

## Perspective

# Towards the same goal from different ends: the use of arts in psychiatric practice

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### Abstract

Various artistic modalities are used as an alternative or supplementary treatment method in modern-day psychiatric practice. It has been shown that artistic activities are beneficial to patients as they provide a platform to open up and share the experiences, feelings, perceptions, views, and expectations of their lives with mental illnesses. Artistic activities can be used as a powerful tool to improve empathy not only in clinicians but also in patients by allowing them to

view the world from a different perspective. Artistic modalities can be effectively used in mental health promotion and prevention when adopted by cultures. The ultimate goal of biologically driven psychiatric practice is to reduce the suffering due to mental illnesses, and the incorporation of non-pharmacological treatment modalities like artistic activities can complement achieving the same target.

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### Introduction

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, medicine had emerged as a robust scientific discipline. It is true for any branch of medicine, including psychiatry. More emphasis has been given to studying the biological basis of disorders, and there are remarkable developments in understanding the molecular genetics underlying the diseases, the application of structural and functional imaging, and the development of more specific medications targeting specific receptors of the brain.

But with all the recent advances in medicine, it has been debated whether there is something significantly missing in contemporary medicine known as the “art of medicine” (1). Nowadays, we frequently see anguished concerns and harsh criticism in the public media, social media, and even professional literature about what is seen as a lack of confidence in modern doctors as good listeners, communicators, and healers. One of the major criticisms is that modern day doctors are more inclined to see the “symptoms” than the patient as a whole with their expectations, imaginations, hopes, fears, intuitions, beliefs, or perceptions (2). Therefore, most of the time, patients become the victims of biology in modern times. The irony is that all these concerns occur in an era when scientific gains in diagnosis and treatment have never been more impressive. This concern is more important for psychiatrists as clinicians who deal with human psychology: Can they ignore their patient’s existence as

a whole human being, which not only includes the biological aspect of the disorder as well? It is in this context that we see a growing emphasis on the concept of “medical humanities” (2).

Medical humanities include medical ethics, medical sociology, the social history of medicine and the application of literature and the arts to medicine (2,3).

The application of principles of medical humanities, including the utilization of arts and literature, provides a platform for better therapeutic relationship (4,3).

### Use of artistic activities to promote expression, communication and treatment engagement

In psychiatry, the assessment, diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis heavily depend on the complex and sensitive relationship between the doctor and the patient (1). An empathic understanding of the patient’s context is pivotal throughout the doctor-patient relationship. This can be a challenge in situations where patients present with poor or partial insight about their presentation and how they affect themselves and others (5). This sort of presentations are not uncommon in psychiatric practice compared to other medical specialties. Especially in situations where patients are treated involuntarily, the doctor-patient relationship faces an extra challenge (6).

One of the main reasons patients are hesitant to continue treatment is that they believe they are losing control of their lives once diagnosed with a mental illness. Stigma attached to mental illnesses, fear of judgements, a sense that they have limited control over the changes that will occur as a result of the diagnosis, fears about what a therapist may discover about them, self-pride that they do not require professional help, and a lack of mental health literacy are some of the few reasons for not seeking psychiatric treatment (5,6,7). Considering all these factors, losing one's sense of autonomy is a major contributor to poor treatment adherence (6).

In this context, art has long been recognized as a therapeutic tool for those with mental health issues, providing means of expression and communication that can help individuals to cope with emotional and psychological challenges (8,9).

It is beneficial if mental health clinicians can convince patients that their perceptions, imaginations, fears, hopes, and even their response to illness have an impact on their inner world, and that that is something they can change. It provides patients some sense of agency (10, 4). Expressive art therapy is helpful to bridge this gap between the outer world and the patient's inner world.

The concept of expressive art therapy was developed by Natalie Rogers in 1993. She is the daughter of Carl Rogers. She has extended Carl Roger's person-centered approach by incorporating art, movement, writing, and music. It uses creative activities to help the patients process their feelings, memories and perceptions, which are hard to put into words (4). The objective was to connect with the clients and help them processing emotions. Emotional processing is defined as modification of memory structures that underlie the emotions (11). Processing emotions is about learning to understand, make sense of and deal with emotions in healthy and productive ways. So the negative emotions are diminished to the extent that other experiences and behaviours can proceed without disruption (12). There are studies to see the impact of song lyrics on individuals and found that lyrics offered a personal connection to life events (13). This gives access to human experience in non-technical language and helps to acquire more expressive language. This helps both the patient and the doctor to deepen their understanding of how that particular person presented with that particular symptom cluster that time in his or her life. This will, in a way, help in formulating the patient's presentation and devising a better collaborative treatment plan (4,13,14).

### **Use of artistic activities to develop empathy**

On the other hand, art can be used as a powerful tool to develop empathy in psychiatric practice. Empathy is defined as the ability to feel oneself into the situation of another (5). Empathy uses the ability of the psychiatrist,

as a fellow human being, to experience the patient's subjective state. The benefits of empathy are not limited to patients but also to doctors. Various artistic modalities can be used effectively to improve the empathy of mental health professionals. As once told by Professor Femi Oyeboadi, "like every other skill, our moral imagination, that is, our empathy, needs to be exercised and tested and literature provides a safe way of doing it" (15). By encouraging patients to express difficult experiences like trauma through artistic platforms, mental health clinicians can gain a better understanding of their clients' experiences (4). And sometimes, as clinicians, certain artistic creations help us understand why some people continue with what they are going through. As an example, consider the case of a survivor of domestic violence. As clinicians, how many times have the treating teams rushed to come up with solutions without understanding the patient's real social context? It is common for clinicians to take a problem-solving approach in these kind of instances. But the survivor's experience and expectations may differ from what clinicians suggest them to practice. Artistic modalities like song lyrics give clinicians a better understanding of patients' experiences, thereby helping us empathize more with them (14). This resonates more with what patients go through simply because the lyricist is from their same cultural background.

It has been shown that art therapy and art psychotherapy provide a non-invasive therapeutic environment for children and adolescents to work through their fears, traumas and difficulties (16). Techniques such as role playing and analyzing other artists' work allow patients to understand how others may feel in similar situations (17,18). It gives patients the opportunity to see the world through new eyes.

### **Use of artistic activities in mental health promotion and prevention**

Various artistic modalities can be effectively used as tools to improve mental health awareness, promotion and prevention. Each culture influences the way people understand mental health and their regard for it.

Therefore, it is necessary to understand a particular community's concepts of mental health before engaging in mental health promotion.

There is a growing body of evidence discussing the benefits of incorporating artistic activities in health promotion and prevention. Such interventions can include the visual arts, music, drama, theatre, movement-based art and dancing and creative writing. The advantage is that the messages delivered through these channels can be designed to match cultural variations and expectations. It has been shown that various artistic interventions are effective in reducing mental health stigma and delivering important mental health messages

to the community (19,20,21). Thus there is an advocacy for substantial use of creative art work to address social and cultural determinants of poor health (22).

## Conclusions

Various artistic modalities can be used as an alternative or supplementary treatment method in modern-day psychiatric practice, both in the clinical and community settings, targeting the treatment and prevention of mental health issues.

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