



Research on the Application of Expressive Art Therapy in the Teaching of Mental Health Education Courses for College Students

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Abstract: Mental health education courses hold a pivotal role in nurturing the psychological well-being of college students and shaping their future development. This paper explores the integration of expressive art therapy into mental health education courses and its impact on college freshmen's mental health and classroom satisfaction. Drawing on a non-random cluster sampling method, 198 students from a university in Shandong Province participated, with half forming the experimental expressive art group and the other half constituting the control traditional group. Results demonstrated that the expressive art group experienced significant improvements in mental health, with higher scores in self-affirmation and lower scores in anxiety and depression compared to the control group. The study emphasizes a student-centered approach, focusing on experiential learning and self-expression, facilitated through music, painting, and psychodrama. It also highlights the role of expressive arts therapy in reducing self-defense mechanisms, enhancing self-expression, and challenging negative cognitions. While the study shows promise, future research should consider long-term effects and qualitative assessments to comprehensively evaluate the clinical significance of expressive art group therapy.

Keywords: expressive arts therapy, mental health courses, college freshmen

I. Introduction

Mental health education courses serve as a primary means of fostering the psychological well-being of college students and play a pivotal role in shaping their future development. A significant milestone in this regard occurred in February 1987 when Ma Jianqing introduced the inaugural domestic elective course, initially titled "Youth Mental Health" and later renamed "College Student Mental Health," at Zhejiang University. Subsequently, from 2001 to the present, our country has issued a series of directives pertaining to mental health education within colleges and universities. This evolution has witnessed the progression from modest beginnings to the present-day status of mental health education courses, which have transitioned from optional offerings in various institutions to becoming nationally mandated subjects for college students as stipulated by the Ministry of Education. This transformation has played a constructive role in mitigating students' psychological conflicts, enhancing their psychological resilience, and facilitating their holistic development. Nevertheless, the implementation of mental health courses is not without its challenges. Notably, issues such as content that leans excessively towards specific disciplines, mechanistic teaching approaches, and narrow assessment criteria have resulted in students' diminished engagement in instructional activities and a lack of initiative [1]. These challenges, in turn, constrain the efficacy of current mental health education and hinder the realization of its intended objectives. Consequently, there is an urgent need to explore innovative elements that can enrich the classroom experience, invigorate the learning environment, and render mental health courses more experiential and engaging.

Expressive art therapy represents a fusion of artistic expression and psychological principles, harmonizing pedagogical theory with practical application, thereby affording students an opportunity to actively engage and assume central roles in the learning process. The integration of expressive art therapy into mental health education courses stands as a promising avenue for enhancing students' interest in and application of mental health education, thereby contributing to the advancement of mental health within the realm of colleges and universities. The ongoing educational curriculum reform provides a fresh vantage point, offering space for experimentation and exploration. This study endeavors to combine three therapeutic modalities—namely, music, visual arts, and drama—and incorporate them into the teaching of mental health education courses with the overarching goal of elevating college students' mental well-being and enhancing their overall classroom satisfaction.

II. Objects and Methods

2.1 Object

We employed a non-random cluster sampling approach to select 198 students from four freshman classes at a university in Shandong Province. Out of these, two classes comprised the experimental group (referred to as the "expressive art group"), consisting of 103 students, while the other two classes formed the control group (referred to as the "traditional group"), comprising 95 students. In the intervention group, there were 16 male and 87 female students,

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with an average age of (18.60±1.22) years old, and a GHQ-20 pre-test score of (11.92±2.29). In the control group, there were 15 male and 80 female students, with an average age of (18.30±1.33) years old, and a GHQ-20 pre-test score of (11.36±1.85). No significant differences were observed in general information such as age, place of birth, family structure, major, and GHQ-20 pretest scores between the two groups ($P>0.05$). All participants were well-informed about the study and signed an experimental teaching contract.

2.2 Research Tools

2.2.1 The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ)

The GHQ was originally developed by Goldberg and subsequently revised by Li Hong and Mei Jinrong in 2002 into the GHQ-20[2], which includes 20 questions. The scale exhibits a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82 and a test-retest reliability of 0.77. It is divided into three subscales: self-affirmation, depression, and anxiety, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.75, 0.63, and 0.64, respectively. Except for questions 7 and 10, which require reverse scoring, all questions are in a "yes" or "no" multiple-choice format, where "yes" is scored as 1 point, and "no" as 0 points. To enhance statistical accuracy and ease of analysis, this study employed a 4-level scoring system for the questionnaire, which was later converted back to 0 and 1 scores during statistical analysis. Depression and anxiety items were reverse scored and combined with the self-affirmation scale to yield a total mental health score[3].

