

Evidence Brief

Trauma & Arts-Based Therapy

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work and searched in online databases using the following key terms: "Trauma," "Creative Therapy," "Arts-Based Therapy," "Youth," "Trauma-Informed," and "Evidence-Based." We then used the 'related articles' function on Google Scholar to find additional resources.

Key Terms

What is Trauma?

"A traumatic event involves a single experience, or enduring repeated or multiple experiences, that completely overwhelm the individual's ability to cope or integrate the ideas and emotions involved in that experience" (Klinic CHC, 2013).

Experts describe three defining elements of trauma (BC-MCFD, 2016):

- Exposure to harmful events or circumstances
- Experiencing the events in question
- Experiencing effects as a result of the events

Trauma affects individuals, families, and communities. Its impacts can be profound, transforming how individuals see themselves and experience the world around them (Klinic CHC, 2013).

What is Arts-Based Therapy?

"Creative arts therapy is an umbrella term used to describe the professions of art therapy, music therapy, dance therapy, drama therapy, poetry therapy, and psychodrama. There is growing neurological evidence in favour of using creative arts therapies, specifically for trauma, which is based on the visual and sensational nature of traumatic memories stored in the brain" (Westrhenen & Fritz, 2014).

Practitioners using arts-based therapy to address trauma argue that trauma is stored in the memory. As such, expressive approaches, such as arts-based therapy, may be effective in

addressing trauma (Smith, 2018). They also argue that these creative media make it possible for individuals to explore the visual and sensational nature of traumatic events without necessarily translating them into the narrative (Westrhenen & Fritz, 2014).

Key Messages

Considerations for Using Arts-Based Therapy to Address Trauma

- Arts-based therapy models may be particularly useful when working with young people, especially if narrating traumatic events is difficult for the individuals in question. They don't require youth to describe events with words (Edwards, 2017). Rather, they use accessible media such as dance, music, and art (Westrhenen & Fritz, 2014). Studies show that for some individuals who have experienced trauma, speaking about their trauma can be emotionally overwhelming. Providing non-verbal processes to address trauma can make managing its effects easier (Klinik CHC, 2013; Edwards, 2017).
- People experience trauma in different ways. Experiences are highly subjective (Sitzer & Stockwell, 2015). In addressing trauma, experts recommend developing responses where emphasis is placed on providing care that meets the specific needs of the individuals who have been impacted (Klinik CHC, 2013). A one-size-fits-all approach is not ideal. Arts-based approaches open up possibilities for flexible practice. Their unstructured nature mean they can be more easily tailored to meet the needs of the individuals accessing them (Westrhenen & Fritz, 2014).
- To effectively process trauma, individuals need safe environments. Approaches centering arts-based therapy can foster these environments. They allow individuals to explore emotions, externalize difficult events, and develop strategies to build resilience (Sitzer & Stockwell, 2015).

Centering Communities in Addressing Trauma

Marginalized and minority youth are more likely to experience traumatic events. For example, the probability of experiencing trauma is higher for LGBT2SQ youth, Indigenous youth, Black youth, and youth living in low-income settings (APA, 2019). The disproportionate impact on key groups and communities highlights the importance of considering community-based approaches in responding to traumatic events. Furthermore, culture, community, and context play an important role in how youth understand trauma. They impact youth's beliefs and perceptions on whether trauma is resolvable (APA, 2019).

Approaches that centre communities can strengthen and guide interventions. Engaging community

can play an important role in building understanding of problems faced by youth and defining how they can be addressed at the community level.

Discussion

This Evidence Brief highlighted how arts-based therapy programs can be used to address trauma. However, it is important to note that, across the board, researchers agree that more studies are needed on the efficacy of arts-based therapy in addressing trauma (Slayton et al., 2010; Westrhenen & Fritz, 2014; Wong 2008).

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