

**Exploring Creative Art Therapy (CAT) through Severe Mental Health Disorders**

by

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**Abstract:**

Humans want to help people have a better quality of life however people suffering from severe mental health disorders including bipolar disorder, anorexia, schizophrenia, depression disorder,

post-traumatic stress disorder, and many more are forced to go on SSRIs, antipsychotic medication, or even very intensive forms of therapy like exposure therapy which inhibits their quality of life. Researchers and psychologists have started to dive into other methods which include creative art therapy also known as CAT. While this is still relatively new in our world due to the stigma of mental disorders, researchers want to see if there is another antidote that doesn't pump a person full of chemicals or hurt them dramatically more due to going through the same situation twice. The reason why this research needs to continue is that humans did not ask for their chemical imbalances and should not be treated as sub-human. With art being on the rise, there have been many controlled studies that research different methods of art, and while some are a miss there has been a significant amount of data supporting the statement that mental health disorders decline rapidly due to creativity and being able to express freely. In this research paper, one will dive into mental health disorders that have been explored using creative art therapy and the results that could help many to come.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Medication dominates patients struggling with severe chemical imbalances/ mental illness and while it has been explored, Creative Art Therapy (CAT) is still not as popular as their results and benefits. Creative Art Therapy is a form of therapy that is used in a mental health professional setting that allows clients and therapists to explore a creative approach to helping mental health disorders which is not limited to drawing or writing poetry to go over traumatic 20awareness of positive therapeutic techniques that help patients struggling with acute and severe psychiatric disorders. There are many forms of therapeutic therapies that are known through education and mental health awareness which include medication, behavioral therapy, cognitive therapy, exposure therapy, meditation techniques, shock therapy which is more harmful than it can appear in institutions, and even dialectical behavioral therapy. However, there are other alternatives that are less harsh and emotionally challenging on the human mind. One has to remember that we are still talking about human people, not just a quick solution to solve the disorder.

The goal and importance of this paper at the end will educate others and make one knowledgeable in mental health disorders, medication dominating the psychiatric world, emotions that patients go through, and finally why CAT is beneficial and should be in every in-patient and treatment center. One might be asking why is this important? The reason is there is a link between coping mechanisms and creative art. Art for centuries has helped people cope in difficult situations, think back to Vincent van Gogh who used painting as an outlet to express his manic depression. Another prime example is famous painter Edvard Munch who had severe anxiety and suffered from hallucinations which influenced a famous painting that is known worldwide called, The Scream. Through my SUNY Purchase college course Your Brain On Art: Explorations in Neuroesthetics taught by Rosalind Newman, I had the pleasure of learning how mental health

disorders are linked to mental health disorders and it is the reason why people who struggle with illnesses are more creative and allow their emotions to flow from the brain to the canvas.

There is a stigma in mental health to end a disorder and it is disheartening to ignore that society tends to turn its eye from a human being who did not ask for it. Chemical imbalances occur when a certain area of the brain is not producing enough or too much of a chemical, which causes a reaction known as a disorder. Extensive research by psychiatric researchers have expressed that when looking at someone with paranoia or schizophrenia disorder, their pineal gland is overactive causing an extreme boost of melatonin which causes severe hallucinations.” Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) studies reported pineal gland atrophy in schizophrenia patients and individuals at a clinical high risk of developing psychosis, implicating abnormalities in melatonin secretion in the pathophysiology of psychosis” The brain is still being explored by and is very complex which is an issue when looking at mental health disorders” ( Bastos, 2019) However, while most patients learn that their disorder will never go away unless it is linked to environmental factors including being in a toxic living space or having an addict as a parent which can sometimes be linked to ( PTSD) and there are certain therapies that can help a patient depending on the patient's situation as everyone. Patients with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder are told to go through Exposure Therapy which helps them be exposed to their fear and learn that their obsession does not need to be carried as a compulsion and their world is not going to end. For example, OCD with praying OCD is afraid that if they do not pray a certain number of times a day they will go to hell or be severely punished. The treatment for this client would be to

