



# The Effects of Art Therapy on High School Students

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**Abstract:** *The present paper examines the effect of art on the mental health of adolescents. The adolescents analyzed in this study mostly include teenage students in high school. Teenagers form an important demographic because studies show that this group increasingly struggles with a variety of mental health issues and that these challenges have a negative impact on their studies. Qualitative studies of teen interviews emphasize the importance of listening to students and the importance of the perspectives that they provide on the benefits of art therapy. The following will examine these studies in order to show how visual arts, in particular, offer benefits to the mental health of teenagers. This paper will also provide some discussion of the benefits of attending to the different aspects of mental health such as emotional, social, and psychological well-being.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In recent years, studies have begun to emphasize the effects that mental health is having upon students in high school (Brooks, Harris, Thrall, Woods 2002; Agarwal 2011; Suldo, Thalji-Raitano, Kiefer, and Ferron, 2016). Such studies are showing that high school students in particular face a number of pressures related to the expectations of acceptance in top colleges. An increasing number of studies are pointing to a diverse set of symptoms that are noticeable in high school studies including anxiety, stress, and depression (Xu and Wang 2023). Studies are also highlighting that the anxiety associated with the pandemic has only furthered concerns over mental health in this demographic as students were cut off from many of the social activities that offered remedies to anxiety (Adnan and Anwar 2020). These studies emphasize that one of the challenges of anxiety is that parents often do not notice the ways in which anxiety is having harmful influences upon their children. Qualitative studies are especially valuable in this context because they offer student voices that are not influenced by parents. However, studies are limited by the fact that responses may not be completely honest or authentic to the true feelings or opinions of students.

Other studies draw attention to the stress that students feel and how this elevates concerns over mental health. Stress in high schoolers stems from high academic pressures, lack of time to relax, and selective high school atmospheres. Specifically, these high school environments offer a more competitive environment for students who want to excel and receive scholarships from top-tier universities. Students feel that the combination of demands from teachers, school assignments, parents, and the feeling that some of their peers are more advanced or well-prepared for academics. This, in turn, makes students feel pressured to work all of the time, including weekends, and to avoid any type of relaxation that would help them recover from stress and anxiety. Studies claim chronic stress in high school often persists into substance abuse, which negatively affects college and adult years. For instance, high school substance use is correlated with post-high school achievement (Bachman et al., 2008; Fergusson & Boden, 2008; Newcomb & Bentler, 1988; Schulenberg, Bryant, & O'Malley, 2004; Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 2005). Additionally, stress contributes to students' withdrawal in academic and social activities because of burnout and lack of motivation. This in turn creates a cycle where anxiety and depression begin to take over a student's academic focus and success.

Anxiety, in particular, forms one of the most common ways that mental unhealth manifests itself in students. Studies have shown that after the pandemic, an increased number of adolescents felt anxious. These studies claim that teenagers become anxious about their performance and the

unrealistic goal of perfectionism as well as how other people perceive them. Studies have also found that Covid-19 has increased psychological stress and anxiety among students around the world (Thakur 2020; Lee 2020; Windarwati et al. 2022). These studies found that suspending face-to-face education has had an overall negative impact on students' mental health. The extremely new and dramatic changes from suspending in-person learning led to increased confusion in individual students as they were left unsure of how to efficiently learn and how to succeed in a completely new learning environment. Additionally, studies show that teenagers excessively worry about other people's perceptions of them. Such studies show that they are afraid of being perceived as embarrassing, incompetent, or stupid.

The cumulative effects that anxiety and stress have on students often leads to depression. Studies show that the results of an anxious lifestyle can lead to depression because being in a state of anxiety is extremely distressing and limiting. For example, a teenager can be stressed about performing poorly, withdrawal from activities and friends, leading to increasing amounts of isolation and eventually depression. Major depression is a type of mood disorder that involves a teenager's body, mood, and thoughts. It results in a never-ending cycle that affects eating, sleeping, and thinking patterns. It has a strong impact on day-to-day life and pervades all routines. Layers of anxiety and depression are often overlooked but common for high school and college students, and are usually not coped with the right mechanisms.

In more recent years, studies have shifted from identifying mental health issues to finding solutions instead. One potential healthy coping strategy to these mental health concerns is the role that arts might play in schools. An increasing number of studies are looking to the arts as a way to mitigate the problems of mental health among this demographic. Research taken between 1994 and 2014 shows that art therapy approaches to people who have mental health issues can significantly improve an individual's wellbeing.