2.2.2 Classroom Feedback Self-Evaluation Scale

The Classroom Feedback Self-Evaluation Scale draws from relevant sections of Fan Fumin's "Subjective Evaluation Scale of Group Members" within "Group Psychological Counseling" (2005). Research participants completed this scale after the first, fourth, seventh, and tenth weeks of class, starting from the baseline score of 0 at the commencement of the course. The scale comprises ten scoring questions and one open-ended question, primarily aimed at gathering participants' subjective assessments in three areas: their personal engagement, satisfaction, and achievement of teaching goals during the course. Scores ranged from -5 to +5, with questions 2, 3, 5, and 6 addressing classroom engagement, questions 7, 9, and 10 evaluating classroom satisfaction, and questions 1, 4, and 8 reflecting the attainment of teaching objectives[4].

2.3 Intervention Methods

Throughout a 10-week mental health education course, conducted once a week with a duration of 2 credit hours per session, the experimental group integrated expressive art therapy activities into traditional mental health class instruction. These activities encompassed various art therapy forms, such as music, painting, and psychodrama, and were implemented in alignment with chapter content related to themes like self-exploration, self-experience, self-acceptance, self-integration, and group harmony, as detailed in Table 1.

Conversely, the control group received conventional mental health instruction without engagement in any expressive arts group therapy activities. Subsequent to the course, a post-test was conducted on both groups using the GHQ-20, and participants from both groups completed the classroom feedback self-evaluation scale.

Table 1 Expressive Arts Group Therapy Program

Week	Teaching contents	Teaching method	Expressive arts therapy
1	Mental health and the growth of college students	Lectures, psychological tests, classroom interaction	Music Therapy
2	Self-awareness and cultivation of college students	Lecture, classroom interaction	Music Therapy
3	Personality development and mental health of college students	Lectures, psychological tests, classroom interaction	Drawing Therapy
4	College Students' Learning Psychology	Lectures, homework, classroom interaction	Drama Therapy
5	Emotion management of college students	Lectures, classroom exercises, classroom interaction	Music Therapy
6	Interpersonal communication of college students	Lectures, videos, discussions	Drama Therapy
7	College students love psychology	Lecture, behavior training	Drama Therapy
8	Stress management of college students	Lectures, tests, training	Drawing Therapy
9	Life education of college students	Lectures, classroom exercises, interactive discussions	Drawing Therapy
10	Career planning of college students	Lectures, quizzes, classroom interaction	Drawing Therapy, Music Therapy, Drama Therapy

2.4 Statistical Method

The data were subjected to statistical analysis using SPSS 22.0. Descriptive statistics, independent samples t-test, and paired-sample t-test were employed for analysis.

2.5. Results

Comparison of General Mental Health Levels between the Intervention Group and the Control Group Before and After the Intervention

As presented in Table No.2, following the intervention, there were notable differences observed between the experimental group and the control group. Specifically, the total score ($F=21.263$, $p<0.05$) and self-affirmation ($F=12.252$, $p<0.05$) in the experimental group were significantly higher than those in the control group, while anxiety ($F=6.348$, $p<0.05$) and depression ($F=27.599$, $p<0.05$) were significantly lower in the experimental group compared to the control group.

Table 2 Comparison of GHQ-20 scores between the experimental group and the control group after intervention (points, $\bar{x}\pm s$)

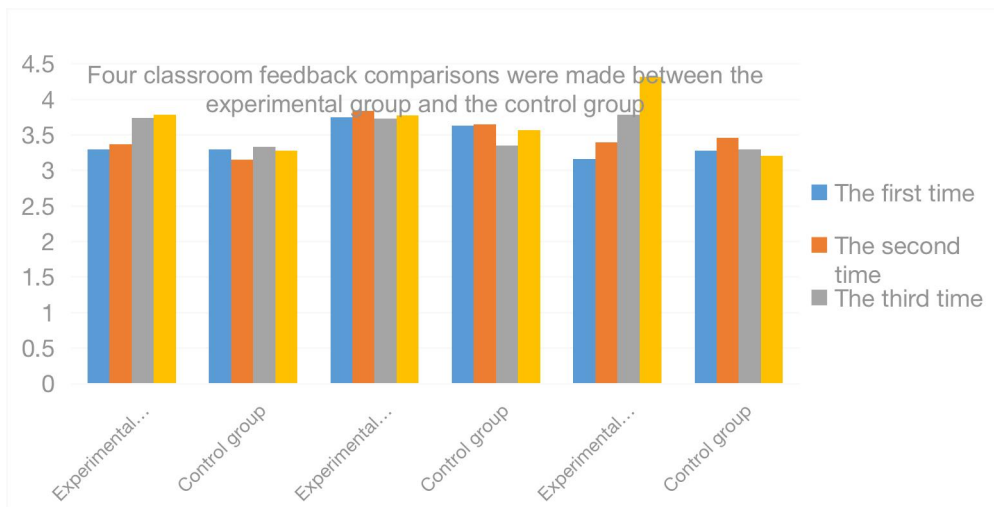
Group	anxiety		melancholy		self-affirmation		total score	
	before interventi on	after interventi on	before interventi on	after interventi on	before interventi on	after interventi on	before interventi on	after interventi on
test group	1.86±0.8 9	0.77±1.3 4	1.34±1.5 0	0.60±1.0 1	4.13±1.0 1	6.42±2.4 7	11.92±2. 29	16.05±3. 93
control group	1.81±0.9 2	1.18±1.5 1	4.45±0.7 9	1.48±1.8 7	4.45±0.7 9	5.37±2.7 0	11.36±1. 85	13.71±4. 88
F	0.007	6.348	3.086	27.599	0.346	12.252	0.724	21.263
P	0.728	0.002	0.08	<0.001	0.557	0.001	0.396	<0.001

