

**(W41) THE HEALING POWER OF ART THERAPY FOR MS PATIENTS**

**Background:** In view of unpredictable exacerbations and disease progression, patients with MS often experience life as overwhelming. In this situation the benefits of art therapy can be significant. Creating art is a way to exercise control over one's life rather than remaining powerless. Artistic expression can help manage stress and anxiety, increase confidence and self-esteem, and improve fine motor skills, eye-hand coordination, upper extremity range of motion and endurance. Working in groups and sharing the process of art making can help develop interpersonal skills and a sense of connectedness.

**Design:** Art projects were designed to 1) emphasize participants' strengths, 2) introduce them to multiple media, 3) challenge their creativity, 4) emphasize enjoyment of the experience, and 5) offer opportunities to verbally share their work and concerns with other participants. Projects took them out of the "patient" perspective and encouraged self-empowerment, positive memories and experiences. Several media were explored to accomplish our goals: clay, water color, collage, carving and mosaics.

**Methods:**

Funding: Grant from the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation

Participants: 12 adults with MS

Instructors: 1 board certified registered art therapist and licensed professional counselor

1 registered occupational therapist

Program Outline: Eight 2-hour, weekly sessions

Location: An easily accessible central location in the community

**Results:** Participants reported that the experience of creating art and the weekly contact with others helped them focus on the more positive and enjoyable aspects of their lives, that this helped relieve depression, and increased self-esteem regarding their creativity and ability to interact with and support others with MS.

**Conclusions:** Art Therapy can be a useful tool in the rehabilitation progress. Using art as a creative modality can achieve impressive results when dealing with the multifaceted consequences of MS. It is important to explore traditional and non-traditional ways to enhance the rehabilitation process and improve quality of life.

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