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Art Therapy in Pandemics: Lessons for COVID-19

Jordan S. Potash , Debra Kalmanowitz , Ivy Fung, Susan A. Anand ,
and Gretchen M. Miller 

Abstract

To help art therapists work effectively with the realities of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19), this special report brings together art therapists who have experience working in pandemics (Ebola, SARS), attending to health professionals, and building creative virtual communities. Art therapists can support recommended public health psychosocial guidelines by disseminating information, promoting expression and inspiration, challenging stigma, modulating media input, securing family connections, monitoring secondary traumatic stress, developing coping and resilience, maintaining relationships, and amplifying hope.

Keywords: COVID-19; pandemic; art therapy; Ebola; SARS

In response to the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), art therapists are transitioning how they work by increasing studio sanitation procedures, acclimating to teletherapy, and adapting digital art therapy practices (American Art Therapy Association, 2020). In addition to modifying service delivery, public health experts recommend psychosocial guidelines for meeting the complex demands of a pandemic (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2020; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). This special report lists

protocols that art therapists can enact (Table 1). These practices are illustrated with case examples from the Ebola epidemic in Liberia, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Hong Kong, care for frontline health professionals, and virtual communities.

Ebola: Debra Kalmanowitz

When Liberia faced a massive Ebola epidemic (2014–2015), nobody in the country went unscathed — physically, psychologically, or socially. As the professional clinical coordinator of IsraAid Liberia at the time, I provided training and supervision for healthcare providers and community leaders (<https://www.israaid.org/>).

Disseminating Information

The Liberian government used art to augment large scale posters to raise awareness of risk factors and protective measures individuals needed to take. They were displayed at roads, hospitals, clinics, or in village/town squares. Information was also circulated by word of mouth, village leaders, and community theater groups. All of the former strategies helped provide a sense of empowerment and control. Misinformation, however, can be experienced as a type of virus itself in its ability to overwhelm, frighten, and induce anxiety.

Promoting Expression and Inspiration

Art in the context of psychosocial support groups allowed for the expression of emotions both positive and negative — gratitude, love, sadness, fear, anxiety, depression, anger, disbelief, grief — while engendering a sense of control in a safe environment. Art making altered perspectives and combated disconnection. Exhibitions of paintings allowed for communication and feedback. Not limited to visual arts, music (and particularly prayers) played an essential role in facilitating solidarity and offering inspiration. Lastly, art, music, theater and dance helped provide levity in the form of comedy and satire.

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Table 1. Public Health Psychosocial Guidelines for Art Therapists

Public Health Psychosocial Guidelines	Art Therapy Practices
Disseminating information	Public and online posters
Promoting expression and inspiration	Individual, groups; facilitated self-help groups
Challenging stigma	Psychoeducational campaigns
Modulating media input	Anxiety management
Securing family connections	Family art therapy; family art making projects
Monitoring secondary traumatic stress	Art for relaxation, finding meaning in work
Developing coping and resilience	Identify strengths; healthy creative routines
Maintaining relationships	Telehealth; virtual studios
Amplifying hope	Positive social media posts; celebrate artistic endeavors

Challenging Stigma

Fear can lead to stigmatization against people associated with the disease. For example, burial teams and crematory workers were ostracized and scapegoated. They took massive personal risks and their work was instrumental in ending the outbreak. Even though traditional burial rites were disrupted, these workers provided safe and dignified removal and interment in service to the dead and their families. The arts helped address stigma, fight discrimination, and challenge misperceptions that fueled rejection behaviors (including denial of education or healthcare).

SARS: Ivy Fung

SARS reached Hong Kong from Mainland China in 2003. Schools closed, social and business activities stopped, travel and tourism were damaged, and people panicked. At the art education and development center where I worked, most art classes were suspended, but I maintained individual clients.