Therapy consists of exploring emotions and uncovering hidden or suppressed experiences with different forms of art to help ease the mind into feeling relaxed. It also helps patients find the words that they do not have to explain what is going on. It is hard for people to express what they

are going through or their disorder when that has always been their normal. CAT is known CAT requires a certificate and understanding of the therapy style in order to use it in their business or workplace. It can a long road as you must become a registered art therapist that has a completed undergraduate and master's degree due to the qualifications and learning experiences you must gain for example internships, clinical, and supervised practicum. However, not all therapists and psychologists have this certificate of completion. Many clients and patients have actually spoken up saying they prefer this style of therapy.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

While the scholarship has shown the benefits of CAT it has yet to be proven that CAT is beneficial to patients struggling with severe mental health disorders to the point where it is questioned on why many institutions and mental health professionals turn a blind eye to it? There is a historical relationship between clinical psychiatry and the rise of the pharmaceutical industry and many severe mental disorders require heavy medications where one loses their quality of life. This form of therapy provides an alternative for someone to work through their emotions in an artistic way when they do not have the words to express their emotions. Building upon the scholarship that has highlighted the benefits of CAT, this research argues that creative art therapy is just as important as other forms of therapy because of the ability to express. Due to mental illness being stigmatized by the masses, through my research alone it has been hard to sort through mental health disorders on the SUNY Purchase database as a lot of mental health disorders get clumped in together. , patient relationships, and emotions with therapists during CAT , personal stories of patients including drawings, therapists' journeys and insight during sessions, a therapist going through her own experience of art therapy to introduce it to others, and lastly research when looking at many data entries involving this key topic.

When looking through data on the SUNY Purchase library database, the researcher conducted a series of processes and elimination to find the nine most influential sources to back up the research question. When analyzing each source, Bitonte and Santo (2014) has groundbreaking evidence because they go over the fundamental reason why CAT is never the first choice even though art has been around since the beginning of man. Bitonte and Santo (2014) by using data and other journal entries to prove their hypothesis which is beneficial when looking at data with mental health. They construct clear data that goes over both sides of art therapy and mental illnesses. Regev, Chasday, and Snir's (2016) dive into the client's journey AT and being

silent during the session; this is a personal data source. The participants included 10 women between the ages of 24-27. The clients all reported forgetting that they are in a therapy session or that the therapist is there because they are learning and uncovering who they are. While some questions arise, for instance there have been indicators of biased thoughts due to the gender of the participants which were all females. The question is, is this the same for women or men or does gender have influence on a different result? Silence is great and can be beneficial but there was no mention of the environment, is there background noise, is it in a comfortable space, or is it in a hospital room? All these factors are extremely important that the data fails to mention. Sherry Beaumont (2018) who is now a certified art therapist gives insight into her own personal journey exploring CAT including writing, journaling, and poetry and shows imagery of before she started training to the middle of her training and after which is beneficial in seeing the growth of therapeutic training. Frostig (1997) is the only of the sources that goes out of the box for this question. This is the process of exhibitions that hosted participants of CAT work that they created in session. It goes over the personal feelings of people seeing the work, other people's harsh reactions, and ensuring that the patient identity is protected so it does not violate client patient confidentiality or HIPAA laws. However, one negative point is that this source is out of date and laws have changed since then. Shaw (2020) published data on an anorexia nervosa CAT class she has been running for three years and she specifically talks about a group she had of 6 to 8 young children between the ages of twelve to eighteen all struggling with anorexia nervosa. The class was affected by COVID-19 which made it go online which can be a con due to the factors of cameras getting shut off, parents hovering around so a child doesn't feel comfortable expressing themselves, and lastly Wi-Fi or technology issues. While Shaw (2020) addressed most of these problems it still is not a solution but rather more of a statement. During the session, the children



would spend 30 minutes individually drawing or painting, and then in the last 30 minutes everyone went around the call showing their artwork and would go into detail about the reason behind the piece and what emotion is occurring when thinking about it. The act of expressing artwork is significant alone because one has to describe why they created what they did and find the words they are feeling. Humans need to feel but more importantly they need the words to help themselves and allow others to understand how to help them also.

