

# Psychology and Art: Exploring Drawing as of Interaction, Counter Reaction, and Self-Healing to Traumatic Experience

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Received: 19 March 2025; Accepted: 31 August 2025; Published: 1 September 2025

## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the role of drawing as an interactive, counter-reactive, and self-healing medium for individuals navigating traumatic experiences. Building on the interdisciplinary integration of psychology and art, the research highlights how visual expression can serve as a nonverbal and therapeutic pathway for processing trauma. Unlike traditional talk-based therapy, which relies heavily on verbal articulation, drawing and other art-based practices provide a safe space for individuals, especially those with limited language or emotional vocabulary, to externalize, explore, and reorganize their experiences. The study was conducted via an online art therapy workshop organised by Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Perak Branch and the University of Gujranwala in Lahore, Pakistan. Participants participated in structured and semi-structured drawing exercises to promote emotional expression, increase self-awareness, and foster resilience. The results indicate that art therapy, primarily through drawing, allows participants to tap into repressed memories and emotions within a safe and supportive setting, which helps alleviate the psychological pressure related to direct verbal sharing. Through creative engagement, individuals developed effective coping strategies, increased their self-esteem, and improved their emotional regulation. This research reinforces existing literature by showing that art therapy not only alleviates immediate trauma symptoms but also nurtures long-term adaptive capacities for mental health recovery. Additionally, the research highlights how adaptable art therapy is for different age demographics and situations, positioning it as a beneficial addition to conventional mental health treatments. By framing drawing as an interaction, counter-reaction, and self-healing process, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how creative practices intersect with psychological well-being, offering an evidence-informed model for trauma recovery and holistic personal growth.*

**Keywords:** Psychology Drawing, Art Therapy, Counter-Reaction, Self-Healing, Trauma



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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, mental health has become an increasingly urgent global issue, affecting people of all ages, social groups, and cultural backgrounds. Conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are now more common, driven by a mix of social, economic, and

personal pressures. Factors like academic and job stress, financial difficulties, family tensions, emotional neglect, and traumatic life events have all contributed to this rise. When untreated, these issues can seriously harm a person's quality of life and overall well-being. In this context, many studies highlight the potential of creative practices, especially art therapy, as alternative ways to promote psychological healing. Basharuddin, Mohd Nor, and Sulaiman (2025), for example, report that color-focused art therapy through painting and illustration can improve emotional regulation and self-expression among university students, a group particularly vulnerable to stress and anxiety. Similarly, Hassan et al. (2025) describe the ART'UISM program, which uses structured, art-based interventions to enhance cognitive skills and social acceptance among children with autism, showing art therapy's ability to support psychological development and social inclusion. Art therapy actively involves individuals in the creative process, offering a positive way to release emotions through mediums like painting, drawing, or sculpture. This process helps participants externalize and work through complex feelings that may be hard to express in words. It also encourages self-awareness by promoting exploration of thoughts and emotions in a supportive, non-judgmental environment. As a result, individuals often gain deeper insights into themselves and their experiences. Additionally, art therapy enhances overall mental health by reducing stress, promoting relaxation, and fostering resilience. Through creative expression, people can develop healthier coping strategies, ultimately improving their quality of life.

Mental health refers to a person's emotional, social, and psychological well-being, which influences daily functioning, including thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. It plays a vital role in managing stress, making sound decisions, and maintaining healthy relationships. However, a range of factors, including economic instability, societal pressures, and the pervasive influence of social media, combined with traumatic experiences such as bereavement, divorce, or chronic illness, can significantly challenge mental health. Children who experience neglect or abuse often endure trauma that may result in developmental and behavioural difficulties. Likewise, adults facing prolonged stress from work, family, or financial problems are at increased risk of anxiety disorders, depression, or burnout. These difficulties can profoundly affect an individual's quality of life and interpersonal relationships. While traditional therapeutic methods, such as talk therapy, rely heavily on verbal communication to help individuals process emotions and experiences, this approach may not be effective for everyone. Children, for example, may lack the vocabulary to articulate their emotions, while those who have experienced complex trauma may find it distressing to verbalise their feelings and memories.

In such cases, alternative therapeutic approaches, including art therapy, play therapy, and trauma-informed care, can be beneficial. These methods offer a safe and supportive environment where individuals can express their emotions non-verbally and begin the healing process. By bridging communication gaps, they enhance the effectiveness of treatment and provide more inclusive pathways to mental health recovery.

