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A Creative Approach to Enhancing Nurses' Mental Health: Art Therapy

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Abstract

The nursing profession carries significant mental health risks due to its high levels of stress and intense emotional demands. Factors such as the pandemic and staff shortages have increased nurses' workloads, leading to a rise in mental health issues such as burnout, anxiety, and depression. These mental health challenges negatively affect both individual well-being and the quality of patient care. In addition to traditional interventions, art therapy has emerged as a promising method to support nurses' psychological well-being. By utilizing creative processes such as painting, music, dance, and drama, art therapy helps individuals express their emotions, reduce stress, and enhance psychological resilience. Research shows that art therapy alleviates nurses' emotional burden, fosters self-awareness, and promotes psychological healing. This review discusses the mental health issues faced by nurses, the impacts of these issues, and the positive effects of art therapy on nurses' mental health based on scientific findings.

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1. Introduction

Nursing is considered as one of the professional groups with high risk in terms of psychological problems as it involves high levels of stress and frequent exposure to emotionally challenging situations (Rafiei et al., 2024). In addition to the difficulties that are inherent in the nursing profession, emergencies such as pandemics and lack of staff increase nurses' workloads and triggers the emergence of mental health problems (Berlin et al., 2023, Squires et al., 2025).

The prevalence of mental health problems among nurses is steadily increasing. According to an international study conducted across 35 countries, the rate of anxiety and depression among nurses ranges from 23% to 61%, while the rates of workplace burnout (fatigue), anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed are reported to be 57%, 44%, and 41%, respectively (Squires et al., 2025). Another study involving more than 7,000 nurses found that 56% experienced emotional burnout, and 64% reported very high levels of stress (Berlin et al., 2023). The widespread occurrence of mental health problems among nurses adversely affects their professional functioning (Rafiei et al., 2024). Therefore, the early diagnosis and intervention of psychological problems in nurses are significant for decreasing negative effects and developing effective intervention strategies (Rafiei et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024).

In recent years, in addition to traditional psychological interventions that aim to support nurses' mental health, alternative and complementary therapeutic methods have gained attention. In this context, art therapy has emerged as a promising approach to help nurses cope with occupational stress and emotional

challenges. Art therapy is a creative form of therapy which enables individuals to express their feelings and opinions through artistic processes. This type of therapy is guided by trained therapists (American Art Therapy Association, 2023). This method, which involves different artistic disciplines such as painting, music, dance, drama, and poetry, has the potential to reduce nurses' stress levels, enhance their emotional resilience, and support their psychological well-being (Malchiodi, 2013). The potential of art therapy to reduce anxiety, depression, and stress levels among nurses and to improve their mental health has recently been emphasized in growing number of studies (Ağaç et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024).

The aim of this review article is to evaluate the use of art therapy in solving mental health problems among nurses in light of scientific data.

2. Mental Health Problems Among Nurses and Their Impacts

Mental health of nurses has critical importance for the sustainability of global health systems and the quality of patient care. Recent studies have revealed that nurses bear a significant mental health burden, which negatively affects both their professional and personal lives (Berlin et al., 2023; Squires et al., 2025). The main factors that form the basis of nurses' mental health problems are shortage of personnel, high patient loads, lack of leadership, excessive administrative duties, workplace pressure, emotional burnout, irregular shift work, insufficient payment, and exposure to violence (Berlin et al., 2023; Rafiei et al., 2024). Common mental health problems among nurses include sleep disorders, stress, depression,

anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, cognitive issues, compassion fatigue, and feelings of being overwhelmed (Berlin et al., 2023; Squires et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2024; Zhang & Dator, 2025). These mental health problems are closely related to various modifiable risk factors such as nurses' behavioral patterns, their ways of life, the level of social support they receive, the level of workplace bullying and violence, shift work patterns, workload, and job resources (Rafiei et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024; Zhang & Dator, 2025).

The mental health problems experienced by nurses significantly affect their job performance, the quality of patient care, and their personal lives (Berlin et al., 2023). Mental health issues such as lack of concentration, anxiety, fatigue, and feelings of being overwhelmed increase the possibility of nurses to make mistakes (Squires et al., 2025). In particular, psychological disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression negatively impact nurses' professional performance and lead to patient safety issues (Labrague et al., 2021; von Vogelsang et al., 2021). To cope with these adverse effects, individual and institutional interventions that support nurses' mental health are needed.

3. Interventions Supporting Nurses' Mental Health

Nurses try to deal with mental health problems on their own (Berlin et al., 2023; Reed et al., 2020). Nurses' individual coping strategies include exercises, spiritual practices, strengthening social support systems (Squires et al., 2025), lifestyle changes such

as changes in diet and physical activity (Yang et al., 2024). For these individual coping strategies to be effective, it is essential for healthcare institutions to strengthen institutional support mechanisms. It is important to extend practices such as flexible working hours, counseling services, support groups, training programs, and appropriate nurse-patient ratios (Berlin et al., 2023; Labrague et al., 2021).

