

“A temporary guest”: the use of art therapy in life review with an elderly woman

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Introduction

Whilst on clinical art therapy placement at a community residential care facility for the aged, I had the privilege to listen to touching memories that some of the residents shared with me. Every person had a story to tell that usually related to well-known historical events. Witnessing the storytelling of century-old memories created a rare opportunity for me to travel with these residents back in time, to learn more of their unique perspective on life, and therefore better attune myself to their present needs. I could not help picturing their vivid memories in my mind, and eventually encouraged some of the residents to visualize them on paper. It was then that I decided to further explore whether art therapy could be incorporated into a personal life review process in a way that was beneficial to working with an elderly woman.

Robert N. Butler's noted article (1963) was the first to establish life review as a normative mental process that may result in positive outcomes. Butler articulated the various visual aspects of reminiscing in a way that invites analogies with art therapy. Nonetheless, the scope of literature on the use of art therapy in life review is comparatively limited, and so I decided to undertake a project that might offer an additional perspective on the combination of these modalities.

The discussion in this paper was similarly narrowed down to one incisive question: Will art therapy enhance the positive outcomes of life review in late life, leading to more self-acceptance and ego integrity?

This qualitative single case study is made up of eight art therapy sessions with an 89-year-old woman, who resided in a low-care community home for the aged. Sessions were

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patterned on a developmental theme-oriented approach ranging from childhood to later adulthood. In order to answer the research question, pre- and post-intervention assessment tasks were embedded in the method.

Art therapy with the aged

Most of the literature on geriatric art therapy is fairly recent. Although growing fast, it is still sporadic. Two articles have discussed separately the unique benefits art therapy might offer when working with two subgroups of the aged population. [Liebmann \(2002\)](#) discussed an open-studio art therapy group for isolated Asian elders and [Sezaki and Bloomgarten \(2000\)](#) described individual and family art therapy sessions with home-bound older adults.

It is now widely acknowledged that art creation provides older adults with a sense of achievement and self-esteem ([Hubalek, 1997](#)). As older adults gain understanding and confidence in art creation, they usually become more independent and more willing to explore their thoughts and feelings. [Dewdney \(1975\)](#), for example, identified three levels of old-age functional ability, and suggested a set of corresponding art therapy activities; [Crosson \(1976\)](#) looked at techniques to encourage spontaneity in geriatric patients; and [Harrison \(1981\)](#) described an outreach art program she established with the aim of offering preventive intervention in a mental health centre.

[Landgarten \(1983\)](#) argued that the modality of art therapy is effective in the treatment of depressed elders. Her work aimed at promoting nonverbal and verbal communication, by requiring clients to complete tasks via art. These tasks were typically structured on therapeutic gains, and clients were encouraged to share their creations and relate to their significance. [Rugh \(1985\)](#) described ways in which a visual arts program can stimulate the creative potential of older adults confined to nursing homes. For her part, [Wald \(1989\)](#) explained that impairments of dementia might severely affect memory, language and interpretation of sensory impressions. According to Wald, art therapy may be used to evaluate patients' deficits in orientation, memory, perception and comprehension.

The aims of old-age treatment in art therapy literature tend to focus on quality of life improvement rather than on therapeutic change. These improvements may include acquiring counter-isolation and adaptability skills, and boosting self-esteem ([Wadson, 2000](#)). The element of loss is often predominant, particularly the loss of loved ones and the loss of functional abilities. It calls for sensitivity in choosing art materials that can be used without difficulty by the clients. For example, a sponge cover on a paint brush, pre-cut collage shapes and water drops placed on colour blocks—all these minor things can render an elderly client's self-expression easier ([Wald, 1989](#); [Weiss, 1984](#)).

In view of the passivity that typifies old-age life in an institution, it has been suggested that art therapists who work with the elderly should encourage active decision-making ([Weiss, Schafer, & Berghorn, 1989](#)). Other positive aspects of art therapy with the elderly often include the release of pent-up emotions, a sense of pride in one's past and in making a tangible product, the integration of unresolved conflicts, subduing personal isolation and despair, and learning compensatory techniques to deal with deficit ([Huet, 1997](#); [Jungles, 2001](#); [Wald, 2003](#)).

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