Modulating Media Input

Jasper (pseudonym), a 6 year-old boy, had nightmares and constant worrying. His first drawing depicted a woman wearing safety goggles, oversized latex gloves, and waterproof footwear. He reiterated a popular saying by the Chief Executive's wife, Mrs. Tung, "Chin Kei, chin kei, chin kei; Sai sau, sai sau, sai sau!" which translates to "you must wash your hands" (three times). She often was seen wearing full protection attire, which disclosed her own anxiety but also spread fear. In parallel, Jasper's mother was hypervigilant to the slightest cough or sneeze and constantly listened to news. I worked with her on how to protect Jasper's health and manage her own anxiety. Jasper's final art depicted himself and peers playing wearing well fit surgical masks and playing happily.

Securing Family Connections

Mandy (pseudonym), a public hospital nurse, felt unusually tired and cried without reason. Her first art piece depicted a bath tub filled with contaminated water. She had not worked in the "dirty team" (i.e., care for quarantined patients) but felt unclean and therefore refrained from living with her family. Her isolation alleviated her fears of infection, but made her lonely and depressed. She created a portrait of her son from a photograph, saying, "it meant so much to me looking at it during the isolation period, now when I put it into this drawing, I could almost feel my own young energy and my liveliness." When SARS ended, she commented, "when I could go home, it felt like another home to me." I smiled and responded, "perhaps it was a new you going home!"

Frontline Health Professionals: Susan A. Anand

I work with patients in a psychiatry clinic while also providing support and education to third-year psychiatry residents and medical students (Anand et al., 2019). They are invited to participate in weekly art therapy groups alongside patients. They also attend wellness retreats that I co-facilitate, using art making for expressing stress, improving collegial relationships, and learning mindfulness and relaxation exercises to mitigate burnout. Additionally, I supervise second-year residents who provide individual psychotherapy to patients. As a result of COVID-19, supervision is now offered by phone or via online video.

Monitoring Secondary Traumatic Stress

During a retreat, residents created drawings that represented a challenging encounter and associated emotions. The drawings were then exchanged and other residents were asked to describe what they saw and felt when witnessing the other person's drawing. One resident drew a difficult situation when a patient's family member had died, which necessitated addressing the

patient's grief, as well as her own. Members of the group provided support to the resident by offering examples of similar experiences, sharing their feelings, and describing their methods of coping. One resident reflected, "there are so many ways to perceive things."

Developing Coping and Resilience

In an art therapy group with patients, a medical resident created a clay "oyster" that revealed "four pearls" representing hidden stories. She described the need to "open up" and discuss her worries in order "to connect with others and grow." In response, a patient discussed her artwork that conveyed being closed down like the "Four O-Clock flowers that close after blooming at 4 pm each day." A medical student attending this session later shared how this interaction reminded her that she could turn to her faith as a source of strength and indication of reasonable expectations when dealing with challenges.

Online Communities for Distance Socializing: Gretchen M. Miller

Albert Einstein is attributed with one of my favorite quotes, "Creativity is contagious, pass it on." Combining the power of creative contagion with the capabilities of the Internet generates opportunities for meaningful connection, community, and creativity (Miller, 2018).

Maintaining Relationships

As an art therapist and artist, I trust in the power of creative expression to serve what I often call *creative goodness* in the spirit of hope, compassion, and generosity. The digital landscape turned into virtual art studios allows art therapists to support one another, remain immersed in art making, and collaborate remotely. Social networking and digital media platforms hold an important space to widely access, obtain, engage with, and exchange content online. These same channels can also amplify creative acts to altruistically influence others and communities.

Amplifying Hope

Art therapists have the ability to form *creative chain reactions* within our online networks. These communities can make far reaching and lasting positive impacts that can spread easily through our social media and Internet connections. Such actions might be posting a status update of one's own art, creating a new online community, or sharing a found image that communicates a

powerful message. Art therapists are all agents of change who can use creative deeds online as a form of motivation, inspiration, and empowerment.

Conclusion

The above examples reflect public health best practices but also resonate with similar situations due to COVID-19. Chinese and Asian people, healthcare professionals, recent travelers, and recovered patients have experienced discrimination. Medical professionals face stress due to a shortage of personal protective equipment. Despite physical distancing, neighbors in Italy stay connected through balcony singalongs, clients receive services, and educators meet students in virtual classrooms. Although it is unclear when the current pandemic will end, art therapists are adjusting rapidly and are well-equipped with psychosocial remedies.

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