

# The Use of Expressive Arts to Build Connection

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## 4 Best Practices

Corey and Corey (1982) suggest particular attention be paid to establishing guidelines, active listening, genuine feedback and empathy, linking, and summarizing and endings in group-work. The authors found these recommendations relevant in reflecting upon best practices

### 1) Establishment of Guidelines

- Orient group to expectations, guidelines, values. In expressive art groups these need to be stated explicitly. Consider the following: statements of confidentiality, non-judgemental atmosphere, ability to pass on sharing, respect for individual needs, naming fears, permission for photos.

### 2) Observation and Active Listening

- Authentic and meaningful discussion happens between the facilitator and participants, and between participants while all are engaged in art activities.
- Flexibility—important to be flexible and involve participants on decisions about activities (so need to be prepared with alternative activities).
- Important to intervene in behavior that may offend others.
- In active listening it's important to remember to engage in direct eye contact, nodding, encouraging of others' thoughts and process, mirroring of body postures and language.

### 3) Genuine Feedback and Empathy

- Dialogical relationship (group facilitator and participants open to learning from each other).
- Appropriate use of self-disclosure (establishes commonality between group facilitator and participants).
- Reflecting empathy to others that communicates back to the person key words and ideas they used to express their perspective "It sounds like" "Let me see if I understand this".

### 4) Linking

- Importance of "surfacing" thoughts and feelings that are stimulated through expressive arts activities, and how these activities stimulate the making of personal connections to one's lived stories of resilience, capacity, and connectedness.
- Importance of facilitation and how self-reflection/shared discussion of personal reflections in group may enhance personal connection and social acceptance amongst group members.
- Managing presenting cathartic emotion in group.

### 5) Sequence of Activities, Summarizing and Endings in Group-work

- Important to consider how activities are sequenced (based on complexity of art activity or amount of expected self-disclosure)
- Summarizing occurs when leaders help members become aware of what has occurred and how the group and how its members have been impacted by the activity.

## 5 Conclusion

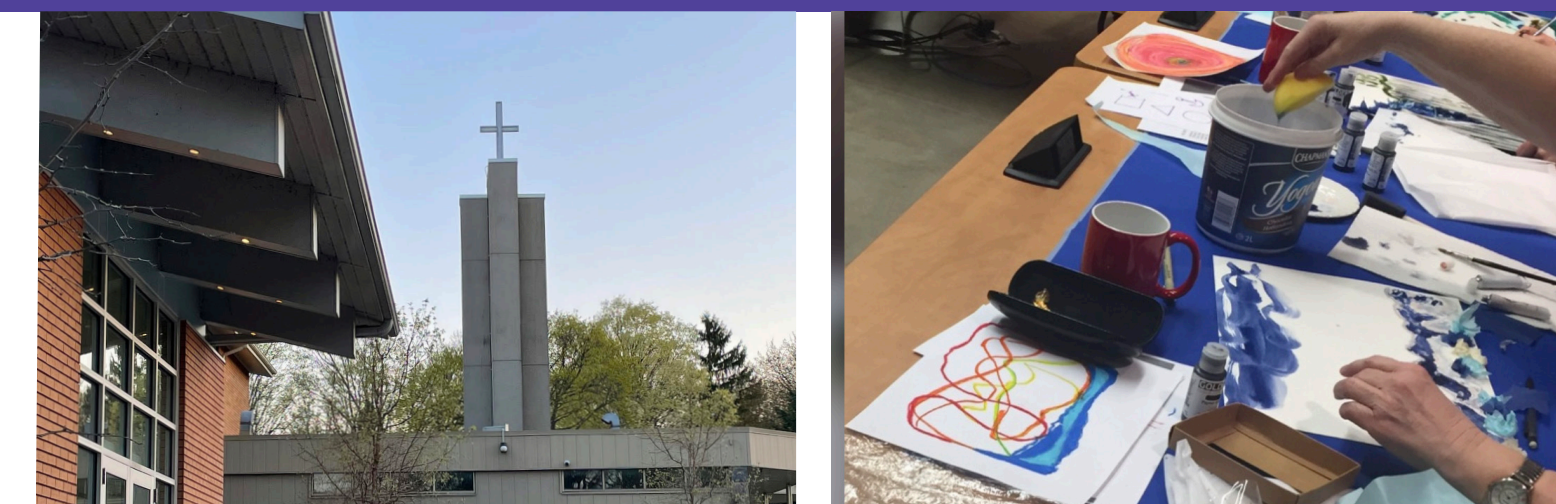
For the authors, incorporating theatre, art-making and poetry into group-practice experiences led to the discovery of how using art and poetry can help transcend client/client, and worker/client divides, as each person finds common humanity through creating and interacting with these offered activities. The authors' hope is that those who attend this poster presentation will learn more about integrating the expressive arts in community-based group work practice and will be stimulated to consider the applicability of these interventions to their own communities.

### 6. References

Corey, G., & Corey, M. (1982). *Groups: Process and Practice* (2nd ed.). Brooks/Cole Pub. Co.  
Heinonen, T., Halonen, D. & Krahn, E. (2019). *Expressive Arts for Social Work and Social Change*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.  
My Sisters' Place website.

