

## Investigation of Art Therapy Applications in Geriatric Rehabilitation from the Perspective of Occupational Therapy\*

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### Abstract

**Aim:** This review aims to systematically examine art therapy practices applied within the scope of occupational therapy for geriatric individuals.

**Method:** A literature search was conducted using the keywords “art therapy” OR “music therapy” OR “dance therapy”, “older adults” OR “geriatric individuals”, and “occupational therapy” OR “ergotherapy”. The Boolean search method was employed in the PubMed and OTseeker databases.

**Results:** Seven articles published between 2017 and 2024 that met the inclusion criteria were identified. Among them, four were research articles (57%), two were randomized controlled trials (29%), and one was a descriptive study (14%). The characteristics and findings of these studies were organized under three thematic categories: dance therapy practices in geriatric rehabilitation, art and craft practices in geriatric rehabilitation, and other practices in geriatric rehabilitation.

**Conclusion:** The reviewed interventions were found to be effective in enhancing cognitive functioning, reducing symptoms of depression, and improving overall quality of life in geriatric populations. Furthermore, the importance of engaging older individuals in personalized, meaningful, and purposeful occupations was emphasized as a means to alleviate behavioral symptoms, reduce caregiver burden, and minimize caregiving time.

**Keywords:** Occupational therapy, art therapy, geriatric individuals.

### Geriatrik Bireylerde Sanat Terapi Uygulamalarının Ergoterapi Perspektifiyle İncelenmesi

#### Öz

**Amaç:** Bu derlemenin amacı geriatrik bireylerde ergoterapi alanında yapılmış olan sanat terapisi uygulamaların sistematik olarak incelenmesidir.

**Yöntem:** "Art therapy veya music therapy veya dance therapy", "older people veya geriatric individuals", "occupational therapy veya ergotherapy" anahtar kelimeleri kullanılarak literatür taraması yapılmıştır. Bu kapsamda PubMed ve OTSeeker veri tabanlarında Boolean arama yöntemiyle tarama yapılmıştır.

**Bulgular:** 2017-2024 yılları arasında yayımlanmış ve araştırma kriterlerini sağlayan yedi yayın tespit edilmiştir. Bunlardan dört tanesi araştırma makalesi (%57), ikisi randomize kontrollü çalışma (%29) ve diğeri de tanımlayıcı (%14) araştırma tarzında makaleleridir. Çalışmaların betimleyici özellikleri ve sonuçları “geriatrik rehabilitasyonda dans terapi uygulamaları, geriatrik rehabilitasyonda sanat ve zanaat uygulamaları ve geriatrik rehabilitasyonda diğer uygulamalar” olmak üzere üç alt başlıkta ele alınmıştır.

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**Sonuç:** Müdahalelerin bilişsel işlevleri iyileştirmede, ilgili popülasyonda depresyonu azaltmada ve danışanların yaşam kalitesini artırmada etkili olduğu bulunmuştur. Ayrıca bireylerin kişiye özel, anlamlı ve amaçlı okupasyonlara katılımının ilgili popülasyonda davranışsal semptomların yanı sıra bakım veren yükünü ve bakım için harcanan zamanı azaltabileceği vurgulanmıştır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Ergoterapi, sanat terapisi, geriatrik bireyler.

## Introduction

Geriatrics is a branch of science that focuses on health issues, diseases, social and functional life, quality of life, preventive healthcare practices, and healthy aging in individuals aged 65 and above<sup>1,2</sup>. Aging is characterized by a progressive decline involving morphological, physiological, and pathological changes that negatively impact both physical and mental capacities, leading to various diseases and deficiencies. According to the World Health Organization, as of 1998, the population aged 65 and over was 390 million, and it is projected to reach 800 million by 2025, comprising 10% of the global population<sup>3,4</sup>.

Art and the creative process, which have existed since the dawn of human history, are inherently empowering, cathartic, and healing. Thus, the use of art as a therapeutic method dates back to prehistoric times and spans many cultures. Although art therapy is multidisciplinary, it is fundamentally a type of psychotherapy that integrates visual arts into the therapeutic process. While the concept of art therapy began gaining traction in the late 1900s, a growing number of psychologists, psychiatrists, and other healthcare professionals now recognize its potential in psychiatric treatment<sup>5,6</sup>. In illnesses where physical resilience is low, it has been acknowledged that not only the body but also mental and emotional well-being is affected—underlining the importance of psychological healing. In this context, the book *Art Versus Illness* by Adrian was published in 1945<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, art therapy has since been adopted within the framework of the National Health Service<sup>5,8</sup>.

