



The effect of group art therapy on older Korean adults with Neurocognitive Disorders



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of group art therapy on improving the emotional capacities of older Korean adults with Neurocognitive Disorders (ND). In Korea, little research has been conducted on patients with mental disorders in nursing homes to measure the effectiveness of art therapy. Expanding upon previous research, this study tested an art therapy program that included 36 treatment sessions and used a wide variety of materials, including traditional materials, such as rice paper, Korean paints and brushes, and ink sticks. The program's goals were to reduce patients' levels of depression and improve their ability to express themselves. This research analyzed the effect of art therapy using the Short Geriatric Depression Scale and computer analysis of painting patterns. Older Korean adults with ND were shown to have decreased levels of depression and increased levels of self-expression, demonstrating that group art therapy was effective at improving the condition of older patients with ND.

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Introduction

Neurocognitive Disorder (ND) is a syndrome that affects memory, thinking and behavior and thus weakens the ability to perform everyday activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2003). Older patients with impaired cognition suffer from the loss of memory and identity, leading to depression along with feelings of anxiety, grief, and sorrow.

Art therapy works at the physical, mental, emotional, and social levels to help people suffering from ND cope more effectively with their condition. Within art therapy, product making is a non-verbal communication method. Making products, such as artwork, helps people overcome their temper by reducing depression and improving their ability to express themselves. Art therapy involving music, literature, horticulture, and the performing arts has been proven to be beneficial in treating people with mental illness (Malchiodi, 2011; Wadson, 2010). Art therapy is a treatment in which the function of art is applied as a therapeutic approach to treat patients in clinical, educational, and rehabilitative facilities. Wald (1989) focused on the following therapeutic

benefits: (1) eliminating distractions; (2) minimizing functional deficits; (3) releasing underlying emotions; (4) providing a non-verbal, visual means of communication; (5) bringing isolated patients into a social group; and (6) strengthening the sense of self-esteem with personal accomplishment.

Art therapy leads people to become more positive by erasing accumulated depression through drawing or creating artwork, which results in an effect known as sublimation of feeling. Sublimation through artwork relieves grief, loss, and symptoms of depression; helps people process their emotions; helps people remember the more positive experiences that they have had; and ultimately decreases destructive and negative energy. Although art therapy offers various benefits to people with ND, this paper will focus on the effects it has on depression and self-expression because these are proven to be the most important symptoms for people with ND.

Literature review

Scholars have studied how art therapy helps people with despair (Kamar, 1997; Rusted et al., 2006), which is widely known as the fundamental conflict of later life. Because most older adults with ND live in public facilities away from their families, they experience limited interactions with other people. They thus feel lonely, helpless, depressed, anxious, and isolated. Such symptoms eventually lead them to lose opportunities to express their thoughts when

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interacting with other people. To address the cognitive, emotional, and physical needs of older patients with ND, various clinicians have drawn on art therapy perspectives to create approaches to working with older patients that are designed to help them confront and eventually resolve previous life issues. Art therapy works to relieve patients' grief and losses and lets them confront their emotions by stimulating an inactive mind (Moon, 1998; Shore, 1997). Various art therapists have questioned self-expression and whether art therapy enhances people's ability to communicate (Cho, 2008; Lee & Kim, 2008; Kim, Betts, Kim, & Kang, 2009; Yang, 2008). Drawing allows those suffering from mental illness who have been deterred from expressing themselves to overcome their depression and to represent themselves through the creation of artwork (Kahn-Denis, 1997; Kim, 2013).

By expressing their inner thoughts outwardly through their artwork, older people with ND can develop both verbal and nonverbal communication abilities, which can eventually lead increased quality of life that is characterized by better interpersonal skills and reduced mental distress (Couch, 1997; Harlan, 1990; Stewart, 2004). Some researchers have argued that depression and the ability to express oneself are correlated (Kim & Chi, 2002). People who express themselves well have low levels of depression, whereas people who do not express themselves well have high levels of depression. Healthy people lead active lives through self-expression, which is crucial for maintaining self-esteem, and many scholars have shown that art therapy helps older people with ND increase self-expression (Kim & Chi, 2002).

