Expressive Arts Therapy for People with Depression

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I would really like to suggest the government to build more studios than hospital that we can dance; we can sing; and we can do more artistic activities. Of course, many of the artistic activities have the physical activity component, which as we have said, have a lot of benefits for mental health. I think many of you here, I dare not to say 100%, but many of you should have been involved in different artistic activities. But in many artistic experiences; you just sing, or dance, or you play musical instrument; but after that, what happens?

I am an advocate, I am promoting expressive arts therapy but why and how and to what extent can expressive therapy help us deal with depression or as a preventive strategy for mental well-being. This is not a new idea, I think many of you are very familiar with that and the fact is that, there are more and more people who have depression and will be affected. And not to say how depression can affect our daily life; the worst thing is that depression produces a lot of burden economically, and in many other aspects of the medical system and even the society.

Affect Regulation in Human

Today I would like you to understand how expressive arts can help depression from the perspective of affect regulation. Some of you may know that depression and anxiety always happen together. Both these disorders are thought to relate to affect regulation and I’m very interested in stress response myself including - the HPA axis, which is our body’s internal system to help us to deal with stress. According to this model, hyper-arousal of the HPA axis system in response to stress can directly or indirectly lead to different forms of anxiety disorders. I will explain a little bit more later. And a state of hyper-arousal will lead to depression. You can see it is almost like two sides of a system.

Part of my past training is anatomy, including neural anatomy, so from that I would also want to draw your attention to your vagus nerve which is the tenth cranial nerve in your brain; and why this vagal system is important in dealing with emotions. The vagus nerve is one of the nerve endings that extends to your internal organs including your intestines, your stomach, and heart, etc. Of course some biologists, or it will involve psychologist, they call the vagal system as the emotional nervous system (Figure 1).

So basically if we have stress we will deal with it with some of our social engagement. We try to talk to people, we try to change our facial features such as change our eye contact with people, or we try different ways softly. When we have these responses, we are using our new vagal system or new vagal branch. But if all of these do not work, what will we do - we will try to fight or flight. We will try to fight with the challenge/stress or we will stay away from it.
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So when our bodies or our behaviours take this strategy we are using our ventral vagal system.

If this does not work again, what will we do? We will paralyse, or freeze. We will use our oldest vagal system which is the dorsal vagal system and this dorsal vagal system actually exists in reptiles, wild animals or we call it as vegetative vagal system. So this oldest vagal system helps us to survive by paralysis, by freezing so that we can keep our metabolic resources.

Normally when our nervous system is healthy we can deal with stress within what we call the normal range - that’s though there is up and down in stress level, we can still deal with it (Figure 2). But if our nervous system is dysfunctional, we will reach a stage of idle hyper-arousal in which we have fight or flight reaction - what we call mobilization state; or we will go into the hyper-arousal state - which is a freeze state - and also we can call this the immobilization state in which depression may occur.

In dealing with depression we need to develop a healthy nervous system or to help persons with depression to have the nervous system to function within the normal range. A healthy nervous system as you know, should have healthy right brain and left brain which can perform different functions. Emotion is usually and mostly processed in the right brain. I’m not saying that the left brain does not process emotion - it is not - but emotional identification, emotional experience and emotional expression mostly happen in the right brain.

So, why this is important for the treatment? Some of you may meet individuals with depression who may not be able to speak or talk about their emotional feelings. In that case non-verbal communication is extremely important. While we know that cognitive behaviour therapy [CBT] is well implemented and is effective for depression treatment but there are also a lot of other evidences showing that non-verbal approach is also very helpful.


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So Professor Henry also uses both channels - both the verbal and non-verbal processes and it also works on both the right brain and the left brain. What does this relate to expressive arts therapy, in which we can also be able to access pre-verbal, unconscious or what we call dorsal vagal materials? First of all, let me give you a brief idea of expressive arts therapy. It is the integrative use of different art forms including visual arts, dance and movement, drama, music and expressive writing as the media for expression and communication which helps further the integration of feelings, thoughts, emotions, and experiences.

How does this integration happen? If you have the experience of working with arts, I think you will also have the experience of creation. How can you create? If you want to create maybe you need to imagine; and when you imagine, when you create actually you are taking reference to some of your existing knowledge which is in the left brain. Then exploration and extension of imagination happen in the right brain. So in that case, we use both the left brain - the cognition, and the right brain - the imagination, to create. During this process actually you are bridging or integrating your left brain and your right brain.