Art therapy is a discipline that combines psychology with creative expression, offering an effective alternative for healing. It allows individuals to explore their inner thoughts and emotions through innovative activities such as painting, drawing, sculpture, and other forms of artistic expression. According to Lo et al. (2018), art therapy provides a pathway for individuals to access thoughts and emotions that may be difficult to express verbally. This process is not merely a recreational activity; it is a profoundly therapeutic experience that fosters reflection, emotional release, and personal growth. Campbell et al. (2016) emphasise that art therapy creates a safe space for patients to externalise their trauma without relying solely on words, thereby reducing the emotional burden that often comes with direct verbal disclosure. The relationship between mental health issues and art therapy is rooted in the healing capabilities of creative expression. For those who have faced trauma, especially children, expressing their pain and memories can be challenging due to language barriers. Regev and Cohen Yatziv (2018) emphasise that participating in art therapy not only helps individuals evaluate their resilience but also enables them to find ways to cope with their traumatic experiences. Similarly, Westrhenen et al. (2017) note that children with limited language skills can use art to express their feelings, allowing therapists to understand their mental state better. In this way, art therapy serves as a link between unspoken experiences and emotional recovery. By channelling emotions into a visual

format, individuals lessen their internal turmoil, enhance their self-awareness, and gradually cultivate more effective coping strategies. Mental illness affects people of all ages due to increasing stress and unresolved trauma. While traditional therapy focuses on verbal communication, art therapy allows creative expression. This form of treatment promotes resilience, self-awareness, and emotional healing. By integrating art and psychology, individuals can discover new paths to recovery, making art therapy a crucial tool for addressing modern mental health challenges.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The connection between art and psychology has been recognised for a long time. Still, recent years have seen a growing emphasis on art therapy as an effective treatment option for those dealing with trauma and mental health issues. Research by Uttley et al. (2015) indicates that merging these fields has led to the development of innovative strategies that stand apart from traditional therapies, especially since art therapy is not reliant solely on verbal communication. This aspect is crucial since many individuals facing psychological difficulties find it hard to express their experiences and feelings verbally. Traditional verbal therapies often necessitate patients to relive traumatic events in detail, which can sometimes be overwhelming and counterproductive. On the other hand, art therapy offers a different way for people to express themselves symbolically, alleviating the stress of verbal sharing while still enabling emotional expression. Abbing et al. (2018), in further research, have elaborated on this by demonstrating that art therapy encourages a more profound exploration of one's thoughts and emotions, allowing patients to reveal feelings that may otherwise remain hidden. All research emphasises both the limitations of verbal therapies for specific groups and the distinct advantages offered by creative approaches.

In addition, Haeyen et al. (2018) show that art therapy is beneficial for people dealing with complicated psychological issues, such as trauma alongside anxiety or depression. This is supported by Campbell et al. (2016), who suggest that art therapy provides a safe psychological space for patients to express trauma in less direct ways. Together, these studies argue that art therapy creates environments that encourage personal expression while offering protection, particularly for those who may avoid traditional treatments. The process helps manage trauma and builds resilience and coping skills. Regev and Cohen Yatziv (2018) in their research has pointed out that creative activities help individuals cope with trauma and prepare them for future challenges. This is complemented by Haeyen et al. (2018) in the research findings, showing that art therapy promotes long-term strategies for psychological growth. A significant amount of research has also focused on how art therapy impacts children, who may struggle to express their traumatic experiences verbally. Schouten et al. (2014) discovered that art therapy is a symbolic way for children to communicate their emotions, helping them connect their experiences with their feelings. Wigham et al. (2020) further support this by showing that creative expression gives children a non-verbal means to process distress, making it more accessible than traditional talk therapy. This consistent pattern across diverse studies underscores the significance of art therapy for younger individuals. It demonstrates that children exhibit a positive response to these non-verbal therapeutic modalities, which contribute to their mental development.

