

Arts therapy and chronic low-back pain: Managing the lived experience

Sarah Moore

Abstract

This research explores the effectiveness of arts therapy as a contribution to chronic low-back pain management (CLBP). Through a supportive arts therapy group, participants explored their lived experiences of chronic low-back pain over twelve sessions, broken into six individual interviews and six group sessions. This study used a mixed-methodology approach incorporating phenomenology, heuristics, and arts-based and outcomes-based research. It involved systematic pre-, mid- and post-testing using the McGill Pain Questionnaire (MPQ), the Rand Short 36 (SF-36) and an arts therapy relational neurobiology (ATR-N) brief assessment protocol. Improvements in quality of life and well-being, an increase in self-efficacy and identity, and an improvement in communicating the lived experience of chronic low-back pain through creativity were evident.

Keywords

Chronic low-back pain, pain management, communication, group, mixed methodologies, holistic well-being

Introduction

Pain, as defined by the International Association for the Study of Pain, is “an unpleasant sensory and emotional/affective and cognitive experience that is associated with actual or potential tissue damage or is described in terms of such damage” (Vaajoki, 2013, p.1). Pain can be acute or chronic. Acute pain lasts for a short period and acts as a warning signal, while chronic pain is classified as a persistent pain that lasts longer than three to six months, or longer than the expected healing time (Nicholas, 2000; Angheluta & Lee, 2011). Pain can fall under the categories of nociceptive pain, caused by tissue damage, or neuropathic pain, caused by damage to the nerves (Nicholas, 2000). Chronic pain can occur from injury, accident, disease, illness, or other health conditions, with the musculoskeletal area being the most common site for chronic pain (Nicholas, 2000; Swain & Johnson, 2014; Dominick, Blyth, & Nicholas, 2011; Crawford, Lee, & Bingham, 2014).

New Zealand has a high rate of people experiencing chronic pain, suffered by one in five adults (21 percent) (Ministry of Health, 2016). Two studies on chronic pain within New Zealand

show that one of the leading causes is injury or accident, with a large proportion (24.1 percent and 59 percent respectively) of this population having chronic pain in the back or lower-back area (Dominick et al., 2011; Swain & Johnson, 2014). The National Health Committee estimated the total cost of services for chronic lower-back problems in 2012/13 to be \$39.6 million (NHC, 2015).



Figure 1. Sarah Moore, *Under the surface*, watercolour on paper, 210 × 297mm.

anzjat

AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF ARTS THERAPY

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Full-length articles 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 14 were double anonymously peer-reviewed.



Published by the Australian, New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association

ACN 63 072 954 388

PO Box 2391, North Brighton, VIC 3186, Australia

www.anzacata.org

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ISSN: 1833-9948

Design and production Vic Šegedin