Opinion Article

The Art of Self-Care

Susan Ridley*

Creative Arts Therapy, West Liberty University, USA

***Corresponding author:** Susan Ridley, Assistant Professor of Creative Arts Therapy, West Liberty University, WV, USA.

Abstract

This paper discusses the risks associated with social distancing, self-isolation, and preventative measure imposed to stop community spread of COVID-19. These includes disruption of daily routines for children and teens, adverse effects on older adults and those with disabilities trapped in their homes, risk of burnout of health care workers on front lines, and the stigma attached to the disease. Mental health issues have been neglected in the drive to treat physical symptoms of burnout. Although the true impact of the pandemic on mental health and substance use has not been calculated, the author offers suggestions to mitigate these risks. Activities include creating daily rituals, a safe space and sanctuary, expressing gratitude for what is working, and engaging in a variety of creative activities such as music, visual arts, movement-based creative expression, and creative writing. Examples of each of these activities include creating daily rituals, a safe space or sanctuary, practicing gratitude, mindfulness and meditation activities, and activating creativity through music, visual art, dance/movement, and creative writing.

Keywords: Creative arts therapy; Art therapy; Music; Dance; Movement; Creative writing; Self-care; Mental health; Substance abuse; COVID-19; Coronavirus, pandemic

Introduction

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health issues and drug use was increasing in the United States. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health [1], found that 47.6 million (19.1%) adults aged 18 years or older reported at least one mental illness in 2017-2018, and over 11.4 million (4.6%) suffered a serious mental illness that impacted daily functioning. The survey found that nearly 10.7 million adults (4.3%) had suicidal thoughts, 3.3 million (1.3%) made plans to kill themselves, and 1.4 million (0.6%) made a nonfatal attempt. Over 48,000 people followed through on their threat and died [2]. In 2018, an estimated 164.8 million people (60.2%) aged 12 years or older used substance such as tobacco, alcohol, illicit drugs, or misused prescription pain medication [3]. Wilson et al. [4], reported that there were 67,367 drug overdoses in the U.S. and of these, 46,802 (69.5%) was caused by opioid misuse. As the pandemic continues to stretch health services to the limit for

treatment of physical symptoms of the disease, the mental health toll has yet to be calculated.

Javed et al. [5], highlighted the risks of social distancing, self-isolation, and preventative measure imposed to stop community spread. These included the risks to children and teens when daily routines were disrupted, adverse effects on older adults and those with disabilities, additional pressures on health care workers, and the stigma attached to the disease. In Czeisler et al. [6], survey conducted between June 24-30, 2020, participants reported mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, trauma or stressed induced symptoms, and increased substance use related to the pandemic. With limited access to services for existing health needs and the fear of catching the disease for those with underlying conditions, feelings of isolation, loneliness, and disconnection with self and others can only be exacerbated. Add in the financial

pressures of lost revenue or jobs through lockdowns and closing of businesses, all aspects of daily life and living has been impacted by the pandemic. These symptoms can only increase as the pandemic rages on and the death toll mounts.

Self-Care and Expressive Arts

Panchal et al. [7], reported that front line workers including those in healthcare face the additional risk of burnout from these stressors as they deal with their own life issues and concerns for their own families as well as provide support and services for others. Which is why self-care is very important to mitigate these risks. Besides following CDC guidelines regarding health and safety during this pandemic, daily activities that reduce anxiety levels and improve mood states can be done at home to increase coping skills and improve mental health. Stuckey and Nobel [8], investigated literature on four areas of creative expression (music, visual arts, movement-based creative expression, and expressive writing). The researchers found that engaging in creative activities helped to decrease symptoms of anxiety, stress, and mood disturbances. Martin [9], systematic review of Creative Arts Therapy literature from 1980-2016 concluded that while more empirical research was recommended, there was evidence that engaging in creative activities had a positive effect on participants. Mood-creativity research indicates that there was a correlation between positive mood states that were focused and engage participant's motivation towards a specific goal [10,11]. These results were supported by Han et al. [12], study that indicated that specific goals such as increasing feelings of happiness, concentration, being active, and interested resulted in increased creativity, while low-activity and negative mood states were associated with feeling tired and sleepy.

Developing daily rituals and engaging in mindfulness and creative activities can help to reduce stress and increase positive mood states. Suggested activities include:

1. Creating rituals. Whether rituals were as simple as making a cup of tea (or coffee) or preparing for the day, they can be important in bringing attention and focus to the moment. Rituals have been around for generations and across cultures. Fiese et al. [13], found that simple family rituals helped to bring members together, improved parenting, and child interactions, and helped to define what was important to the family unit.

2. Creative a stimulating environment through color, sounds, smells, textures etc. and a sacred space at work or at home can help provide a safe place from which to recover from the trials of the day [14]. Whether it is a room, a shed, a balcony, or a corner, inside or outside, making a space can help nurture creativity and provide a sanctuary.