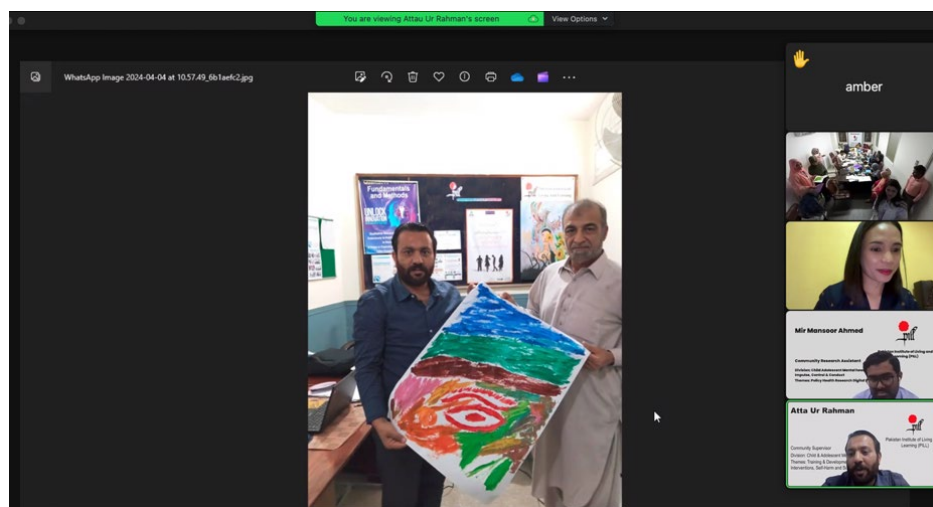
While the evidence for its effectiveness with children is strong, art therapy also benefits adults. As Grefe et al. (2020) explain that art therapy is a holistic approach, addressing psychological symptoms and physical and spiritual health. This expands earlier research by indicating that art therapy's benefits go beyond alleviating symptoms, providing a comprehensive healing experience. The transition from studies on children to adults illustrates how adaptable art therapy is across different age groups, reinforcing its value as a versatile therapy. Research has also documented the long-term benefits of art therapy. Meanwhile, Bosgraaf et al. (2020) emphasise that regular participation in art therapy fosters sustainable recovery, helping individuals overcome trauma and prevent relapse. This builds on previous studies like Abbing et al. (2018) & Haeyen et al. (2018), confirming that art therapy's effects can last well beyond initial treatment. Additionally, Westrhenen et al. (2017) highlight that art therapy can reduce reliance on medication, presenting a less invasive and more empowering way to heal. This is significant given the broader conversation about mental health, where over-medication may not

effectively address deeper issues.

Overall, the reviewed research consistently shows that art therapy is a distinctive and effective method for treating trauma and non-psychotic mental health conditions. While art therapy uses creative expression to tackle trauma, gamification offers a similar engaging approach to lessen anxiety. Moreover, Abdul Rahim et al. (2023) found that gamified activities significantly reduced speech anxiety for Malaysian ESL learners, improving their confidence and engagement. Like art therapy, gamification fosters a supportive environment that encourages expression without relying only on verbal communication, suggesting it could be an effective complementary method for emotional and psychological support. The evidence, ranging from innovations highlighted by Uttley et al. (2015) to the depth shown by Abbing et al. (2018) and Haeyen et al. (2018), the focus on children by Malchiodi (2008) and Wigham et al. (2020), and finally, the exploration of adult populations and long-term outcomes by Grefe et al. (2020) and Bosgraaf et al. (2020), builds a clear case. Art therapy stands out as a supportive practice and a comprehensive and flexible intervention that addresses immediate trauma and fosters long-term well-being.

## 2.1 The Rise of Art Therapy in Evidence-Based Practice

For mental health development, Lith (2016) stated that the fusion of art therapy and psychology is evidence-based. As for Fenner et al. (2017) emphasised that art therapy serves as an effective treatment method and a viable alternative to conventional clinical interventions, contributing to mental health care. Meanwhile, Coiner and Kim (2011) noted that the popularity of art therapy has grown alongside research demonstrating its effectiveness, with studies showing significant positive outcomes in psychological well-being. In clinical psychology, this method is increasingly recognised as a professional in addressing contemporary mental health challenges. The research by Shukla et al. (2022) highlighted that the recognition of art therapy is increasingly tied to its role in mental health care initiatives. Tibbetts and Gabriel (2013) explained that art therapy enables individuals to express themselves creatively, releasing emotions even through simple media such as paper and pencil. While some researchers argue that art therapy provides only temporary relief due to its lack of formal clinical procedures, its effectiveness depends largely on the individual's engagement and acceptance of the process (Wigham et al.2020). Moreover, studies in the Malaysian context indicate that art-based interventions can enhance emotional resilience, coping skills, and mental well-being (Umar & Zainuddin (2025) & Abdullah et al. (2024). These findings reinforce the notion that, although not universally applicable, art therapy remains a valuable tool for exploring personal challenges and preventing the worsening of mental health conditions.



