



## **A Psychosocial Touch on Elderly Individuals: Art Therapy**

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### **Abstract**

Aging is a natural and inevitable process of change experienced by every living being. Old age can be defined as the irreversible loss of biological and mental functions as a result of the physical and mental decline of the individual, and the decrease in the body's potential to balance between internal and external factors. Individuals go through a process of physical, mental and social change while aging, and they may encounter many problems such as chronic illnesses, discrimination, abuse, neglect, social isolation, loneliness, and poverty. It is very important for individuals to live their lives biopsychosocially healthy, active, successful and happy and to cope with the problems they experience in the aging process. Art therapy, which includes the development of coping and problem-solving skills, is a psychosocial intervention used in older individuals. Different types of art therapy can be used in many problems elderly individuals face such as depression, dementia, loneliness and hopelessness. It is stated that art therapy enables the elderly to relax physically, supports autonomy, increases socialization and sharing, reduces functional impairment and improves self-confidence. In addition, art therapy is described as an extremely effective method in conditions such as dementia, depression and loneliness, which are common in elderly individuals. Art therapy, which is included in the nursing intervention classification, can also be used by nurses to increase the quality of care.

## 1. Introduction

Aging is a natural and inevitable process of change experienced by every living being. Change begins in the womb and continues until death. While physiological development progresses continuously in the first 20 years, it shows stagnation and then regression at later ages. The period in which regression and changes are experienced most rapidly is the old age period (Kitiş, 2019). Aging is defined as the irreversible loss of biological and mental functions as a result of the physical and mental regression of the individual, and the decrease in the body's potential to find a balance between internal and external factors (Akkaş, 2020). Although there are different approaches and classifications regarding aging, individuals aged 65 and over are considered to be elderly according to the mostly adopted criteria (Kalınkara, 2021).

From the 20th century onwards, technological progress has affected many areas as well as health, and eventually, life expectancy and the number of elderly individuals have increased (Fahs, 2011). The adoption of preventive health services, the fight against infectious diseases, the development of vaccines, and the discovery of new medical diagnostic tools and drugs have allowed to extend the expected life expectancy (Göçer, 2021; Kalınkara, 2021). This increase in the elderly population has caused the problems experienced by elderly individuals in the world and in Turkey to become more visible (Çelebi & Yüksel, 2014). Discrimination, abuse, neglect, social isolation, loneliness and poverty are among the problems experienced by the elderly (World Health Organization, 2017). On the other hand, physical changes, chronic diseases and mental problems that

emerge with aging cause a decrease in the quality of life of individuals (Karatay, 2021). It is also stated that situations such as chronic diseases and loss of relatives increase death anxiety in elderly individuals (Karahan & Hamarta, 2019). Thus, it is very important for individuals to live their lives biopsychosocially healthy, active, successful and happy and to cope with the problems they experience (World Health Organization, 2017).

The Final Declaration of the 1st Council on Aging, published by the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services in 2019, emphasized that actions to prevent biopsychosocial conditions that prevent healthy living in old age should be determined (Sağlık Bakanlığı, 2019). In line with this emphasis, interventions involving problem solving and the development of coping skills for the difficulties experienced by elderly individuals have gained importance in recent years. Psychoanalytic therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, family therapy, life review therapy, reminiscence therapy, and art therapy are among the intervention methods used in elderly individuals (Çelebi & Yüksel, 2014).

## 2. Art Therapy

The discovery of art as a therapy method dates back to ancient times and across a wide variety of cultures. Wall paintings in the cave period, handicrafts of Turks, rug patterns, African dances, Christian choirs, and Buddhist sand mandalas can be given as examples of the use of art for healing purposes (Güner & Genç, 2021). However, the use of art as therapy was officially adopted in the 1940s, and it was professionalized in the 1960s. The term art therapy

was first used by Adrian Hill in 1942. Hill joined the war after graduating from art school and was subsequently treated for tuberculosis in the hospital. During his stay in the hospital, he started to draw pictures of objects far from his bed and realized that this work healed him faster. Since then, art therapy has started to be seen as an integral part of health care (Güner & Genç, 2019).

Art therapy is defined as the use of various art materials to reach a diagnosis and then to provide treatment in order to cause a positive development in individuals, resolve conflicts, reduce physical and mental problems, solve problems, and help cope with stress (Düzgün & Demir, 2020). The American Art Therapy Association, on the other hand, defines art therapy as a mental health field that organizes art through the discovery of creative processes and by using art with the help of a practitioner so that the individual can express his/her feelings, resolve conflicts, manage his or her life and addictions, gain an insight into matters, and develop social and interpersonal skills (American Art Therapy Association, 2014).

The aim in art therapy is not to "make art", but to express feelings, thoughts, desires and needs by using art as a tool. Many fields of art such as painting, sculpture, drama, dance, music and story can be used. Various paints, fabrics, clay, waste materials, fabric, ribbon, old magazines, natural materials such as stones and leaves, and many materials such as dried legumes can be used in art therapy. The material to be used is selected in accordance with the purpose of the therapist and the needs and characteristics of the client (Güner & Genç, 2019). Art therapy can be applied

individually as well as in group work (Çıtakbaş & Üçok, 2019).

