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Online art therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic

On 11 March, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared outbreaks of Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) throughout the globe as a worldwide pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis and growing need for regions and countries to lockdown, put quarantine practices into effect, and isolation protocols to 'shelter in place' or 'stay at home' disrupted the delivery of many services, including mental health treatment and therapy programming. As a result of this impact and necessity to still meet the needs of service users, our field experienced a rapid explosion of online art therapy practices, a collective shift to implementing telehealth services, and increased provision of art therapy remotely all across the world.

Art therapy and technology

Utilizing computer-assisted technology, online platforms, and telehealth are not a new phenomenon to art therapy. Digital art therapy, which includes the application of computer-generated content and use of digital media as part of art therapy practice has been employed over the last three decades as progressively more and more art therapists have introduced computer technology into their clinical work (Canter, 1989; Gussak & Nyce, 1999; Hallas & Cleaves, 2017; Parker-Bell, 1999; Thong, 2007) through media such as, but not limited to: digital photography (Atkins, 2007), animation (Austin, 2009), collage making (Diggs et al., 2015) and art making apps (Choe, 2014). Research about facilitating art therapy online and delivering art therapy services through telehealth platforms was introduced two decades ago (Collie, 1998; Collie & Čubranić, 1999) and has seen ongoing use (Collie & Čubranić, 2002; Collie et al., 2017; Levy et al., 2017; Lloyd & Usiskin, 2020).

Art therapy practice goes online in times of COVID-19

Articles in this issue showcase the breadth of online art therapy practice and research methods delivered through a variety of digital platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, WhatsApp, and others with a range of service user populations, approaches, and methods. Attention to ethical considerations, safety factors, the value of connection, accessibility, and resiliency, as well as challenges and aspirations that emerged due to this digital shift are also described.

Creating digital safe spaces

Ania Zubala and Simon Hackett, authors of 'Online Art Therapy Practice and Client Safety: A UK-wide Survey in Times of COVID-19', examine findings obtained from practitioners that adapted their clinical work with clients to online delivery (Zubala & Hackett, 2020). Survey outcomes reported how shifting to digital spaces emphasized the role of client and therapist safety risks, space and material considerations when engaging in and conducting art therapy remotely, establishing digital boundaries, and developing privacy protocols unique to online and art therapy work. Lucy Shaw describes in "Don't Look!" An Online Art Therapy Group for Adolescents with Anorexia Nervosa', how her clients facing body image challenges responded to the online environment, which often includes the use of web cameras and one's comfort level or experience of being or not being seen on video (Shaw, 2020). Informed by her online experience, Shaw suggests art-based therapeutic frameworks for safely working with the needs of this population.

Creating accessibility and connection

Natalia Gomez Carlier et al., in 'COVID-19 Transforms Art Therapy Services in the Arabian Gulf', share how moving art therapy services online appeared to lead to a decrease in stigmatization for seeking help and create new possibilities for client connection, empowerment, and openness (Gomez Carlier et al., 2020). Increased engagement with art therapy through online delivery was noteworthy. Gillian Datlen and Chiara Pandolfi in their article 'Developing an Online Art Therapy Group for Learning Disabled Young Adults using WhatsApp', describe the importance of creating an accessible digital art therapy platform for this client group, which can often experience exclusion from technology (Datlen and Pandolfi, 2020). The use of an open studio and community-based approach through WhatsApp provided a new form of communication and creativity for much needed connection.

Creating resilience

In 'Military Museum Collections and Art Therapy as Mental Health Resources for Veterans with PTSD', Janice Lobban and Dominic Murphy share how their onsite work with veterans in a museum-based setting transitioned online due to COVID-19 (Lobban &

Murphy, 2020). Their findings highlight how digital art therapy sessions provided an opportunity for not only creating accessible and inclusive spaces for veterans managing isolation during this time, but technology's role in strengthening resilience and forming a sense of belonging through shared art experiences online. Bobby Lloyd and Miriam Usiskin share in 'Lifeline, Frontline, Online: Adapting Art Therapy for Social Engagement Across Borders', how their work with Art Refuge supported individuals and families experiencing displacement manage isolation through creative and digital psychosocial opportunities that fostered emotional resilience and engagement (Usiskin & Lloyd, 2020). The authors also suggest that the widespread adaptation of art therapy practices navigating the online environment, showcases the art therapy profession's resiliency as well.

Conclusion

Much of the global art therapy community was propelled almost overnight into navigating how to adapt technology as a primary and essential platform for delivering services due to COVID-19, including how to develop creative and art-based virtual spaces for therapeutic work. The contributions in this issue offer valuable insight into current online practices to add to the growing literature on art therapy and technology. We hope these articles offer key considerations for designing future research and advancing online art therapy practices that are relevant, effective, and applicable for addressing the therapeutic needs of service users.

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