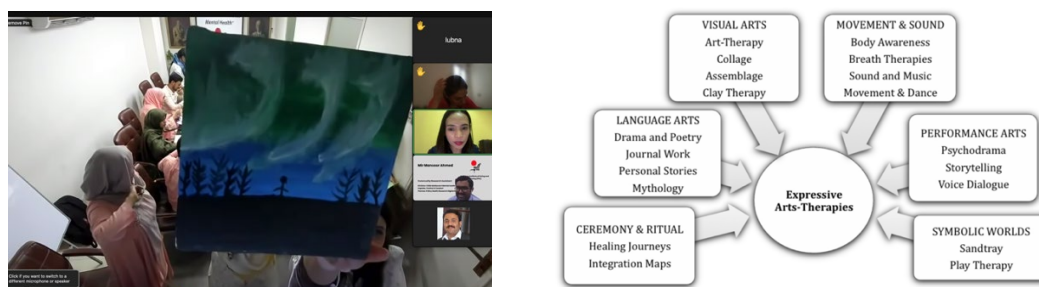
**Figure 1** Art and Psychology workshop collaboration between Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, and University Gujranwala, Lahore, Pakistan via Zoom Platform

In fact, this art of therapy provides a unique and comprehensive approach to the trauma experienced by an individual. Some practice the traditional art of therapy. This methodology actually encourages individuals to explore more deeply and safely. The term “Safe” refers to an environment where individuals' thoughts are undisturbed, which can facilitate gradual healing from their traumatic experiences. A study conducted by Hass-Cohen et al. (2018) suggests that art therapy allows people to express their issues in a secure setting comfortably. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) necessitates thorough treatment, and a visual art therapy approach is practical. According to research by Jones et al. (2017), this creative process helps to provide a clear understanding and offers solutions for patients in need of art therapy. Additionally, research by Drusedum (2017) indicates that using canvas and various art mediums serves as a narrative tool to assist individuals dealing with mental health challenges, leading to a sense of fulfilment when they view their own artwork. This highlights the difficulties art therapists may face in confronting their surroundings. Meanwhile, according to Baker et al. (2018), this new understanding and exploration can pave the way for adaptive responses and resilient behaviours, fostering a sense of agency and control over their own healing journey. Through the use of art therapy, individuals can develop important coping skills and improve their ability to bounce back from stressful situations. Incorporating art therapy into trauma treatment not only provides a therapeutic outlet for self-expression and healing but also promotes a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between psychology and art. Westrhenen et al. (2017) stated that the creative nature of mental illness also often offers the individual the opportunity for deep self-transformation while also contributing to well-being in their own thinking. Research from Regev & Cohen-Yatziv (2018) says that both verbal and non-verbal aspects can help deal with the effects of individual trauma. It can also help an individual to be more open toward what is happening around them.

Previous research by Chong (2015) with the methodology of art therapy, the individual can also apply the understanding of response to self-healing. Art therapy is also one of the efficient methods to reduce the symptoms of trauma to mental illness faced by individuals. Furthermore, according to Eaton et al. (2007), art therapy can also be used as a healing for children who have experienced trauma. The findings of this study are very helpful in giving hope to individuals in finding a solution to the problems they experience, especially for children. Furthermore, through creative therapeutic art, this art intervention greatly benefits children who have very limited language and find it difficult to convey what they experience verbally. This study is also supported by Chui & Chong (2017) in their study, they also say that the function of this art helps a lot in the psychology of an individual who suffers from trauma. This greatly helps them recover from the psychological pain caused by deep trauma. Overall, Art Therapy provides a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to trauma treatment, addressing the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural aspects of the individual's experience. Apart from that, a study from Writer (2022) also says that art therapy is a form of therapeutic intervention that combines visual arts, such as drawing and painting, as a way of self-expression and also a way of healing. This method gives people a variety of comfortable, non-verbal methods and ways to communicate their thoughts, emotions, and experiences. Art therapy also helps individuals explore their emotions, reduce stress, and motivate the patient's own personal growth (Hu et al., 2021).