Creativity is a two-part process that entails producing something both original and functional. It includes not only the ability to act spontaneously but also the skill of divergent thinking—thinking flexibly, uniquely, and in detail<sup>9</sup>. As such, creative processes yield outcomes that are original, engaging, and functional. Creative individuals are often open to personal experiences, independent, capable of questioning established ideas, flexible in their thinking, and emotionally and socially sensitive<sup>10</sup>. One way to enhance individual creativity is through the use of creative arts. Creative arts span a broad spectrum, including auditory and literary forms (such as music, drama, and literature), as well as visual and physical forms (such as dance, movement, and painting). Among verbal arts, literature and drama are most prominent, while non-verbal forms include music, dance/movement, and visual arts such as drawing, painting, and sculpture. Verbal and nonverbal art forms often complement one another<sup>9,10</sup>.

In the international literature, art therapy is categorized into six types: visual art therapy, music therapy, dance/movement therapy, intermodal therapy, psychoanalytic therapy, and creative writing/poetry therapy (bibliotherapy)<sup>11</sup>. Visual art therapy utilizes elements of visual art, such as drawing, sculpting, marbling, ceramics, and tile painting<sup>12</sup>. According to the World Federation of Music Therapy, music therapy is defined as “the

planned use of music and/or musical elements (sound, rhythm, melody, and harmony) by a trained music therapist to develop and enhance communication, relationships, learning, expression, mobilization, organization, and other relevant therapeutic outcomes that meet the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive needs of individuals or groups”<sup>13</sup>.

Like other creative arts therapies, dance/movement therapy (DMT) uses the artistic process to support healing and restoration. It also engages bodily sensations and experiences. DMT is grounded in the belief that the body and mind are interconnected and that bodily movements reflect emotional states<sup>14</sup>. Intermodal expressive arts therapy is a relatively new and evolving field that promotes integration between different artistic forms, in contrast to traditional categorizations<sup>15</sup>. "Intermodal" refers to the therapeutic use of two or more art forms in tandem to facilitate positive change. The intrinsic sensory connections between art forms form the basis for transitions across modalities. Creative expression in this context enhances the natural healing capacity of the community<sup>16</sup>.

Psychoanalytic therapy, a deterministic and clinical approach developed by Sigmund Freud in 1895, is based on personality theory, instinctual drives, developmental psychology, and biological/genetic factors<sup>17</sup>. Psychodynamic therapy, a related model, attributes behavioral disorders to unconscious processes and emphasizes how developmental issues during early childhood may negatively affect an individual’s mental functioning<sup>18</sup>. Bibliotherapy is a process through which individuals are supported in solving personal problems or gaining deeper self-understanding through the use of literature. The discovery of the therapeutic and developmental impact of the dynamic interaction between a reader and a book has led to the adoption of bibliotherapy in psychological counseling and guidance<sup>19</sup>. Occupational therapy is both an art and a science, aiming to assist individuals in engaging with meaningful occupations so they can perform essential daily activities that promote health and well-being<sup>20,21</sup>. This definition illustrates the integration of artistic practice with evidence-based scientific methodology. The conceptualization of art within occupational therapy stems from its historical roots and development<sup>22,23</sup>.

The application of art therapy in geriatric populations plays a significant role in occupational therapy interventions. However, the number of studies specifically examining this intersection remains limited. This review aims to systematically examine occupational therapy research that explores art therapy interventions in geriatric individuals. The findings are expected to provide foundational insights into whether art therapy practices that support cognitive health and promote active aging can enhance geriatric rehabilitation practices in occupational therapy.

## **Material and Methods**

In this study, a systematic review approach was adopted in order to provide a comprehensive and evidence-based synthesis of the current literature regarding art-based occupational therapy interventions aimed at improving cognitive functions in geriatric populations. This method was conducted in accordance with predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure methodological rigor and transparency. Relevant studies were identified through a systematic search of electronic databases, followed by a multi-stage selection process including title, abstract, and full-text

screening. This approach enabled the identification, evaluation, and synthesis of high-quality evidence, allowing for a more structured and objective analysis of how occupational therapy practices incorporating art, music, and movement influence cognitive health in older adults<sup>24,25</sup>.