Creating Arts and Therapy

When you create art, when you are experiencing the creative process, you will have more self-understanding - for example, you may ask yourself: why did I make this, why did I draw this, why did I move like this… and then, you may have more understanding about your preferences, your strength, and even your weakness. In expressive arts therapy, we usually connect with people not only through verbal dialogue or talking; we also connect with people through arts or the other non-verbal means. There is an important neurological basis of empathy. Let’s listen.

[music plays]

What is happening in your body when you heard that music? Maybe you are telling yourself don’t move, I’m a professional, I’m a professor - sit still, don’t move...
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But you are happy, I observed some unconscious movement: tapping your feet - I can see many of you, tapping your fingers, moving your head, whatever. Yes, we are born to move. We all have the instinct to dance/move. There is an internal structure in your brain that always wants to synchronise with rhythm. Also, when we move, when we dance, we are using both sides of your brain - combining the left brain and the right brain.

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This slide actually reviews some of the expressive dances which can help people with depression. I think that especially with dance movement therapy, because the physical activity will lead to change in brain chemistry including the secretion of endorphins which helps more. This is one of the studies showing that neurohormones would change after a group of students who completed their dance therapy (Figure 3). Of course there are also other research showing that movement and dance may help people with different mood disorders. So when we feel blue, when we feel depressed, go out to dance or to move, that helps.

And also I have worked with cancer patients with depression. Here, I would like to introduce the concept of Stagnation which Dr. Ng Siu Man has been spending a lot of effort in research related to this concept. The concept of stagnation is from the Chinese traditional medicine which is similar to depression but with distinct differences in the signs and symptoms. We found that stagnation improved after dance therapy treatment. My another

- Adolescents with mild depression
- Randomized into Dance movement therapy (n=20) and control group (n=20)
- 12 week DMT
- Significant improvement in psychological distress and depression
- Increased in plasma serotonin and decreased in dopamine concentration
- Conclusion: DMT may help stabilize the SNS

Figure 3: Dance movement therapy for depressed adolescents
colleague, Dr. Joshua Nan, who had been the art therapist in the Mental Health Association, worked on an RCT using clay art therapy for depressed adults. He recruited 52 people with depression in the intervention group and 48 in the control group. It is actually the first randomised trial in this field (Table 1).

Preliminary findings of the study showed that clay art therapy produced significant improvement in the treatment group that the control group in depression scale and GHQ12, a scale measuring mental distress. He is now organizing his thesis. Figure 4 shows an art product created by one of the participants in his study.

I have another post-graduate research student Alan Tang who is working on another randomised control trial on music therapy with depressed elders. In this research, the intervention group received music therapy while the control group watched movie. He is now still working on the study so I’m still waiting for the data; but he mentioned about that he observed some positive changes in the participants in the intervention group. We hope to see the results very soon. Nevertheless, the pilot study Alan conducted has quite encouraging outcomes - the results. The GDS score dropped in the experimental group while in the control group, the score increased.

Lastly, I also want to mention that expressive art therapy can also combine with CBT which Professor Daniel Wong will speak after the break. Music therapy, art therapy and also drama therapy can combine with CBT and have very good results as well. I think this area will be a very good area for exploration in future.

This is the time for conclusion now. Expressive arts can always open the doors

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<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Participants’ characteristics</th>
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<tr>
<td>Demographic</td>
<td>Intervention (n = 52)</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
<td>N (%)</td>
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<td>More than 10 years</td>
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Figure 4: Artwork of participant receiving Clay Art Therapy

Figure 5: Expressive Therapies Continuum. Lisa D. Hinz (2009)  
Expressive Therapies Continuum: A Framework for using art in therapy (p.5)
for creativity. It stimulates both brain hemispheres and influences cognition and deepens learning. I want to give you some ideas of how and why therapeutic effects happen when we dance and when we move or when we sing. This is quite a complicated model called Expressive Therapy Continuum which I don’t have time to explain it in detail (Figure 5). But basically the kinaesthetic sensory level is always the first level that we get in touch with whatever artistic activity when we do. Then if we do not deepen the experience it may not have any great effect. Of course it will make you happy and you will enjoy doing it. If we want to deepen the experience and to move the activity into what we call therapeutic or semi-therapeutic, we need to deepen the process into perceptual level or affective level. And the best thing, the deepest process will be elevating the experience to the cognitive level or symbolic level so that we have a deeper learning or develop new perspectives out of our experiences. The presence of a well-trained therapist is extremely important here as he/she can facilitate the client to go through these processes.

Lastly, I would like to conclude there; the whole brain function is very important for our wellbeing. Arts activities can help us to activate and assimilate different parts of the brain which can help us to develop a more coherent brain within which information can flow freely and smoothly. Thank you very much for your attention.

References