## **2.2 Characteristics of Art Therapy**

A key feature of art therapy is its adaptability to different individuals and their unique needs, especially between adults and children. It also includes the older group. The stress of life and the environment is the cause of mental illness. An additional important component of art therapy is its non-verbal nature, helping people express their feelings without having to find the right words. This can be especially helpful for those who struggle with verbal expression or have experienced trauma. In this approach, the therapist will guide the individual through emotional understanding and also the artistic process. Furthermore, art therapy can be integrated into other types of therapy, such as traditional methods, or used on its own, and provides a versatile method in dealing with various mental health issues. Overall, the main characteristics of art therapy include the adaptability of the process, its non-verbal nature, emphasis on individual reflection, and other therapeutic modalities.



**Figure 2** The input of the workshop that was conducted through Zoom between the participants and the speaker.

## 2.3 Art Therapy Techniques and Applications

Art therapy techniques vary and depend on the wants and needs of the traumatised individual. Some standard methods these people with a mental health condition use include free drawing, picture-guided imagery, making interesting and creative collages, carving wood, and turning it into sculptures. This art therapy technique can also be used to explore deeper interests and express hidden emotions, overcome trauma or sadness experienced, increase the individual's self-esteem, develop problem-solving skills, improve communication and social skills in their environment, and promote individual development, as mentioned. Art therapy can be applied in many contexts, including public or private educational institutions, government and private hospitals, centres, and so on. Art therapists are professional and trained members with expertise in monitoring and helping mental patients. This member has profound knowledge in using therapeutic methods of artistic expression for the mental well-being of individuals. In art therapy, creative expression also offers a space for individuals to express their emotions and feelings and produce symbolism in visual form.



**Figure 3** The Example of Art Therapy Techniques that help participants reduce stress and gain awareness of mental disorders.

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### 3 ART THERAPY IN CLINICAL PRACTICE

Art therapy in clinical practice involves a collaborative partnership between therapists and patients, utilising creative expression as a powerful tool for healing. Since trauma is often difficult to articulate verbally due to its complex and deeply personal nature, art therapy provides a unique and effective means of communication (American Art Therapy Association, 2017). Through various artistic mediums such as painting, drawing, sculpting, and collage, patients can externalise their emotions and experiences, uncovering feelings that may be buried or hard to articulate (Rubin, 2016). This therapeutic approach encourages individuals to explore new perspectives on their lives and emotions, promoting self-reflection and facilitating personal growth. Patients often gain insights into their thoughts and behaviours, leading to greater understanding and acceptance of themselves (Kapitan, 2017). Research has indicated that art therapy can enhance cognitive abilities, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and psychomotor skills, encompassing the coordination of mental and physical activities (Malchiodi, 2012). Furthermore, art therapy significantly improves self-awareness and self-esteem, as individuals learn to appreciate their creative abilities and express their identity. It also fosters emotional stability by providing a safe space for patients to process their feelings and cope with stress. Additionally, as participants engage in group art therapy sessions, they cultivate vital social skills, build meaningful connections with others, and strengthen their sense of community, ultimately contributing to holistic well-being (Rubin, 2016 & Kapitan, 2017).

### 4 AIMS

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of drawing as an interactive, counter-reactive, and self-healing medium for individuals experiencing trauma by integrating psychological and artistic approaches. Specifically, it seeks to evaluate how structured and semi-structured drawing activities facilitate emotional expression, enhance self-awareness, and develop coping strategies in a safe, non-verbal therapeutic environment.

### 5 METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this research was drawing, as it can facilitate the healing process of traumatic experiences. Drawing acts as an instrument that captures mental processes using only a pencil and paper. Usually, drawing reveals a person's mental state. Disciplinary boundaries between philosophy, psychology, neurology in science, and pathology in medical and psychiatry were established. The use of drawing greatly helps various disciplines. In neuropsychology, experts consider drawing as a material trace of cognitive functions, while in psychoanalysis and art therapy, it is used to interpret a patient's narrative through art. This confluence allows methods to be applied to different subjects, revealing the usefulness of drawing tasks for researchers.