2.6 Classroom Feedback Self-Assessment Scale

Upon examination of Table 3 and Table 4, it becomes evident that the statistical analysis of self-evaluation scores from class members demonstrates an improvement in the overall assessment of the class by the participants, both in the experimental group and the control group, regarding class participation, satisfaction, and attainment of teaching objectives when compared to the pre-class evaluations. This improvement has been sustained at a favorable level. Over the course of the four surveys conducted before and after the intervention, the levels of engagement and satisfaction among students in both groups remained relatively stable. However, noteworthy is the incremental trend observed in engagement and the achievement of teaching objectives within the experimental group.

Table 3: Means of Class Members' Feedback Evaluations on the Class

	Commitment(average)		Satisfaction (average)		Teaching objectives completed (average)	
	test group	control group	test group	control group	test group	control group
first	3.3	3.3	3.75	3.63	3.16	3.28
second	3.37	3.15	3.84	3.65	3.4	3.46
third	3.74	3.33	3.73	3.35	3.79	3.3
forth	3.79	3.28	3.78	3.57	4.32	3.21



III. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal significant improvements in the total score of the GHQ-20 and the "Self-Affirmation" scale among college freshmen in the experimental group, alongside marked reductions in scores on the "Depression" and "Anxiety" subscales. Conversely, the control group exhibited a significant increase in GHQ-20 scores. These results indicate that the integration of expressive art therapy activities into mental health course teaching has a notable impact on the overall mental health levels of college freshmen, as well as the enhancement of various dimensions of their mental well-being. This study, in conjunction with prior research, substantiates the efficacy of expressive art therapy in inducing relaxation, emotional release, improved self-esteem, and self-exploration[5].

To begin with, this research is firmly grounded in the principles of humanistic educational psychology, with a strong emphasis on acknowledging the pivotal role of students. Throughout the teaching process, the focus extends beyond the mere transmission of knowledge to encompass students' experiences, interactions, and active engagement, allowing them to assume the central role in the classroom. This approach harnesses the creative potential of expressive art therapy, enabling students to participate actively in classroom activities.

Furthermore, the implementation of expressive art therapy activities contributes to the reduction of individual defense mechanisms and effectively fosters inner expression. Within the classroom, students engage in artistic creation and action-oriented expression through modalities such as music, painting, and psychodrama. With the support and collaboration of their peers, students gain clarity about their true selves, aspire to their ideal selves, and evaluate their place in society. This process culminates in a comprehensive and objective self-assessment, reducing the dissonance between self-perception and lived experience[5].

Finally, expressive arts therapy plays a pivotal role in challenging negative cognitive patterns. It centers on stimulating individual spontaneity and creativity, encouraging individuals to adopt fresh perspectives on themselves, others, and society. For instance, the role reversal technique in psychodrama, which involves viewing oneself through the eyes of others, can heighten individual awareness and, to a certain extent, rectify distorted self-perceptions. This, in turn, enhances the flexibility of self-perception, diminishes rigidity, and fosters self-affirmation[6].

In summary, the inclusion of expressive art therapy within mental health courses, as compared to traditional approaches, yields improvements in college students' mental health levels and classroom satisfaction, while simultaneously promoting self-affirmation among college freshmen. However, it's worth noting that this study covered only one semester of teaching, without a follow-up to assess long-term effects. In future research, it would be beneficial to increase the number of interventions and collect qualitative research data through semi-structured interviews for more comprehensive effect evaluation. Follow-up measurements should also be conducted at intervals of 1 month, 3 months, and half a year post-intervention to gain deeper insights into the clinical significance of expressive art group therapy and enhance our understanding of its mechanisms of action.

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