While this is extremely research based there are four more sources to evaluate and examine. Maclagan (2020) is a very intimate case study of Richard Nie who was being treated in an in-patient facility. There is key information on his study through AT (drawing) and his fears about the case being released. While this piece shows the artwork he created and the journey he had; it never states what mental illness disorder he was struggling with or diagnosis, Varley, and Fan's (2019) research is focused on CAT and different approaches of CAT through different disorders which gives more insight to each disorder written about above. However, while this research did not find many findings, it is a great start to breaking the silence. Konopka (2014) published an article in the Croatian Medical Journal in 2014 that took a different approach and highlighted the importance and truth of clients struggling with mental illness and their experiences with CAT. It explores the discomfort patients initially feel and how professionals need to take different approaches to see success. Haeyen & Staal (2021) goes over the process of CAT and changes the story of what happened originally to more of a positive. It shows how a situation occurred but changing it to change the story. This research addresses images and not words. However, a downside of this article is one might perceive them telling participants to change their story or situation as shutting the event that occurred. CAT is starting to gain more attention when addressing mental health disorders. Medication is not always the answer and more people in the

mental health field come forward with their own experiences through their clients. To this day even with viable, clear, and present information, many refuse to give CAT a chance.

When looking at the reason many professionals refused to use CAT the answer becomes very clear in the sense that many strayed away from the unknown. Every mental health disorder is different, and everyone's brain expresses creativity in its own way. There has been more attention and data coming forward in the past ten years that is making many become aware of their options when it comes to their mental health disorder. There is data, personal data, own experiences, intimate drawings, and sources that participants created, and lastly a scientific approach to the data at hand. This question has become extremely scientific, but it is beneficial when educating and addressing the truth behind CAT and AT.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

The reason why I chose this research topic is the disheartening truth that many people with psychiatric disorders are told to take medication and deal with their emotions which can have negative consequences. Creative art therapy has become more popular in patients with psychiatric disorders but it is still not favored in the mental health industry even though there is an increase of sufficient data supporting and backing it up. The goal of this research is to educate others and show the truth behind the mental health industry. This is a generic qualitative method that focuses on what people experience and feel but still brings it back to analyzing and finding research. The goal of this research is to educate others and show the truth behind the mental health industry.

There are many methods and techniques for helping patients including mediation, cognitive therapy, and behavioral therapy. However, other alternatives are less harsh on the human mind when dealing with chemical imbalances and emotions. This research focuses on analyzing different forms of CAT, psychiatric disorders, and the client's and therapist's perspective. The research consisted in the identification and analysis of the relevant scholarly literature, data taken from psychologists, and images of artwork with the consent of patients in journal entries and bring it back to personal experiences the writer has gotten to learn and understand by diving into this topic.

The reason that the generic qualitative method took precedence over other research methods is due to the scientific background of this question. To make this question successful, one has to use data entry logs and real-life conversations that were taken in psychiatric facilities that academic students do not have access to. This also goes hand in hand intending to educate others on CAT when looking at different forms of therapy instead of going to medication first. To make the generic qualitative method successful, the researcher (myself) conducted research on

perspectives with CAT and peer-reviewed journals evaluating the level of truth, effort, data, and lastly the overall message the data was showing. The researcher stayed along the lines of psychiatric disorders when looking at medication, CAT. Lastly, one might ask if the data I have chosen is biased but I went through a series of data including the pros of medication and other therapy methods vs CAT This is why I am grateful for the knowledge and information I obtained at my four years at SUNY Purchase and SUNY Oneonta, I have been grateful to have a victorious real-life experience in learning how to perform and deliver to the audience an in-depth generic qualitative method research paper.