The systematic review focused on occupational therapy studies published between January 2017 and February 2024. The literature search was conducted using the PubMed and OTseeker databases, as well as the Google Scholar search engine. The Boolean search method was employed, utilizing the following keywords: “Art Therapy”, “Music Therapy”, “Dance Therapy” for interventions involving music and movement; “Older People” and “Geriatric Individuals” for the target population; and “Occupational Therapy” and “Ergotherapy” for the field of occupational therapy. The keywords were applied both individually and in various combinations to ensure a comprehensive search strategy. The Boolean operators used for this purpose are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Keywords

Art Therapy	AND	Older People	AND	Occupational Therapy
OR		OR		OR
Music Therapy		Geriatric Individuals		Ergotherapy
OR				
Dance Therapy				

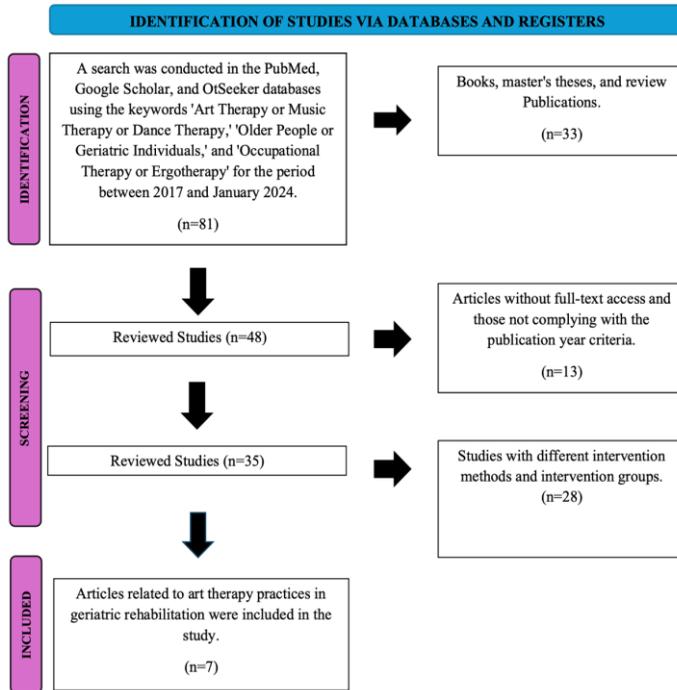
Studies published between January 2017 and February 2024, written in English, involving sample groups composed of individuals aged 65 and older, and offering full-text access were included in this review. Conversely, review articles, meta-analyses, books, and book chapters were excluded from the analysis.

A total of 81 occupational therapy studies investigating the effects of art therapy interventions on cognitive functions in geriatric individuals were initially identified. Of these, 33 were excluded as they were reviews, meta-analyses, books, or book chapters. Following title and abstract screening, 13 additional studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria were removed. The full texts of the remaining 35 studies were then assessed. Among these, 10 did not involve occupational therapy interventions, 8 included participants under the age of 65, the full text of 5 could not be accessed, and 5 were excluded due to being published in a non-English language. As a result, 7 studies were included in this systematic review. The process of study selection and inclusion in this review is presented in Figure 1.

## Results

Following the comprehensive search, seven studies were identified and included in the review (see Appendix 1). The selected studies comprised research articles (57%), randomized controlled trials (29%), and descriptive studies (14%). The descriptive characteristics and findings of these studies are presented under three thematic subheadings: Applications of Dance Therapy in Geriatric Rehabilitation, Applications of Art and Craft in Geriatric Rehabilitation, and Other Applications in Geriatric Rehabilitation.

**Figure 1.** Flow chart



**Table 2.** Geriatric rehabilitation: insights on art therapy practices

Author/Year	Study design	Participants	Evaluation	Intervention Methods	Conclusion
<b>Rocha et al.<sup>26</sup> (2017)</b>	Research Article	(n=18)	Semi-Structured Interview Form	Dance Therapy	It was concluded that the effects of dance therapy are multidimensional.
<b>Bruyneel et al.<sup>27</sup> (2023)</b>	Randomized Controlled Trial	Experimental Group (n=9), Control Group (n=10)	Lower Extremity Motor Coordination Test (LEMOCOT), Montreal Cognitive Assessment Scale (MoCA), Stroke-Specific Quality of Life Scale (SS-QOL)	Dance Therapy	No significant difference was observed between the two groups. However, the experimental group showed an increase in evaluation scores.
<b>Kim D.<sup>28</sup> (2017)</b>	Research Article	(n=28) (65+ geriatric individuals)	Functional Independence Measure (FIM), Beck Depression Inventory, Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE-K)	A 16-session program combining physical activity, recreational activity, art, and crafts was conducted	A significant difference was found in restrictions in daily living activities, cognitive functions, and depression levels due to physical strength loss.
<b>Regier et al.<sup>29</sup> (2017)</b>	Research Article	(n=56) Individuals with Dementia Aged 75+	Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE), Cornell Scale for Depression in Dementia	Activities including physical, cognitive, sensory exercises, social interactions, household tasks, music and recreational activities, and crafts were conducted	A significant difference was observed in cognitive functions and independent participation in daily living activities.