## 1 Introduction

There has been growing interest in the use of the expressive arts in social work, leading both to theory and practice development (Heinonen, Halonen & Krahn, 2019). This poster presentation will convey the facilitated group work practice experiences of two social workers who provided expressive arts experiences in their local community. Dr. Olivier will discuss his work at a local community-based women's agency, where he has conducted several art-based groups with vulnerable women using theatre, painting/drawing. Dr. Lewis will discuss facilitation of single-session arts-based intervention with women's spiritual Church-based groups, inviting participants to a greater understanding of themselves through art-making and poetry. The therapeutic outcomes of these theatrical, drawing/painting and poetry opportunities to foster and build connection will be tied to group work theory and narrated best practices.



### Dr. Lewis and Women's Spiritual Church-Based Groups

These half-day expressive art making workshops, enhanced by the use of poetry, were focused on promoting participant's reflection on, and acceptance of the twists and turns of one's life story. Using multiple artistic mediums (paint, tissue paper, pastels, markers) participants created a mixed media Collage that represented "Their Life's River."

Participants considered their life unfolding from childhood to their present moment. They:

- considered life's "twists and turns" and perhaps abrupt endings
- thought about the banks that support their river's flow
- assessed the swiftness (dangerousness and excitement) of the current at certain life junctures
- wondered about the rocks and wildlife that make the river their home
- honoured and reflected upon the times in life when their river moved more slowly
- Reflected upon when they have been able to be on the shore – watching their river's beauty and grace

## 3 Benefits and Outcomes

As evident in observation and program evaluations:

### Expressions Group (Dr. Olivier)

Participants benefit from:

- Having fun and socializing
- Expressing creativity
- Connecting and community
- Reducing isolation
- Mitigating symptoms of depression
- Venting and expressing feelings
- 'Rehearsing' real life struggles and challenges

Benefits from participating in the community performances:

- Increasing one's sense of compassion/empathy toward those struggling with homelessness, mental health, and addiction issues
- "Self-motivating" to do something about social justice issues (such as homelessness, access to mental health services)
- Engaging in social activism (raising public awareness in an entertaining way)
- Sharing and reflecting upon one's own experiences (revisiting personal experiences like those in the performances)
- Gaining a wider perspective and insight through sharing
- Increasing self-confidence (successfully performing acting role)
- Acquiring feelings of belonging (with the other group members)
- Feeling supported by peers
- Having fun, laughter

### Single Session Workshops (Dr. Olivier)

Participants in the single session workshops reported:

- Quiet and relaxing experience
- Positive thoughts, nice change of pace, feel happy
- People sharing ideas, the kindness and caring of the people involved
- I can draw if I put my mind to it
- Being able to express ourselves through art, illustrating my resilience through drawing
- I was able to share what was distressing me—I felt "safe" to do that in this group
- I have pent up anger about Christmas that I did not realize
- Value of using these tools for myself on a regular basis

### Women's Spiritual Church-Based Groups (Dr. Lewis)

Participants of these single session workshops reported:

- Learning new things about themselves and others
- Enjoying the art activity
- Becoming more aware of how creative activities may help to cope with stressors
- Activities reduced feelings of stress and induced feelings of calm
- Enjoyed sharing life experiences with others
- Becoming more aware of my responses to poetry and others

### Outcomes (Themes Across Programming): Connections

The small group programming supports the ability of art to bridge many critical divides in social work including levels of practice, practitioner and service user disconnect, cognition and emotions, and demographic diversities. Many kinds of connection are fostered through groups that have an expressive arts focus including connection to self (one's emotions, creativity, dreams, hopes, personal strengths, and playfulness); and connection to others (witness others' emotions, commonalities, shared humanity, social activism).

### Insight and affirmation of strengths

Group participants can tap into their creativity in exploring their lived experiences through various expressive art activities. The activities assist group participants surface their thoughts and feelings related to such issues as resilience, social support, hopes and goals, and trauma and loss. Facilitated reflection and discussion results in greater self-awareness and insight. Participating in art activities leads to an affirmation of strengths such as greater recognition of creativity and resilience.

### Well-being

Art-making in and of itself is enjoyable and fosters a sense of well-being (benefits not to be underestimated). In addition, the group experience mitigates feelings of isolation, loneliness, and depression.

## 2 Overview of Organizational Setting and Expressive Arts Programs and Activities

### Dr. Olivier and My Sisters' Place (a community-based women's agency)

- My Sisters' Place is a safe, welcoming, and inclusive centre that supports women and girls through drop-in and wrap-around services.
- Many experience multiple vulnerabilities including gender-based violence, trauma, chronic mental health and physical health challenges, homelessness or housing instability, substance use, and extreme poverty.

Dr. Olivier has facilitated single session workshops on the topics of resilience and processing Christmas/holiday season memories.

Dr. Olivier facilitates a weekly "Expressions Group".

### Expressions Group

The Expressions Group is a weekly, one-hour, drop-in program that is open to all women. The group provides opportunity for self-expression and exploration through drama and the creative arts in a supportive and fun environment. An additional goal is to provide education and contribute to social change through public performances on such topics as homelessness and mental health. Importantly, the group is a place to socialize with other women and to play and have fun. Since October 2020 the group has been meeting virtually through Zoom.