This line of research offers promising results but many people are unaware of what art therapy is exactly. So, what exactly is art therapy? Art therapy is a non-pharmacological medical complementary and alternative therapy (Shoemaker et al. 1976; Rubin 1999; McNiff 2019). Previously, medication like antidepressants were often the default solution or remedy to all mental health issues. However, more recently studies have found that art therapy has been successful in reducing suffering from mental disorders such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Blomdahl et al. 2013; Van Lith 2016). The larger goal of art therapy is to help students manage social, emotional, and cognitive barriers through art-related tasks and projects (Rubin 1999). Art uses creative expression to help foster healing and mental well-being. The creative process helps patients explore themselves, and in the process, they gain personal insight and develop new coping skills. It serves as a useful method to help patients open up and share their feelings and experiences in a unique and un-intimidating way. Art therapy can show up as humanistic, psycho-educational, of systemic orientations. The humanistic approach is patient centered. Psycho-educational approach focuses on the behavioral and developmental state of a patient, and a systemic approach refers to family or group therapy. Overall, art therapy can show up in a multitude of different ways but is effective either way. Art can be a helpful coping strategy for teenagers and should be more prevalent and available in schools for these individuals.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This essay will examine five qualitative studies that describe students' perspectives on the benefits that art therapy may have upon mental health. The first study, "Arts-based interventions for youth with mental health challenges" was conducted in 2019 and published in 2020 (Coholic, et al 2020). It represents teenage youths who receive short-term mental health support in hospitals. These youths had complex mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and psychosis. The study includes information from sixty youths from a nine-month period. Study 1 is a qualitative study that presents its findings with creative composite vignettes that capture the essence of the mental health challenges in youth's lives. The study shows that although teenagers were initially skeptical or nervous to partake in the study, they ended up finding that the program was enjoyable and beneficial.

The second study this essay will examine is called, "Qualitative and Arts-Based Evidence from Children Participating in a Pilot Randomised..." which was published in 2022 (Moula 2022). The paper studied sixty-two children aged seven to ten with mild emotional and behavioral difficulties.

These difficulties included self-harm, eating disorders, sleep disturbance, depression, and anxiety. The children were randomly assigned to art therapy, music therapy, dance movement therapy, or dramatherapy. Data was collected through semi-structured one-to-one interviews with children to understand their experiences after participating in the different art therapies.

The third study is “Online Self-Help Art Therapy-Based Tasks During COVID-19” published in 2021 (Valachiné 2021). This is a qualitative study that explores how online individual art-based therapy supported international students during the Covid 19 pandemic lockdown. Studies found that during the pandemic, there was an elevated level of anxiety, depression, and mood disorders, as well as irritation and anger. The paper studied twenty-two international university students from 8 different countries in Hungary. Students underwent weekly art-making instruction and reflective questions as part of the study. Additionally, participant’s artwork images and written responses were analyzed to find any differences between emotions before and after the online self-care programs.

The fourth study this paper examines is “Art Therapy for Adolescents with Depression: Feasibility and Acceptability Study in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry”, published in 2024 (Blomdahl 2024). The study examined the feasibility and acceptability of manual based phenomenological art therapy as an intervention for adolescents. The paper studied nine adolescents who range in age from 13 to 19 years old and struggle with depression. The subjects underwent a ten-week treatment that utilized phenomenological art therapy and collected self-reported measurements before, during, and after treatment. Phenomenological art therapy is a process that uses art to reflect an individual’s experiences and then is followed by a conversation with a therapist to discuss the narrative of the piece. The study did not intend to examine if treatment had an effect on depression compared to a control group, but instead examined adolescent’s satisfaction and attendance to the treatment as well as its fit and usefulness in their personal lives.

The fifth study this paper examines is “Perceptions of Art Therapy in Adolescent Clients Treated within the school system”, written by S. Harpazi and published in 2020 (Harpazi 2020). The study examines how an art therapy program in school would affect adolescents. The study examined twelve adolescent clients, between the ages of 14-18. Five students were at a regular educational school for at-risk youth, two were in a regular education school but took special education classes, and two were studying at a special educational school. Each adolescent took part in an art therapy session at school for more than a year and data was collected through interviews. The interviews asked many detailed questions about the student’s overall experience and influence of art therapy at the school.