In addition, it is emphasized that awareness studies should be conducted to reduce mental health stigma, human-centered institutional policies should be developed, national-level monitoring systems should be established, and programs promoting peer support should be encouraged (von Vogelsang et al., 2021). It is suggested that when all these strategies are implemented, nurses' psychological well-being will increase, which will, in turn, have positive effects on the quality and safety of patient care (Squires et al., 2025).

The literature involves numerous systematic reviews that examined interventions to prevent burnout and enhance psychosocial well-being among healthcare workers (Cohen et al., 2023; Townsley et al., 2023). These interventions consist of a variety of strategies at both the individual and organizational levels such as educational programs, retreat-based practices, mindfulness-based stress reduction, cognitive training, workload adjustments, the enhancement of teamwork, and communication skills training (Cohen et al., 2023; Townsley et al., 2023). Art-based interventions offer nurses an experience that allows them to externalize their intense emotional burden while also enhancing self-awareness, self-compassion, and psychological resilience (Tjansik et al., 2023). In the literature, there is a growing body of

evidence indicating that art therapy-based group interventions improve nurses' ability to cope with occupational stress and help them develop new perspectives (Huet & Holtum, 2016). Moreover, art therapy has emerged as an effective method that supports emotional and psychological healing and enables nurses to cope with stress, learn emotion regulation method, and enhance personal resilience (Phillips & Becker, 2019). Therefore, the inclusion of art therapy approaches in mental health interventions for nurses and the expansion of their areas of application have become a significant need.

4. Definition and Benefits of Art Therapy

The American Art Therapy Association defines art therapy as "a holistic mental health profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative processes, applied psychological theory, and the psychotherapeutic relationship" (American Art Therapy Association, 2023). Art therapy is regarded not only as a means of communication but also as a psychotherapeutic approach that presents a visual language to individuals through which they can express complex emotions, thoughts, and experiences which they cannot express verbally (Çelikbaş, 2019). It is not necessary for an individual to be an artist or possess special skills to express themselves through art; the most important element is showing an open attitude toward creativity in everyday life (Vaartio-Rajalin et al., 2021).

Three general approaches are adopted in art therapy (Abbing et al., 2018). According to the

first approach, art-making is used as an enjoyable and relaxing activity that creates a trance-like mental state. This leads to relaxation and contributes to stress regulation by lowering cortisol levels (Kaimal et al., 2016). The second approach perceives art as a means for expressing unconscious cognitive patterns and gaining insight; this process makes the unconscious visible and enables individuals to explore their emotions and cognitions. In this way, cognitive regulation is facilitated (Abbing et al., 2018). In the third approach, art is used as a process for the conscious expression of difficult emotions and traumatic memories. It supports exposure, remembering, and emotional distancing by providing a safe space. In this way, it contributes to better emotional regulation (Abbing et al., 2018). All of these approaches support the recognition and safe expression of challenging or suppressed emotions, offer individuals a secure environment where they can express themselves without judgment, and foster self-awareness and the development of psychological resilience (Van Lith & Spooner, 2018).

Art therapy is an effective psychotherapeutic method that enables individuals to express their inner worlds and contributes to emotional healing processes. When verbal communication is limited or insufficient, it allows individuals to express their emotions and thoughts through visual means. Art therapy offers several prominent benefits (Liebmann, 2004; Malchiodi, 2013):

- It offers individuals the opportunity for free expression without the pressure of artistic accuracy and facilitates the reactivation of artistic activities experienced during childhood.
- It provides an alternative communication channel for individuals who have difficulty with verbal expression and has the potential to simplify intense verbal account.
- It creates a safe space where individuals can express themselves without judgment and fosters self-awareness and the development of psychological resilience.
- Visual expression enables more direct and effective reflection of emotions and contributes to the exploration of the individual's inner world.
- The artworks that are produced serve as concrete and lasting records of the therapeutic process and become reflective communication tools between the client and the therapist.
- The process of creating art activates senses (touch, sight, etc.) and increases emotional and physical participation.
- It encourages the re-emergence of playfulness and creativity in adults and supports psychological relaxation.
- In group settings, it encourages equal participation and facilitates the active involvement of individuals with low motivation.
- Art provides catharsis and thus enables emotional release, reduces stress levels, and enhances overall well-being.
- In some cases, it can assist in the diagnostic process and be used in the assessment of certain psychological disorders.

