

## Effects of art therapy with prison inmates: A follow-up study

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### Abstract

A pilot study conducted to measure the effects of art therapy with prison inmates (Gussak, 2004) demonstrated marked improvement in mood. The results of this study encouraged a quantitative follow-up study the following year. This study used the Formal Elements Art Therapy Scale (FEATS) and the Beck Depression Inventory-Short Form (BDI-II) as pre and post-test assessments to assess the effects that art therapy had on an adult male prison population, specifically on decreasing depression and improving socialization skills. A control group pre-test/post-test design was implemented for this study. An experimental group members attended group art therapy for eight weeks, one session per week. They also completed the assessments prior to, and at the end of the sessions. A control group did not receive the services but still completed the pre and post-test assessments during the same amount of time. The changes in BDI-II scores and the scores of all 14 categories of the FEATS from pretest to posttest (i.e., post-test score – pre-test score) were calculated and the differences were analyzed using independent-sample *t* tests to find differences between the experimental and control groups. The BDI-II results supported the assumption that art therapy was effective in reducing depression in the adult male inmates. The results from the FEATS, however, did not yield supportive data. Thus, although the art therapy was effective with the experimental population, the quantitative results were mixed. This article concludes with a case vignette that supports the notion that art therapy was effective, and an explanation on why the FEATS may not have been as effective a measurement tool in this particular study.

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In the summer of 2003, a pilot study was conducted to quantify the effects of art therapy with prison inmates (Gussak, 2004). This study yielded data that supported the positive effects of art therapy in prison (Gussak, 2004). This quasi-experimental study utilized a standardized art therapy assessment, the Formal Elements Art Therapy Scale (FEATS) (Gantt & Tabone, 1998), and a pre- and post-test survey designed by the primary researcher and the mental health counselor of the prison unit to measure the effects. The results indicated that over 4 weeks, two sessions a week, of art therapy groups, the inmates who participated demonstrated a significant decrease in depressive symptoms and improvements in mood. Results based on the data indicated that the participants' attitudes and acceptance of each other and the environment also improved, and interaction improved with peers and staff. Overall, those who participated demonstrated greater compliance with directives and improved behavior. These results encouraged a quantitative follow-up study conducted in the summer of 2004. This follow-up study report presents the methodology used, including the FEATS and the Beck Depression Inventory-Short Form as pre- and post-test assessments, the results, and future plans for art therapy in the prison system. Finally, a case vignette is presented as an example for the efficacy of alleviating depression in art therapy in prison.

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## Literature review

Based on the findings of the pilot study, this study focused primarily on alleviating depression in prison inmates. Depression is a major problem in prison. In 1994, Eyestone and Howell found that of 102 inmates evaluated at a variety of different security levels, 25% maintained symptoms of severe depression; as well, another 30% maintained depressive-like symptoms, but did not meet all of the standards of the *DSM-III-R (1987)* classification system used. Chiles, Von Cleve, Jemelka, and Turpin (1990) found that 30% of all male inmates maintained a major depression diagnosis while 15% were diagnosed with dysthymia.

Some maintain that depression is a normal reaction to incarceration. However, long-term, depressed inmates “can affect the prison community as a whole” (Boothby & Durham, 1999, p. 110). Depressed inmates may suicide, or self-abuse (Toch, 1992), which is, of course, detrimental to the inmates, and can be quite costly to the prison system. As well, an increase of depression in the prison population may increase drug and alcohol use as a means to escape (Winfree, Mays, Crowley, & Peat, 1994). All of these reactions to depression cost the prison system money and staff-time to monitor such reactions and for psychotropic medication administered to alleviate these mental illnesses (Baillargeon, Black, Contreras, Grady, & Pulvino, 2002). Art therapy has been used as a viable, alternative means to address depression.

It is believed that the actual art-making process helps alleviate depressive symptoms. The art-making process provides an alternate means of escape (Gussak, 1997, 2004). It can also instill a sense of self-worth and identity. However, there has only been the pilot study thus far that attempted to assess empirically the benefits of art therapy in a prison population, including alleviating depression.

## Method

A control group pre-test/post-test design was implemented for this study. It was hypothesized that if inmates receive art therapy services, then they will exhibit marked improvement in mood, socialization, and problem-solving abilities within the correctional environment.

## Participants

This follow-up study was conducted in a medium- to maximum-security male adult correctional facility in a rural section in Florida’s panhandle. An announcement asking for volunteers for this project was made on all of the units. Participants who volunteered for this study were randomly assigned to either the control group or the experimental group. Twenty-seven inmates were provided art therapy services. The age range for the participants was from 21 to 59 years old. Seventy-four percent of the participants were white, 22% were black, and 4% were Hispanic. Forty-four percent of them had completed high school or an equivalent (GED) while 22% had attended some college. For 41% of the participants, this was their first prison sentence. Their crimes ranged from possession of narcotics to murder. Only two of the participants were not taking medication for a mental illness. Of these 27 participants, only 16 attended all eight sessions and completed the post-tests.

The control group was not provided art therapy sessions, but was administered the pre- and post- assessments. Seventeen volunteers attended the initial session when the pre-test assessments were administered. The age range for the control group was from 21 to 59 years old. Eighty-two percent were white, 18% were black, and 0% were Hispanic. Forty-seven percent of them had completed high school or an equivalent (GED), while one member (5%) of the control group had attended some college. For 23% of the participants, this was their first prison sentence. Seventy-seven percent of the control group was taking medication for a mental illness. Of the 17 members of the control group, 13 completed all of the assessment procedures.

## Measures

This research project used two measurement tools. Each client was asked to complete a drawing using standardized materials of a person picking an apple from a tree (PPAT) the first day and the last day of sessions. These drawings were used for a pre- and post-project comparison, and were assessed using the Formal Elements Art Therapy Scale (FEATS) rating guide (Gantt & Tabone, 1998). This assessment demonstrated much success in ascertaining a decrease

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