The sixth and final study this paper examines is called “Group Art Therapy with Eighth-Grade Students Transitioning to High School” published in 2010. This study examined the effectiveness of group art therapy intervention within a school setting with the purpose to increase coping skills and decrease disruptive behaviors for 8th graders at risk for making a poor transition to high school. The study found that drastic change in adolescents, such as transitioning from middle school to high school, can negatively affect an adolescent’s psychological, social, or cognitive development. Adolescent’s stress and anxiety can be seen through new disruptive behaviors, becoming withdrawn from peers, and feeling a decreased sense of school belonging. The study examined six eighth-grade students in regular education classes at a private k-8 school who exhibited poor coping skills and/or disruptive behaviors in class. The study used qualitative and quantitative measures that evaluate changes in the participants’ coping strategies and behaviors. These were a survey called the Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences, a completed drawing, and parent interviews.

### 3. DATA

One major result of the use of art therapy was the way that creating complex designs helped to bring relief to a sense of overwhelmed feelings and more confidence in managing multiple tasks. In a study published in 2022, students were asked to create museums as an expression of art therapy. The museums could be drawn, built, etc., but the point was to create the art over several stages during which students could return to the museum piece and continue to redesign or revise it based upon their feelings. After taking part in the art therapy exercise, students were interviewed about their own feelings about the benefits of the program. One student stated, “The task gave me an opportunity to turn my frustrations into something more manageable. My feelings became less scary. The process of drawing relaxed me” (Moula 2022:95). The quote shows how students found that art therapy provided

an opportunity to take control and manage their school work and social life. Using art helped to provide the feeling that the student could tackle the different responsibilities that they had in a more relaxed pace without fear. In drawing out the difficult parts of their lives in museum pieces, they had an opportunity to reflect more deeply and make their complicated feelings more concrete. They had the choice of how to express themselves with whatever mediums or techniques they wanted and therefore they regained a sense of control over their emotions. Additionally, the transformation task was helpful because it gave an opportunity to modify artwork. The modifications allowed positive emotions to evolve and decreased negative emotional content. The practice of art was an ability for students to be able to grow, and capture their growth. When students felt frustrated, they were able to express it through art, and when they felt better, they had the opportunity to transform their art into something less fearful. They ended up with control and management of their feelings, something that was only possible through the art exercise.

Art therapy also provided a lot more space for self-expression since it formed a safe space for children to share their true experiences and feelings that they had never been comfortable previously sharing. For example, in a different study published in 2022, evidence showed how different forms of art therapy were able to make children open up in a way they had never before opened up. The assignments for the children in this study were to create art with any material in any way a child preferred. There was a high stress that any art created would not be judged and children had permission to make or express anything they wanted. In these assignments, children no longer had to be afraid of making something look too “silly” or “crazy,” and as a result, they could truly reflect on what they were feeling. A specific individual from this study, who was dealing with the loss of her aunt said, “I made it [the character] look like crazy, you know, like my auntie used to be before she passed away. I want to be like my auntie so this [character] was actually me” (Windarwati 2022:19). This shows how the child used her art to reconnect with her own feelings of sadness and grief for her aunt. The art was a way for the child to reflect more deeply upon the characteristics of her aunt and remember her in a less painful way. Additionally, ideas about loss and grief are extremely difficult for children to comprehend and uncomfortable to express, however the quote shows how this girl was able to convey her true ideas by using her art pieces as symbols.

Self-expression was also more easily available through art therapy because it didn’t need to be spoken aloud, and individuals found it particularly helpful because their emotions were too complicated for explanation. Specifically, in a study conducted in 2020, individuals spoke out about how art therapy was helpful because it was a place for expression that didn’t require any clarification. Some people who are struggling with mental health issues have trouble sharing their emotions or asking for help because they are unaware of how to speak it aloud. However, art made it so individuals could share what they wanted to share in an easier way. For example, an individual stated, “I didn’t know how to formulate my words and thoughts but with art, you have all the colors in the world to share your thoughts more and to express yourself. I am starting to observe that I really enjoy being able to express myself in a way I never thought I could” (Harpazi 2020:279). Because art has many different mediums and options, individuals found other ways that more reflected their emotions without having to deal with the discomfort of having to say them aloud. Art provided an opportunity for another form of communication because there was less of a barrier and individuals didn’t have to deal with simplifying their problems down to words.