5. Applications of Art Therapy

Art therapies are among the effective components of complementary medicine. These methods which include various creative disciplines such as drama/theatre, dance/movement, creative writing (poetry, storytelling, etc.), music, and visual arts (painting, sculpture, photography, etc.), are combined with psychotherapeutic principles to support individuals' physical, emotional, cognitive, and social well-being (Smriti et al., 2022). Art therapy can help individuals explore past and present experiences, review their lives, adapt to age-related changes, and cope with emotional crises (Vaartio-Rajalin et al., 2021).

Art therapy is widely applied both individually and in groups in various settings including hospitals, mental health centers, rehabilitation units, schools, and community centers (Van Lith & Ettenberger, 2023). It is emphasized that in all these settings, art therapy should be conducted under the guidance of a therapist and sufficient time must be spent for the verbal processing of emotions arising from the artistic experience (Vaartio-Rajalin et al., 2021).

Art therapy, which is an effective tool for processing various emotional difficulties, resolving conflicts, gaining insight, and enhancing psychological well-being (American Art Therapy Association, 2023),

provides strong support particularly for expressing experiences that are difficult to express verbally, such as physical or sexual abuse, grief, and trauma (Malchiodi, 2013). Studies have shown that art therapies have been successfully applied to healthy adults (Kaimal et al., 2016), individuals diagnosed with cancer (Jiang et al., 2020), anxiety and depression (Newland & Bettencourt, 2020), neurocognitive disorders (Liu et al., 2023), and mental disorders (Hu et al., 2021), as well as children and adolescents (Zhang et al., 2024b). Moreover, integrating art therapy with complementary methods such as mindfulness, meditation, yoga, and energy healing leads to a stronger mind-body connection in individuals and offers a holistic healing process (Newland & Bettencourt, 2020).

6. The Effects of Art Therapy on Nurses' Mental Health

Art therapies encourage participants to identify the physical, psychological, and emotional effects of workplace trauma. Specifically designed workshops aim to help individuals make sense of traumatic experiences, strengthen social support systems, and develop coping mechanisms that reduce isolation (Reed et al., 2020).

The use of art therapy in reducing mental health problems of nurses is getting more widespread. It has been reported that painting therapy facilitates the expression of emotions in a safe environment, thereby reducing stress, alleviating anxiety, and improving nurses' mental health (Kai et al., 2020). It has been found that music therapy is effective in coping with burnout, anxiety, and depressive

moods, improving psychological states, and enhancing overall physical and mental health (Zamanifar et al., 2020). It is stated that dance/movement therapy increases nurses' levels of compassion satisfaction and reduces levels of burnout and compassion fatigue (Yilmazer et al., 2020). It has also been reported that dance/movement therapy positively influences nurses' physical functioning, emotional integrity, and post-traumatic stress levels, thereby reducing psychological distress, burnout, and intentions to leave the profession (Calamassi et al., 2022).

Studies which have combined many forms of art therapy demonstrated benefits such as reducing depression and anxiety and developing positive coping styles among nurses (Zhang et al., 2024a). Furthermore, it is emphasized that art therapy has the potential to alleviate professional burnout (Moss et al., 2022), resilience (Torres et al., 2023), compassion fatigue (Ağaç et al., 2024), stress levels (Zhang et al., 2024a), and anxiety levels (Moss et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024a). Research has also indicated that art therapy has significant positive effects on traumatic stress symptoms, emotional states (Moss et al., 2022), positive coping strategies, and psychological well-being among nurses (Zhang et al., 2024a). All of these art therapy interventions contribute to both individual and organizational well-being by reducing occupational fatigue and enhancing communication and relationships.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The nursing profession involves severe mental health risks due to high levels of stress, emotional burden, and workplace demands. This has become a major issue which requires solutions at both the individual and systemic levels. Anxiety, depression, and burnout are prevalent among nurses, adversely affecting their professional performance and the quality of patient care. Therefore, art therapy has emerged as an effective intervention method that supports nurses' emotional well-being, reduces stress and burnout levels, enhances psychological resilience, and fosters insight through non-verbal expression. In this context, integrating art therapy into mental health programs for nurses, either individually or in group-based formats, may support the development of emotional regulation skills and contribute to creating a healthier and more sustainable work environment. Current findings indicate that art therapy is a promising approach for improving nurses' psychosocial well-being. Therefore, it is recommended that further empirical studies should be conducted to evaluate the long-term effects of art therapy, standardize intervention models, and extend its implementation in healthcare institutions.

Ethical Statement

Ethics committee approval was deemed unnecessary for this study, as open access sources were utilized;

however, the study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles.

Financial Support for the Study

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Presentation Information

The findings of this study have not been presented at any conference or journal.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this study.

Author Contributions

The contributions of the authors are as follows: Mehtap Ağaç contributed to literature search and editing the report. Sultan Ayaz Alkaya conducted the supervision and final revision of the manuscript.

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