<b>Kim D.<sup>30</sup> (2020)</b>	Randomized Controlled Trial	Experimental Group (n=18), Control Group (n=17)	Functional Independence Measure (FIM), Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE-K), Geriatric Depression Scale-K (SGDS-K), Geriatric Quality of Life Scale-Dementia (GQOL-D), Subjective Memory Complaints Questionnaire (SMCQ)	Reminiscence Therapy was applied through dance therapy, music therapy, physical activity, and daily living activities	A significant difference was found in cognitive functions, depression levels, and quality of life.
<b>Spooner et al.<sup>31</sup> (2019)</b>	Research Article	(n=3) Individuals working in the military and veterans	Montreal Cognitive Assessment (MoCA), World Health Organization Quality of Life Scale (WHOQOL-BREF), Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS-X), Person Picking Apple from a Tree (PPAT)	Visual Art Therapy, Dance Therapy, and Music Therapy were applied via telerehabilitation	It was concluded that these methods are feasible and accessible through telerehabilitation.
<b>Engelbrecht et al.<sup>32</sup> (2023)</b>	Research Article	(n=92)	Semi-Structured Interview Form to Evaluate Reminiscence Therapy and Music-Supported Reminiscence Therapy	Music-Supported Reminiscence Therapy was applied for 6 to 12 weeks	Music was reported to have a stimulating effect on reminiscence therapy. Additionally, it positively influenced non-verbal communication in geriatric individuals.

### ***Applications of Dance Therapy in Geriatric Rehabilitation***

As a result of the search process, two studies investigating the effects of dance therapy on geriatric individuals were identified in Table 2.

The first study is a research article incorporating qualitative analysis. In this study, conducted by Rocha et al., the effects of dance therapy on individuals with Parkinson's disease were examined. The findings indicated that dance therapy is a widely accepted complementary treatment for individuals with Parkinson's disease. It was found to be effective in improving motor symptoms and enhancing the overall quality of life. In addition to contributing to several rehabilitation goals, dance therapy was also reported to have a positive impact on artistic experiences and creative skills<sup>26</sup>.

The second study reviewed under this subheading is a randomized controlled trial conducted by Bruyneel et al. This study investigated the effects of dance therapy interventions during the subacute phase of stroke rehabilitation in individuals who had experienced a stroke. Conducted in Switzerland, the study aimed to compare the effects of a dance therapy program integrated with conventional treatments on motor recovery and quality of life with those of traditional treatment approaches alone. The results revealed no statistically significant differences between the groups in terms of balance, motor coordination, cognitive functions, or quality of life. However, an improvement in scores was observed in the dance therapy group compared to their baseline assessment. Furthermore, most participants expressed a desire to continue dance therapy after

discharge from the rehabilitation center, reporting increased participation and improvements in their motor coordination skills<sup>27</sup>.

### ***Applications of Art and Craft in Geriatric Rehabilitation***

This section presents two studies that examined the impact of integrated art therapy practices on geriatric individuals in Table 2. The first study is a research article conducted by Kim, which aimed to evaluate the effects of integrated art therapy on daily living activities, cognitive status, and depression levels. The study was carried out in South Korea and involved a sample of 28 individuals aged 65 and over, comprising 12 males and 16 females. Various standardized scales were employed to assess participants: the Functional Independence Measure (FIM) was used to objectively evaluate their daily living functions; the Mini-Mental State Examination Korean Version (MMSE-K) assessed cognitive status; and the Beck Depression Inventory measured depression levels<sup>28</sup>.

The physical activity component involved exercises designed to support motor skills and strengthen muscles. The recreational activities included tasks such as dart throwing and singing, aimed at enhancing motivation and increasing participation. The art and craft component included activities like making pressed flowers and creating eco-friendly bags, which were intended to develop fine motor skills, foster self-confidence, and improve attention span.