Many previous studies have emphasized that art therapy enhances the social relationships of older patients with ND who often have limited interaction with others, but group art therapy effectively improves their communication skills by leading them to express suppressed feelings through artwork and share these feelings with other group members; such therapy reduces their sense of nervousness, isolation, and conflict (Cook, 1991; Weiss, Schafer, & Berghorn, 1989). Group art therapy is far more effective than individual activities because participants feel better when they have an audience for their artworks and stories (Elkis-Abuhoff, Gaydos, Goldblatt, Chen, & Rose, 2009; Gussak, 2007; Kramer, 1994). Group art therapy reduces depression levels by involving patients in creative activities that provide entertainment and a sense of pride in achievement. In addition, group art therapy provides each individual with emotional support and a feeling of camaraderie. Through this experience, patients learn to be involved in a social group and eventually overcome isolation and develop interpersonal relationships (Landgarten & Features Submission, 1983; Wald, 1993, 2003). By effectively leading older people with ND to practice both self-management and social skills, group activities enable older people with ND to form community relationships.

Moreover, using rich and special art materials can motivate older patients with ND to demonstrate a more diverse spectrum of emotions. The availability of diverse materials can further increase patients' chances of finding the most suitable way to achieve full emotional expression, which ultimately leads to higher self-esteem and lower rates of depression. Previous studies demonstrating the empowering effect of art therapy have used a variety of art materials, such as pencils and crayons (Blomdahl, Gunnarsson, Guregård, & Björklund, 2013; Drake, Coleman, & Winner, 2011; Rubin, 1987, 1999; Snir & Regev, 2013). Kimport and Robbins (2012) and Sholt and Gavron (2006) noted that using clay improves mood and enhances emotional expression and catharsis.

Some researchers studying art therapy have used life review to demonstrate the effect of reminiscing on solving the psychological problems of older patients with ND. Butler (1982) first described the method of life review. According to Butler, "aged people live by memory rather than by hope" (p. 65). Zeiger (1976) was the first to apply life review in combination with art therapy. Other

researchers have shown that for older patients with ND, life review methods can significantly increase self-esteem and social support and can help such patients achieve self-ego integrity (Bergland, 1982; Cook, 1991; Haight, 1992; Ravid-Horesh, 2004; Shore, 1997; Zeiger, 1976). This body of research proves that the life review program, which elicits memories of past events or experiences that recall the entire life span, is especially helpful for older patients with ND.

Furthermore, several therapists, including Choi, 2005, Hartz and Thick (2005) and Yaretzky, Levinson, and Kimchi (1996), emphasize the advantages of a large number of sessions for art therapy. Yaretzky et al. (1996) noted that the effectiveness of art therapy could not be determined in only five sessions because older patients with ND cannot build rapport in a short period of time. A large number of sessions is required to allow patients to build rapport with one another, and long-term support is needed to help patients maintain their enhanced mental state throughout the therapy and even after the program is concluded (Hartz & Thick, 2005; Yaretzky et al., 1996).

Art therapy intervention

The program was organized with 14 older people with ND who were living in a nursing facility in Seoul. All participants attended each of 36 sessions, and each session lasted 45 min (Butler, 1982). This study had two original features: (1) a larger number of therapy sessions and (2) a wide variety of materials, including traditional Korean materials. To motivate older patients with ND to improve their self-integrity, this study used a wide range of materials, including traditional Korean objects and extravagant decorations. Because using multiple materials can create better therapeutic outcomes compared with using a single material, this study used diverse materials. The art therapist had a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in oriental painting as well as Master's Social Work degree. In addition, the therapist was a licensed Korean Art therapist.

The rationale for choosing 36 sessions was to allow enough time for the participants to establish trust-building relationships with each other and to actively participate in the program. Each session was divided into three phases: (1) 5 min for icebreakers, (2) 30 min for art production, and (3) the last 10 min for group discussion. Art production was facilitated through the use of diverse materials, including colored pencils, oil crayons, marker pens, pastels, paints, and clay, along with traditional materials, including Korean pulp, oriental painting, beads, plaster casts, and decorative jewelry.

Based on the theory of life review, each program was divided into three structural stages: initial, intermediate, and final. The initial stage (sessions 1–10) was focused on making participants feel comfortable, increasing their interest in art therapy, establishing trust-building relationships with one another, resolving their anger and stress, and ultimately, relieving their depression. This stage focused on attracting older patients with ND and encouraging them to actively participate in the program by exposing them to various fun activities using diverse materials. These initial 10 sessions focused on Korean activities, such as making traditional Korean rice cakes or dumplings.

The intermediate stage (sessions 11–25) was structured to follow a life review process to help patients resolve and integrate unresolved conflicts by reminiscing about happy memories of special events from their past, such as childhood memories, wedding ceremonies, and the joys of building a family. This stage was divided into two parts: individual work and group work. For individual work, the patients produced artworks, such as clay figurines (as shown in Fig. 1a); traditional wedding ceremony attire, including black hats for the groom and headpieces for the bride (as shown in

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