## Chapter 4: Results

When looking through data on the SUNY Purchase library database, I conducted a series of processes and elimination to find the ten most influential sources to back up the research question. Taking a look at each source, Regev, Chasday, and Snir's (2016) scholarly research journal dives into the client's journey CAT and being silent during the session; this is a personal data source. The participants included 10 women between the ages of 24-27. The clients all reported that they forget that they are in a therapy session or that the therapist is there because they are learning and uncovering who they are. While this is an intimate approach on exploring AT, there are some negatives that immediately arise in one's head which is the gender of the participants were all females, could this not be the same for men or would they have a different result? Silence is great and can be beneficial but there was no mention of the environment, is there background noise, is it in a comfortable space, or is it in a hospital room? All these factors are extremely important that the data fails to mention. Shaw (2020) published data on an anorexia nervosa CAT class she has been running for three years. In this group there are 6 to 8 young children between the ages of twelve to eighteen all struggling with anorexia nervosa. The class was affected by COVID-19 which made it go online which can be a con due to the factors of cameras getting shut off, parents hovering around so a child doesn't feel comfortable expressing, and lastly WIFI or technology issues. While Shaw (2020) addressed most of these problems it still is not a solution rather more of a statement. During the session the children would spend 30 minutes individually drawing or painting and then the last 30 minutes everyone saw the art work and expressed what caused them to draw it/ emotions that arise. Beaumont (2018) gives insight into her own journey and adventure exploring CAT including writing, journaling, and poetry. However, a question that came to mind is does Beaumont (2018) herself suffer from mental illness or was she doing it for a

self-expression journey? Bitonte and Santo (2014) go over the truth behind why CAT is never the first choice even though art has been around since the beginning of man. Bitonte and Santo (2014) take the scientific approach by using data and other journal entries to prove their hypothesis which is beneficial when looking at data with mental health. There are no negative thoughts when looking at this piece because they construct clear data that goes over both sides of art therapy and mental illnesses. Frostig, (1997) is one of the sources that goes out of the box for this question. This is the process of exhibitions that hosted participants of CAT work that they created in session. It goes over the personal feelings of people seeing the work, other people's harsh reactions, and making sure it does not violate any human right laws. These are all important things when looking at data and getting the participants perspective. However, one negative point is that this source is out of date and laws have changed since then.

While this is extremely research based there are five more sources to evaluate and examine. Konopka (2014) published an article to the Croatian Medical Journal in 2014 that states a more scientific approach to clients struggling with mental illness and their experiences with CAT. It explores the discomfort patients initially feel and how professionals need to take different approaches to see success. This article is very beneficial to mental health professions to provide different forms of approaches for trial and error with their patients. Maclagan (2020) is a very intimate case study of Richard Nie who was being treated in an in-patient facility. There is key information on his study through CAT (drawing) and his fears with the case being released. While this piece shows the artwork he created and the journey he had; it never stated what mental illness disorder he was struggling with or diagnoses. Searing (2010) is a different source that may have many questionings why it is in this research question however it is important to note asylum hospitals and their treatment with patients suffering from mental illness. Many patients to this day

suffer injustices and abuse during care and people with mental illness are still human and should be treated as such. Chaing, Varley, and Fan (2019) research is focused on CAT and different approaches of CAT through different disorders which gives more insight to each disorder written about above. However, while this research did not find many findings, it is a great start to breaking the silence. The last peer-reviewed source was written by Haeyen & Staal (2021) which goes over the process of creative art therapy and changes the story of what happened originally to more of a positive. It shows how a situation occurred but changing it to change the story. This research addresses images and not words. However, a downside of this article is one might perceive them telling participants to change their story or situation as shutting the event that occurred. While there are ten sources present, the ideology of the research stays the same, which is that CAT is starting to gain more attention when addressing mental health disorders. Medication is not always the answer and with doors opening and more people in the mental health field coming forward with their own experiences through their clients. Even though CAT and AT have always been around, many went against it.