The results indicated significant improvements in participants' daily living activities following the intervention. Notably, cognitive function improved in both male and female participants. A significant reduction in depression levels was observed, with female participants showing greater improvements compared to their male counterparts<sup>26</sup>.

The second study reviewed under this subheading is an intervention study conducted by Regier et al., which focused on the characteristics of activities designed for patients at mild, moderate, and severe stages of dementia. This study was carried out in the United States in 2016 and published in The Journal of the American Geriatrics Society in 2017. The sample consisted of 56 individuals with dementia: 21 in the mild stage, 13 in the moderate stage, and 22 in the severe stage.

Standardized scales were used to assess participants, including the Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) and the Cornell Scale for Depression in Dementia (CSDD). The Timed Up and Go (TUG) test was used to evaluate physical function. For caregivers, assessments included the Dementia Agitation Behavior Scale and measures of functional and distress levels.

The intervention program involved eight home visits over a four-month period, with each visit lasting 90 minutes. The activities provided included arts and crafts, physical exercises, cognitive activities, music and recreational activities, sensory stimulation, activities of daily living (ADL), and instrumental activities of daily living (IADL), as well as social engagement activities. The results demonstrated significant improvements across all activity areas. Additionally, the activities were adapted according to the cognitive stage of the participants (mild, moderate, or severe), ensuring that the intervention was tailored to the individual's specific needs<sup>29</sup>.

### ***Other Applications in Geriatric Rehabilitation***

Under the subheading Other Applications in Geriatric Rehabilitation, three studies were reviewed in Table 2. These studies were grouped due to their integration of art therapy with other therapeutic modalities, such as reminiscence therapy and tele-rehabilitation.

The first study is a randomized controlled trial conducted by Kim D. in 2019 in South Korea, and published in the Journal of Hindawi in 2020. The study included a sample of 35 individuals diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, who were randomly assigned to two groups. The experimental group (n=17) participated in a combined intervention involving integrated art therapy and reminiscence therapy. The control group (n=18) engaged in a conventional program composed of physical activities, recreational exercises, and daily living tasks. Both groups received 24 sessions, each lasting 60 minutes, conducted five times per week. The results indicated statistically significant improvements in the experimental group compared to the control group in subjective memory, cognitive functioning, and levels of depression ( $p < 0.05$ )<sup>30</sup>.

The second study, conducted by Spooner et al. in 2018 in the United States and published in The Journal of Arts in Psychotherapy in 2019, explored the use of creative art therapies delivered via tele-rehabilitation to military veterans. The study sample comprised three veterans, each receiving a distinct form of art therapy: music therapy, dance/movement therapy, and visual arts therapy. The interventions were administered through the RVTRI-CAT program, a platform for tele-rehabilitation. Findings suggested that creative art therapy had beneficial effects on participants and that tele-rehabilitation could serve as a viable alternative for individuals lacking access to in-person services. Nevertheless, the study also acknowledged limitations of remote therapy in comparison to traditional face-to-face methods<sup>31</sup>.

Both individual and group therapies were favored formats across the interventions. Among professional groups, only nurses reported a higher use of traditional reminiscence therapy compared to music-based approaches. The findings concluded that music generally enhanced the effectiveness of reminiscence therapy. However, certain types of music were found to have a potentially adverse effect on participants' psychosocial well-being<sup>30</sup>. Both individual and group therapies were favored formats across the interventions. Among professional groups, only nurses reported a higher use of traditional reminiscence therapy compared to music-based approaches. The findings concluded that music generally enhanced the effectiveness of reminiscence therapy. However, certain types of music were found to have a potentially adverse effect on participants' psychosocial well-being<sup>32</sup>.

### **Discussion**

This review aimed to examine the effects of art therapy practices on individuals undergoing geriatric rehabilitation. The studies analyzed under the subheadings of Dance Therapy Applications in Geriatric Rehabilitation (28%), Art and Craft Applications in Geriatric Rehabilitation (28%), and Other Applications in Geriatric Rehabilitation (44%) collectively indicate that art therapy interventions have positive effects on both the physical and psychosocial well-being of older adults.