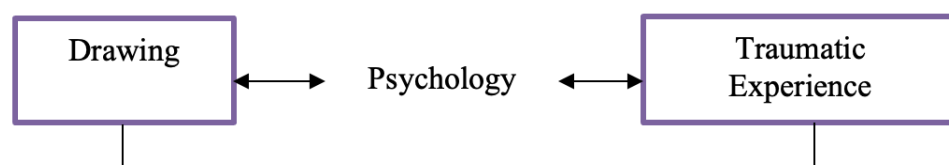


Figure 4 Drawing a circle that helps in therapy

### 6 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 5 presents the research results, highlighting many positive outcomes from art therapy sessions conducted. Each participant's story demonstrates the effectiveness of this therapeutic approach over time. The findings reveal that art therapy is beneficial in treating trauma for all participants by providing a secure platform for expression and aiding in psychological healing. Through the workshop, participants can explore their feelings and emotions more deeply. Art therapy has proven to be

particularly effective for individuals who struggle to express or interpret their feelings and those who feel uncomfortable using verbal communication to convey their thoughts and opinions. Furthermore, the art therapy sessions allow participants to tap into their creativity and use art to heal. Art therapy emerges as an excellent solution by promoting self-esteem, self-awareness, emotional resilience, and social skills development while also helping to reduce conflict and anxiety. In summary, this workshop is an effective therapeutic strategy that enables individuals to heal themselves and enhance their well-being through artistic expression, exploration, and recovery.



**Figure 5** The outcome of the workshop, participant presenting their piece of art.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

In general, future research in art therapy should prioritise studies that are both verifiable and can be reproduced (Regev & Cohen-Yatziv, 2018). These studies examine the effectiveness of art therapy across various demographics and patient outcomes for those dealing with mental health issues, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data. They should also look at the underlying mechanisms of change in art therapy, such as how creative expression can help with emotional processing and self-awareness of mental patients. Furthermore, it is important to continue to expand the role of art therapists in various sectors and with the generally diverse populations of today. Various expertise is required in dealing with mental problems. Furthermore, future initiatives in this art therapy research will develop into a treatment. According to the information presented, art therapy has been proven in the healing of trauma and psychological stress (Slayton et al., 2010). Art therapy has also been shown to be useful in healing among traumatized youth. Art therapy is therefore provided by skilled art therapists to achieve personal and relational treatment goals. Art therapy is also a specialized form of therapy that uses the creative process and artistic expression to support individuals in achieving personal growth, healing, and self-discovery as a whole. In fact, art therapy is clinically proven to achieve personal and relationship treatment goals, improve cognitive and sensorimotor function, increase self-confidence and self-awareness, develop self-resiliency, promote self-awareness and self-esteem, improve social skills, reduce conflict, and improve social and ecological functioning. Art therapy research is a research design that can be recommended and adapted to the current situation.

In conclusion, the workshop of art therapy can be a valuable tool for participants in processing trauma and their thoughts. It's essential to recognize its limitations and the diverse needs of survivors. A holistic and individualized approach to trauma treatment that integrates various therapeutic modalities



will better address the complex and multifaceted nature of traumatic experiences. Alternatively, the use of workshops to address stressful circumstances and encourage self-healing is a creative and effective methodology. Additional future research is needed to figure out the beneficial effects of art therapy for trauma treatment. Additionally, it is crucial to consider the cultural context and sensitivity when implementing art therapy as a treatment for trauma. Exploring art as an interaction, counter-reaction, and self-healing to traumatic experiences through art therapy can provide participants with a safe outlet for expression and facilitate a sense of emotional safety and well-being. By providing a nonverbal and sensory-based approach, art therapy allows individuals to access traumatic memories in a meaningful way and promote the processing and organization of traumatic experiences.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thank you to the organizer of the Hand in Hand Initiative for the index publication and the knowledge shared in this publication. Thank you also to the collaborating authors, Prof. Dr. Musdi Hj Shanat, Rosmidahanim Razali, Sana Rehman, and Hairulnisak Merman for sharing your expertise in this research.

## FUNDING

No financial aid was received for this research.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This research resulted from a collaborative effort by all listed contributors. Florene Ejot Masanat led the conceptualisation, data collection, analysis, and manuscript writing. Prof. Dr Musdi Shanat developed the methodology, interpreted the data, and reviewed the manuscript. Sana Rehman provided supervision, edited the work, and approved the final version. Hairulnisak Merman and Rosmidahanim Razali also offered supervision, editorial input, and final approval.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this publication.

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