When looking at this piece as a whole it starts to make sense why many professionals refused to use CAT because the answer becomes very clear in the sense that many strayed away from the unknown. Every mental health disorder is different, and everyone's brain expresses creativity in their own way. There is more attention and data coming forward in the past ten years that is making many become aware of their options when it comes to their mental health disorder. There is data, personal data, own experiences, intimate drawings and sources that participants created, and lastly a scientific approach to the data at hand. The results are never-ending which is probably not what one would want to hear. The reason why I say this is because the brain is still not fully discovered and mental health disorders are constantly being explored and tweaked to help

humans suffer a little less. While creative art therapy is a great form of therapy, there might be a moment where other treatments take precedence over because every client and patient is different. The psychiatric world is very hesitant to try new things and likes to stick to traditional methods to solve mental health disorders. However, some therapists, psychologists, and art therapists are breaking the mold and making an impact on their patients. As someone who has a little sibling with borderline personality disorder and decided to go to in-patient treatment on their own will, they came forward when learning about my topic and stated, “Out of all the help and different forms of therapy, their favorite was CAT which was jewelry making and collaging. Their least favorite was cognitive which was 'excruciating and hard when you don't have the words in an uncomfortable setting as it is'”.

The more people that speak out will cause CAT to become more accessible to everyone. Many patients through this survey did face uncomfortable emotions when having to express their emotions and show their group, however many other patients expressed happiness and clarity when actively in the art portion of the time in silence. Everyone is different when it comes to art, so it is up to the therapist to figure out what style is beneficial to the client. While some might thrive in exposure therapy style drawing where they change the storyline into a positive, others might feel more beneficial creating jewelry to help them find the words in their brain that they couldn't get out before.

However, with many of the findings, it became clear that there has been a lot of abuse and mistreatment of patients struggling with mental health disorders which is extremely heartbreaking, and that alone needs to be brought up more to raise awareness. In order to create new options of therapy that can be available world-wide we have to expose the truth on what is actually going on in facilities, hospitals, treatment centers, and even certain therapeutic schools. Many people die



even when looking at Wilderness statistics that are available on the internet for people to see. Growing up I was close to someone who will go by the name of Mary who was sent to wilderness therapy due to depression. They had personally seen someone die, get pinworms and struggle with them for 6 months, and almost died of an infection that crept up their leg. When they came home, they were a shell of who they used to be and to this day struggle with PTSD and flashbacks to the harsh treatment they faced. The goal is to treat people with psychiatric disorders as humans at the end of the day and CAT is a step in the right direction by using a lighter more stimulating therapeutic style in order for the client to heal and grow with the disorder they have. While medication can be a good thing, it shouldn't always be the first step. The first step should be making the patient comfortable and trying to help them express their own emotions that they are struggling with.

The journey and discovery of the truth will take a lot of time to change the industry but the imagery, data, personal journal entries of the client's growth, and therapist perspectives are only in favor of the truth of CAT. Being creative shows a sign of personal growth and passion towards a specific art medium which is important to note in itself.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion (Dissecting and Wrapping Up)**

The results presented here with a reduced sample provide preliminary results that would be further supported with the production of further research in the mental health field. With this research, I have learned some disturbing heartbreaking things that occur in the mental health world. With CAT being the main concern, it won't be able to flourish until other negative powerful influences go away, unfortunately. This question has evolved over time and when you think you are going in one direction, you might be surprised at where you actually land. This question has grown with me and has shown me that there needs to be more sub-questions and exposure. CAT are not the only questions I have anymore; it is time to break the silence.

Creative expression is important and does allow one to be able to tap into more of their emotions and brain when feeling relaxed or eager to create a piece of artwork they can take home and reflect on. Everyone is creative in their own way but it is figuring out what way works for specific people. However, we need to make sure the environment is peaceful and accepting because even if a patient is able to participate in CAT it will not be beneficial if they are on edge or fearful of the environment, they are in. While I found little to no evidence of environmental factors it has been proven in passing within these sources that one needs to recognize the importance of setting, noise level, group vs individual work, talking during sessions or sitting in quiet, and lastly trust between patients and therapist.

Overall, this project started off as a seed planted in a pot and has now grown into a field of sunflowers. There is so much more to explore but there has been so much information that has given myself and the reader more knowledge on the data and topic at hand. I am thankful to walk from SUNY Purchase with more knowledge than I ever thought I would have. I myself as a researcher has blossomed.

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