3. Daily gratitude and focusing on being thankful and appreciating what is working can help provide meaning in difficult circumstances [15]. Keeping a journal that includes words of gratitude, positive affirmation, or inspiring poem can help to increase life satisfaction.

4. Mindfulness activities include deep breathing exercises, meditation, yoga, and movement. Whether it is keeping a food or drink diary to control unwanted behaviors such as emotional eating or self-medication, being mindful and in the moment can halt negative impulses. Howarth et al. [16], found that even brief mindfulness practices resulted in positive health outcomes in their systematic review of the literature.

5. Activating your creativity. Whether its music, art, dance/movement, creative writing, or any other form of expression, make time during the day or week for a creative activity. Engaging in these activities can increase self-expression, self-discovery, and reconnect to social identity [17]. Mix up your creative expressions by painting to music, dancing to art, putting movement to words, or dancing to your favorite songs. Make art with found objects or recycled materials. The important thing is making the time for you and incorporating creativity into self-care practices.

Conclusion

In a period of transition, it can be easy to lose one's way. Worrying about things that you have no power to change will only increase frustration and anger. The pandemic is causing world-wide suffering. We are not alone in this. It is important to take care of yourself first before you can help others. Which is why self-care is very important and the number one priority for those working in health care and on the front lines of the battle to contain COVID-19. Keep it simple. Focus on one goal each day. Slow down and take a walk, work in the garden, or plant some seeds and watch them grow. Bring a little order into the chaos and uncertainty and make space to reflect on what is important. Re-evaluate, de-clutter, organize, and schedule your time. Let go of things you cannot control. Embrace your creativity and allow it to be part of healing for self and others. Above all, have fun, explore, and create!

Acknowledgement

None.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no potential conflict of interest in this opinion paper.

Author Statement

The author is an Assistant Professor at West Liberty University (WLU) and teaches undergraduate creative art therapy courses and is in the process of developing a graduate Art Therapy and Counseling program at WLU. In her practice, she has used a wide range of modalities including talk therapy and a variety of expressive arts including the use of art materials to elicit emotional and psychological responses, movement, music, drama, and play therapy. She is a Board-Certified Art Therapist (ATR-BC), a Registered Expressive Arts Therapist (REAT), and a Nationally Certified Counselor (NCC).

References

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. 2017-2018 NSDUH States estimates of substance use and mental disorders.

2. Centers for Disease Control (2020) WISQARS leading causes of death reports - 2018.

3. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2018) Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States.

4. Wilson N, Kariisa M, Seth P, Smith H, Davis NL (2020) Drug and opioid-involved overdose deaths – United States, 2017-2018. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 69(11): 290-297.

5. Javet B, Sarwer A, Soto EB, Mashwani Z (2020) The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic's impact on mental health. International Journal of Health Planning and Management, 35(5): 993-996.

6. Czeisler MÉ, Lane RI, Petrosky E, Wiley JF, Christensen A, et al. (2020) Mental health, substance use, and suicidal ideation during the COVID-19 pandemic: United States, June 24–30, 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 69(32): 1049-1057.

7. Panchal N, Kamal R, Orgera K, Cox C, Garfield R, et al. (2021) The implications of COVID-19 for mental and substance use.

8. Stuckey HL, Nobel J (2010) The connection between art, healing, and public health: A review of current literature. Am J Public Health 100(2): 254-263.

9. Martin L, Oepen R, Bauer K, Nottensteiner A, Mergheim K, et al. (2018) Creative arts interventions for stress management and prevention: A systematic review. Behav Sci (Basel) 8(2): 28.

10. Baas M, De Dreu CKW, Nijstad BA (2008) A meta-analysis of 25 years of mood-creativity research: Hedonic tone, activation, or regulatory focus? Psychol Bull 134(6): 779-806.

11. Davis MA (2009) Understanding the relationship between mood and creativity: A meta-analysis. Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 108(1): 25-38.

12. Han W, Feng X, Zhang M, Peng K, Zhang D (2019) Mood states and everyday creativity: Employing an Experience Sampling Method and a Day Reconstruction Method. Front Psychol 10: 1698.

13. Fiese BH, Tomcho TJ, Douglas M, Josephs K, Poltrock S, et al. (2002) A review of 50 years of research on naturally occurring family routines and rituals: Cause for celebration? J Fam Psychol 16(4): 381-390.

14. Adelstein P (2018) Sacred space. Glob Adv Health Med 7: 2164957X17751903.

15. Sansone RA, Sansone LA (2010) Gratitude and wellbeing: The benefits of appreciation. Psychiatry (Edgmont) 7(11): 18-22.

16. Howarth A, Smith JG, Perkins-Porras L, Usser M (2019) Effects of brief mindfulness-based interventions on health-related outcomes: A systematic review. Mindfulness 10: 1957-1968.

17. Van Lith T, Schofield MJ, Fenner P (2013) Identifying the evidence-base for art-based practices and their potential benefit for mental health recovery: A critical review. Disabil Rehabil 35(16): 1309-1323.