Art therapy also helped students feel more empowered and more self-confident. The same study from 2022 found that another major result of art therapy was a feeling of empowerment and improved self-esteem and self-confidence. One specific activity was a project where students made dreamcatchers. In this activity, the children reflected on their hopes and dreams for the future and emphasized that in their art work. One child said, “My dream is to become a head teacher, that’s the wish I wrote down on my dreamcatcher and I hope this dream will come true one day [ . . . ] to help other children feel good, take good grades, have fun at school and be fair.” (Moula 2022:9). Not only did this activity make the kid realize their dream, but also made concrete ways the child could achieve their dream. Children are usually extremely stressed and overwhelmed with the future. However, this activity was a way to promote self-confidence by allowing them to reflect on their potential future in a risk-free zone and realize that it’s possible if they take the right steps. As these conversations are difficult to have when spoken aloud, the art provided the opportunity to open up and create goals. With said goals, children became aware that their hopes and dreams were within reach and were able to boost self-confidence.

Art therapy, specifically group therapy, also had a direct positive impact on serious mental health and anxiety issues for youths who were actively struggling because it provided a way to express their emotions that had been too complicated to grasp beforehand. In a 2020 study, youths reported that they felt high anxiety and depression. In a specific vignette, someone stated, “I just try to get through my depression and anxiety and try not to have a crying spell but it can come up whenever it wants to. I start thinking and those thoughts turn into bad thoughts, like self-harming thoughts, and I feel kind of suicidal...I can’t understand my feelings and I have trouble dealing with them because I don’t know what to do with them” (Harpazi 2020:278). This individual has reported high negative and mentally unhealthy feelings before coming to the art-based program. They were unaware of their own feelings and how to properly cope with them because it was overwhelming and extremely uncomfortable. However, coming to art therapy provided individuals with comfortable and safe environments that made expressing emotions less difficult. When the same individual reflected on their experience after going to art therapy, they stated “We did a lot of fun activities that helped us to learn about each other and ourselves. I guess it showed me not to bottle up and speak to what is on my mind. My mind is constantly racing and the group helped me realize how I was feeling on the inside” (278). This individual shows how art therapy was a way for the individual to clear their thoughts in an unconventional manner that was easier than speaking them aloud. Additionally, in being surrounded by people who were going through the same thing, the individual was able to make their complicated emotions less complicated.

Another major result of art therapy was that individuals found it easier to reduce their emotional burden because they felt as if they were in more control of not only the session. In a study published in 2020, participants stated that they felt like they were able to make choices during therapy and were in control of the session or the day. Art therapy wasn’t a class where they were forced to do what the teacher, or therapist asked, but instead they could choose what they wanted to work on. For example, an individual stated, “I choose. I come in, and she asks me ‘do you want to do something in art, choose some markers, watercolors’... or talk, sit with me and talk” (Harpazi 2020:9). Because these children had many options in art therapy, they didn’t feel like they were forced to do anything. Sometimes they would engage in conversations with the therapist, learn other techniques in art, but regardless they had the choice on how they could spend their sessions. Therefore, individuals could come into a session and be able to vent without any restrictions and feel lighter and in a better mood afterwards. They stated “It really gives you a good feeling... if I tell her something I don’t tell others, and it’s fun because it takes a weight off of you” (11). This shows how the freedom of art therapy allowed one to feel better about themselves and more ease to continue on with their day of week. They could relieve themselves of any feelings of pain or difficulty and also feel less lonely.

Art therapy also utilizes and gives the opportunity to make use of metaphors to result in more self-awareness in an individual’s emotions. In a study published in 2010, a group of students were assigned with a task to draw a representation of themselves during their transition to high school. In a specific task, participants identified multiple stressors that they experienced and were asked to find objects that represent each stressor. Specific participants created mobiles and tried to balance as many objects on it as possible. To them, it represented the struggle of balancing multiple stressful situations. Another example is a participant who had to deal with the struggle of the “pressure to be too girly” in the “game of life” and used a wooden game piece and a comb (Speir 2010:78). While these difficulties seem simple, it is extremely difficult to own up to them and say them out loud. These art projects have given students the idea of voicing their fears and stressors in metaphorical ways which is allowing them to open up, but not open up completely. Furthermore, art is also up for interpretation so the artist can know what their own art means, but does not need others to do the same.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND SYNTHESIS

Art therapy holds promising potential in school settings for alleviating the mental health issues that are so prevalent in youth these days. The studies examined in this study show that the decrease in stress is largely due to the way in which art therapy provides a context for self-expression and provides a safe space for participants to open up about their personal experiences and reflections. As discussed earlier, mental health issues are important problems that should be considered because it affects many high schoolers in this generation. Teenagers often have to deal with the fact that they have problems and may be too embarrassed or scared to confront their issues. These teenagers are

unwilling to express themselves and don't really have the opportunities to do so. For example, they do not have a place or people where they feel comfortable enough to share how they truly feel. Fortunately, art therapy is a beneficial and functioning solution that not only lets students decrease stress, but is an outlet for self-expression and connection with other peers.

