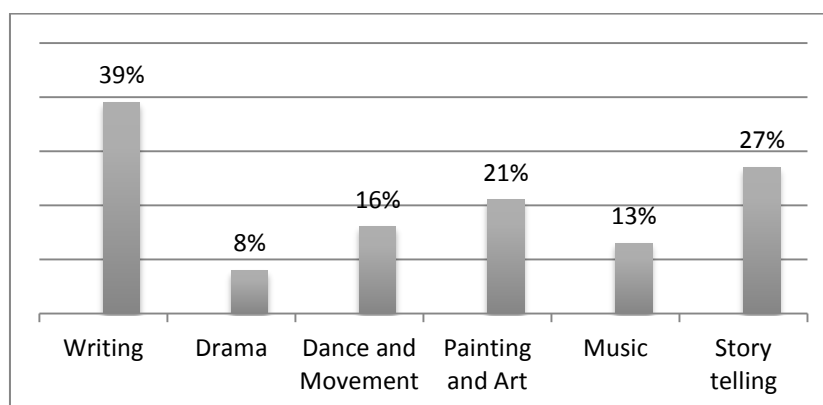


Figure 2: Perception of the Effectiveness of Art Therapy Techniques

A majority of students (58%) agreed that they would consider Expressive Arts Therapy if they had to attend counseling sessions. If in a situation where they attended psychological counseling sessions, participants reported that their personal preference would be to use Painting and Art (77%), Story-telling (74%) and Creative

writing (63%) as part of personal counseling. 54% of students also reported that they would feel comfortable if expressive arts therapy techniques were employed during group counseling or group therapy sessions.

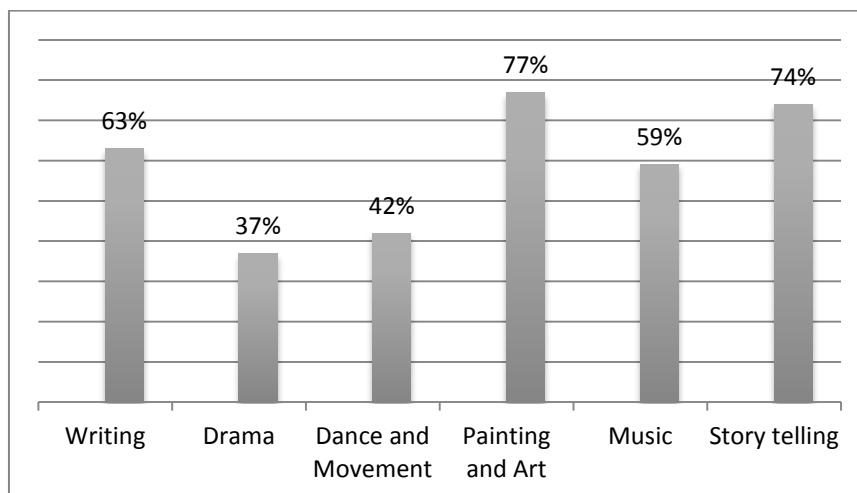


Figure 3: Personal preference in using Expressive Arts Therapy Techniques

Openness to receive professional psychological services for emotional difficulties was seen among the students at the College of Medicine and Health Sciences. Students were also open to Expressive Arts Therapy as a therapeutic approach and were convinced of its effectiveness. A majority of students agreed that they would consider using Expressive Arts Therapy techniques in the counseling process. Preference was for specific expressive arts techniques- Painting and Art, Story-telling and Creative Writing.

To improve the effectiveness of the counseling process and to enhance service delivery, it is vital to take into consideration the preference of clients when planning counseling modules. Incorporation of various expressive arts techniques by trained therapists in the psychological counseling modules offered at the Student Counseling Center at the College of Medicine and Health Sciences is to be considered. This study not only brings out the importance to be given to client preferences in psychological counseling, but also highlights the need for therapists and counselors to be specialized in multiple therapeutic techniques preferred by clients.

#### IV. Appendix 1

*Kindly read each item carefully and answer appropriately.*

1. Would you go to a counselor/psychologist if you were experiencing anxiety, stress or any other psychological/emotional difficulties?

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree
1	2	3	4	5

2. If you were to attend counseling sessions, which of the following approaches would you prefer the counselor to use? Rate your choice (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>)

Psychoanalysis	Cognitive Behavior Therapy	Expressive Arts Therapy	Any other (mention)

3. Which of the following techniques do you think are involved in expressive arts therapy? (Please tick)

Writing	
Drama	
Dance	
Movement	
Painting and Art	
Music	
Story telling	

4. Do you think that using these expressive arts techniques will help individuals with emotional difficulties?

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree
1	2	3	4	5

5. In what way do you think using art, drama, dance and music will help individuals with emotional difficulties?
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6. If you had to attend counseling sessions would you consider expressive arts therapy?

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree
1	2	3	4	5

7. In addition to talking to the counselor, which of the following techniques would you like to be incorporate into counseling sessions?

**a. Writing**

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree
0	1	2	3	4

**b. Drama**

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree
0	1	2	3	4

**c. Dance and Movement**

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree
0	1	2	3	4

**d. Painting and Art**

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree
0	1	2	3	4

**e. Music**

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree
0	1	2	3	4

**f. Story telling**

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree
0	1	2	3	4

8. If you had to attend group therapy/counseling, would you feel comfortable if expressive arts therapy techniques were employed?

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree
0	1	2	3	4

9. Do you think expressive arts therapy is an effective approach?

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	Agree
0	1	2	3	4

10. Comments (if any)

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*Thank you for your cooperation.*

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