The studies focusing on dance therapy applications highlight its potential to improve the physical, cognitive, and emotional health of elderly individuals. For instance, in a study conducted by Rocha et al.<sup>26</sup>, involving individuals with Parkinson's disease, the positive impact of appropriate music selection in dance therapy on the motor cortex was emphasized. Similarly, Bruyneel et al.<sup>27</sup>, in their randomized controlled trial with stroke patients, underscored the importance of creating a safe and motivating environment during dance therapy sessions to foster participation and engagement. Overall, dance therapy has been shown to improve motor coordination, flexibility, and endurance. These findings suggest that integrating dance therapy into physical activity in an enjoyable and social context can increase motivation and enhance social participation among elderly individuals. Nevertheless, there is a need for more large-scale and long-term randomized controlled trials to establish the comprehensive effects of dance therapy in geriatric rehabilitation.

Art and craft activities were found to provide significant benefits, particularly in supporting cognitive function and emotional well-being. The reviewed studies indicate that these activities are effective in reducing depression, enhancing self-expression, and stimulating cognitive processes. In a study conducted by Kim<sup>30</sup>, art and craft practices were shown to significantly reduce depression levels among geriatric individuals, with women demonstrating greater improvement compared to men—a difference attributed to varying levels of self-esteem. Likewise, the study by Regier et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of tailoring interventions to the specific stages of dementia, showing that personalized art therapy practices were effective in alleviating symptoms and enhancing quality of life<sup>29</sup>. These findings collectively suggest that individualized approaches in art therapy are more likely to yield meaningful therapeutic outcomes.

Other applications in geriatric rehabilitation involved integrating art therapy with physical activity, telerehabilitation, and reminiscence therapy. Notably, telerehabilitation emerged as a promising approach due to its accessibility and ease of implementation, potentially enhancing the independence and well-being of elderly individuals. In a 2020 study by Kim, integrating art therapy with reminiscence therapy was shown to improve memory skills and foster social interaction among individuals with Alzheimer's disease<sup>30</sup>. Similarly, Spooner et al. (2019) highlighted the effectiveness of delivering creative art therapies, such as music and visual arts, via telerehabilitation, particularly for veterans with limited access to in-person services<sup>31</sup>. However, it was also acknowledged that the therapeutic effects of telerehabilitation may be less robust compared to traditional face-to-face interventions.

Finally, a 2024 study by Engelbrecht et al. evaluated the impact of music-supported reminiscence therapy on geriatric individuals, demonstrating that appropriately selected music can significantly enhance verbal communication and memory skills<sup>32</sup>. The study also revealed that both individual and group therapy sessions were effective, although the professional background of the practitioner influenced the choice of intervention techniques. Importantly, while music generally enhanced the benefits of reminiscence therapy, certain types of music were reported to negatively affect participants' psychosocial states.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the inclusion period was restricted to studies published between January 2017 and February 2024, and only seven studies met the inclusion criteria. This limited number of studies reduces the generalizability of the findings. A larger number of studies with broader sample sizes could have led to more robust and reliable conclusions. Second, there was considerable heterogeneity among the included studies in terms of assessment tools, duration of interventions, and evaluation methods. This methodological diversity limited the ability to compare and synthesize findings across studies. Another important limitation is the use of a limited number of databases. Future studies are recommended to include more comprehensive databases such as Scopus and Web of Science. Additionally, the scope of the search terms used in this review was relatively narrow. It is suggested that future research employ broader and more detailed search terms, such as “elderly” and “cognitive rehabilitation,” to capture a wider range of relevant literature.

## Conclusion

The findings of this review demonstrate that art therapy practices are effective in improving cognitive functions, reducing depression levels, and enhancing the overall quality of life among geriatric individuals. Among the various subtypes of art therapy, dance therapy, music therapy, drama therapy, craft therapy, and tele-rehabilitation-based creative art therapy emerged as the most frequently utilized approaches for evaluation and intervention in geriatric rehabilitation.

Moreover, the reviewed studies emphasize the importance of engaging elderly individuals in personalized, meaningful, and purposeful activities. Such participation has been shown to reduce behavioral symptoms, alleviate caregiver burden, and decrease the time required for caregiving tasks, thereby contributing positively to both patients and their support systems.

This review primarily focused on specific subtypes of art therapy and a geriatric population within particular socio-cultural settings. Future research would benefit from exploring the combined effects of multiple art therapy modalities and investigating their impacts on elderly populations from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Expanding the scope of research in this direction may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the therapeutic potential of art-based interventions in geriatric rehabilitation and promote the development of more inclusive and adaptable therapeutic programs.

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