Art therapy stands out as a particularly promising solution for student stress and anxiety because it is open-ended and does not have to be conducted in a certain way. Rather, it may be tailored to an individual student's needs. This strategy then works well with recent trend in education, which emphasizes the need to tailor curriculum to the individual needs of certain students. In the case of a student who struggles with being overwhelmed by too many assignments, an activity that involves the creation of mobiles forms an excellent way for them to reflect on their own management skills and thereby reduce any stressors that arise. For teenagers who are struggling with anxiety and depression, they often find that they have a lot of trouble speaking it aloud. Art therapy also helps such students because it encourages them to express their pain in a literal way instead of keeping it bottled up. This then forms a more comfortable means for sharing their feelings than with a therapist in a formal clinical environment.

One benefit of art therapy compared to a more typical clinical environment is the room that it provides for students to feel surrounded by peer who might be going through similar struggles. It is equally beneficial for students to be in a group environment of people who share similar challenges while also not necessarily having to verbalize them. Art therapy makes it so people can share as much or as little as they would like, but still allows for self-expression and reflection. The benefit of the sessions then is found in the way that it provides a setting for students to feel part of a group while at the same time having the agency to choose to verbalize or not verbalize what they are going through with others. For instance, one group session could be an open-ended project where individuals are assigned to draw many objects as representations of themselves. When sharing these projects, the artists can either explain their pieces, or just let other artists view them and interpret them on their own. In either instance, the individuals could relate to one another- with similar objects drawn or similar explanations. However, either way, the act of sharing one's work will leave individuals feeling less alone and more connected.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Art therapy stands out as a powerful and versatile tool for addressing mental health issues among adolescents. Even though it is not widely utilized in schools, there are countless benefits to art therapy. Art therapy provides a new option for a solution to mental health issues in teenagers because it is more unique and comfortable than traditional therapy or taking medication. It is an option that is extremely beneficial but not adopted enough, as it is a more obscure practice. However, its flexibility makes it a more inclusive and accessible tool for adolescents. Art therapy fosters empathy and a sense of community as well, which is also highly sought after for teenagers going through their high school and college years. Art therapy helps students feel more understood and helps them feel less isolated in social spaces. This paper shows how increased awareness and adoption of art therapy would help create more emotionally healthy teenagers. Including art therapy in school settings would be an investment into mental health, wellbeing, and success in youth.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Although art therapy has not found a place in most schools or in discussions of how to treat mental health issues, it should be a more widely adopted practice. As this paper has shown, it offers a unique and effective way for adolescents to improve their mental health. Art therapy programs can leave a lasting and beneficial impact on adolescents and give them coping skills that they can take with them for the rest of their lives.

Art therapy is most effective when it encourages group activities or individual work that takes place in group settings. This is because in a group students can create empathy with each other and emphasize the fact that each individual is not alone. Giving students individual projects to focus their attention on in such settings fosters an environment where they can choose or not to choose to share their work with others in the group. When students conduct art therapy with others in their same age demographic or with students who are facing the same mental health challenges, they will be more likely to share their feelings. Even if a student does not feel completely comfortable sharing

everything, art therapy in a group setting affords the opportunity for them to share as little or as much as they want. A student can make art that represents themselves in a way only they can understand, however, another student can interpret it in a different way that they themselves can understand. In this scenario, each student will leave feeling better and lighter, knowing that they can express themselves and knowing that they are not alone.

There should be more awareness about the countless benefits of art therapy. Because art therapy is flexible and can be more cost efficient than normal therapy group art therapy can be easily adopted into school systems and made accessible to all who might benefit from it. Although art therapy might at first seem like a large financial burden, most schools already have many of the resources needed in order to implement such programs. Schools would not have to devote considerable funds if they used some of the material resources already housed in art programs.

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