Many problems such as personality disorders, addiction, exposure to violence, physical diseases, and trauma can be addressed with art therapy. In addition, it can be applied to different groups involving children, young people, adults, and elderly individuals. Art therapy, which provides information to therapists about the physical and mental functioning of elderly individuals with reduced functionality, can be very effective in neurological disorders such as Alzheimer's and dementia (Güner & Genç, 2019).

### 3. Use of Art Therapy in Elderly Individuals

Individuals go through a process of physical, mental and social change while aging. In this process, the concept of healthy aging emerges as a subject that needs to be addressed. The World Health Organization has declared that the majority of the elderly can feel completely healthy if their diseases can be managed in a positive way (World Health Organization, 2017). At this point, psychosocial interventions that can enable individuals to age in a healthy manner and feel healthy gain importance. Art therapy, which is a supportive method suitable for the biopsychosocial approach, is one of the interventions that can be used in the aging process and in elderly individuals.

Many studies have so far investigated the effects of different types of art therapy on the health of elderly individuals (Aydm & Kutlu, 2021; Ho et al., 2020; Masika et al., 2021). Studies have revealed that art therapy provides physical relaxation for elderly individuals, supports autonomy, increases socialization and sharing (Dunphy et al., 2019),

reduces functional impairment (Masika et al., 2021), and improves self-confidence (Ching-Teng et al., 2019). In one study conducted with the mixed method, the elderly individuals who received visual art therapy reported that the therapy strengthened their memory, improved their sleep patterns, and enabled them to socialize. They also stated that the process empowered them and developed their self-efficacy, which is necessary for them to discover their talents (Masika et al., 2021). Based on these findings, it can be said that art therapy is a very useful type of intervention for elderly individuals. However, there are some points to be considered while working with elderly individuals in art therapy. Being ready for slow learning speeds and showing patience during therapy, encouraging the elderly to actively participate in art therapy practice, and using soft music to create a relaxing atmosphere are some of these points (Masika et al., 2021).

#### **4. Common Problems Experienced by Elderly Individuals and Art Therapy**

Individuals encounter many problems in the aging process. Depression is one of the common problems among elderly individuals, which can be triggered by other negative chronic consequences at later ages. It is an issue that should definitely be addressed, as it may cause worsening of the existing health conditions of the elderly, suicidal thoughts, and attempts to harm oneself (World Health Organization, 2017). Many studies have shown that art therapy reduces the symptoms of depression in elderly individuals (Ching-Teng et al., 2019; Ciasca et al., 2018; Johannsen, 2019; Lam, 2015). The meta-analysis conducted by Jenabi et al. (2022) revealed that art therapy can be considered as an effective intervention to reduce depression symptoms in elderly individuals. Another

study on this subject presents important findings showing that art therapy helps elderly individuals to relax, increase their sense of confidence and strengthen their ability to manage their emotions, as well as reducing depression and anxiety symptoms in elderly individuals (Lam, 2015).

Another common problem older people suffer from is dementia (World Health Organization, 2021). The limited treatment options in dementia and their limited efficacy have increased the importance of non-pharmacological interventions. It is stated that art therapy, which is a non-pharmacological method, can be beneficial in dementia (Chancellor et al., 2014). Bulduk et al. (2017) reported that when art therapy is implemented regularly in small groups with elderly individuals with dementia, it improves socialization and increases their quality of life.

Yet another problem that elderly individuals commonly experience is loneliness (Gardiner et al., 2018). Most of the time, hopelessness accompanies loneliness in elderly individuals (Hernandez, 2021). Art therapy, which is a supportive method suitable for the biopsychosocial approach, is an important intervention that facilitates coping with feelings of loneliness and hopelessness in elderly individuals (Mann et al., 2017). In fact, in their study with elderly individuals living alone, Aydın and Kutlu (2021) reported that the levels of loneliness and hopelessness of individuals who were applied group art therapy once a week for 6 weeks decreased statistically significantly compared to the control group.

## 5. Art Therapy as a Nursing Approach

Art therapy, which is so effective for elderly individuals, is considered as a nursing intervention and is included in the nursing intervention classification (NIC). Art therapy is an application that covers the skills and job description of nurses and is an important area that increases the quality of nursing care (Eren, 2015). Today, nurses work with professionals from the field of art in a multidisciplinary manner and include creative art therapy activities in their care (Karaca & Eren 2014).

## 6. Conclusion

Elderly individuals may encounter many problems during the aging process. Art therapy, which is a non-pharmacological method, can be used to cope with these problems and to age in a healthy way. Art therapy improves sleep quality in elderly individuals, provides physical relaxation and autonomy, helps cope with feelings such as loneliness and hopelessness, supports self-confidence, and reduces depressive symptoms. In addition, it strengthens memory and provides socialization. Some points should be considered while working with elderly individuals in art therapy. The elderly may be slow in learning, and thus, therapists should show patience during therapy. Encouraging the elderly to participate actively in art therapy and using soft music to create a relaxing atmosphere are other points to consider. Art therapy, which is included in the classification of nursing interventions, can also be used by nurses to increase the quality of care provided.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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