

The Role of Creative Arts Therapy in Supporting the Mental Health of Veterans Returning to School

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Abstract

As an increasing number of veterans opt to resume their studies, the psychological and social obstacles they encounter in adjusting to campus life and the social milieu are becoming more pronounced. The objective of this study is to examine the impact of integrated music and painting therapy on the psychological well-being and social adaptation of military personnel who have resumed their studies. The study subjects were eight re-enrolled military personnel enrolled in Jiangxi Software Vocational and Technical University. The impact of a two-hour art-integrated therapy intervention on the subjects' mental health was assessed through the measurement of changes in depression, anxiety, and stress levels. The findings revealed a notable decline in the participants' mental health indicators following the art therapy intervention, suggesting that art therapy is an effective approach for addressing the psychological challenges faced by re-enrolled military personnel. Moreover, art therapy enhanced their social skills and self-identity, thereby facilitating their adaptation to campus life. In light of these findings, it is recommended that integrated music and painting therapy be promoted in higher education institutions and veterans' service centers to facilitate the comprehensive psychological and social rehabilitation of a greater number of veterans.

Keywords

Re-entry military, art therapy, music therapy, painting therapy, mental health, social adjustment, veterans, depression, anxiety, stress.

1. Introduction

In recent years, as the number of veterans has increased and their need to reintegrate into civilian life has become more prominent, the challenges faced by returning service members in adapting to campus life and social environments have become a significant concern within the academic community. As reported by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the number of veterans enrolled in higher education institutions exceeded one million by 2015. Nevertheless, these returning service members frequently encounter a distinctive array of psychological and social obstacles, including post-war post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety disorders, and cultural discrepancies with their fellow students [1].

The challenges faced by military personnel reintegrating into campus life extend beyond academic stress. They must also navigate the complexities of reestablishing social networks, managing relationships with peers and faculty, and developing a sense of self in this novel environment. Despite their efficacy in certain respects, conventional psychotherapeutic methods frequently prove inadequate for addressing the intricate challenges confronting military personnel upon their return to academic settings. Consequently, an increasing number of researchers and practitioners have commenced investigating the potential of integrated

music and art therapy as a novel intervention to facilitate the adaptation of re-entry military personnel to campus life and the social environment.

Integrated music and art therapy provides re-entry military personnel with an effective means of stress relief, mental health improvement, and enhanced socialization. This is achieved through the non-verbal expression of creativity and engagement with artistic activities. The existing research evidence indicates that the creation of art serves as a conduit for emotional catharsis and also facilitates an individual's intrinsic self-awareness and emotional regulation. In contrast, music therapy facilitates relaxation and emotional regulation through the interaction of sounds and rhythms, thereby enhancing overall well-being. This paper aims to examine the benefits of integrated music and arts therapy for the social integration of re-entry military personnel in the schooling environment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of Military Personnel Who Have Returned to School

The term "veteran" is often used to refer to individuals who have completed their military service and subsequently enrolled in an institution of higher education. In accordance with the definition provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the term "military re-entry" encompasses individuals who have served in the military and have elected to resume their studies following their discharge from military service for a multitude of reasons. A significant proportion of these individuals have been exposed to considerable levels of psychological and physical stress, and in some cases have suffered severe trauma, during their period of service. It is notable that returning military personnel often exhibit notable differences from the traditional student population. Firstly, they are typically older and may already have familial and social obligations. Secondly, they have developed a high degree of self-discipline and independence in the military, but in civilian society and campus environments, these traits may sometimes result in a sense of being out of place in their surroundings. Moreover, returning military personnel may encounter further obstacles due to post-war trauma and mental health concerns [4].

2.2. Transitioning back to school for military personnel Challenges

The transition from military to campus life presents a series of challenges for returning military personnel. These challenges include not only adapting to a new academic environment but also addressing mental health concerns, rebuilding social networks, and navigating cultural differences. In particular, a considerable number of reentry military personnel have been subjected to considerable psychological stress and trauma during their tenure in the military. Their discharge is frequently accompanied by a range of mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety disorders (5). Such mental health issues have the potential to impact not only daily life and academic performance, but also social interactions, leading to feelings of isolation and unease.

It is not uncommon for returning military personnel to feel isolated and alienated within the campus environment. This sense of isolation can be attributed to the discrepancies in age, experience, and lifestyle between these individuals and the typical student population. A significant number of reentry military personnel have reported difficulties in developing robust friendships with their younger classmates and integrating into the campus social scene. This sense of social isolation serves to exacerbate the psychological stress and adjustment difficulties that they are already experiencing.

For a significant proportion of returning military personnel, resuming their studies entails confronting novel academic challenges. Such individuals may perceive deficiencies in their study skills and knowledge base, potentially resulting from a prolonged period of

disengagement from the academic environment. Furthermore, the confluence of academic stress and mental health concerns frequently impedes the ability of returning service members to concentrate and remain motivated in the classroom.

Individuals who have been reinstated to the military are typically instructed in the importance of discipline and teamwork. However, these qualities are not always correctly interpreted or appreciated in the context of a university campus. It is imperative that they adapt to the transition from the highly structured military life to the relative freedom of campus life. This cultural difference also creates additional stress associated with the need to adapt to a new environment.

Young veterans in their 20s may also encounter an age gap, whereby they are several years older than the majority of their classmates. This can result in feelings of social disconnection and isolation. In addition to differences in life experience, these individuals often have significantly different life experiences than their peers, which may present challenges in identifying shared interests and developing close relationships. In addition to the challenges of academic adjustment, returning service members may also need to adapt to different learning styles and rhythms. The transition from military training to academic learning can be a significant undertaking, requiring time and effort to adjust to the distinct approaches to learning and the different pace of instruction. Additionally, there is the pressure of employment, as a considerable number of young veterans may be anxious about identifying suitable employment prospects following the conclusion of their studies, particularly in the context of an economic downturn or a highly competitive job market.

2.3. Theoretical foundations of art therapy

Art therapy represents a therapeutic approach that facilitates an individual's mental and emotional healing through the creation and appreciation of art. Two common forms of art therapy are music therapy and painting therapy.

2.4. Impact of Art Therapy on Veterans

The extant literature indicates that art therapy has a substantial, beneficial impact on veterans. The practice of painting therapy has been demonstrated to improve the quality of life, sense of hope, and overall well-being of hospitalized veterans (11). Similarly, music therapy has demonstrated considerable efficacy in assisting homeless veterans in their transition from isolation to community integration. Moreover, art therapy can assist veterans in coping with post-war trauma by facilitating the expression and release of inner pain and stress through creativity [12].

A systematic literature review indicates that integrated music and art therapy, when employed as an effective psychological intervention, can assist military personnel in adapting more effectively to campus life and the social environment. These findings provide a robust theoretical foundation and reference point for the empirical study presented in this paper.

3. Study design

3.1. Purpose of the study

The objective of this study is to evaluate and examine the impact of art therapy on the reintegration of military personnel. The use of two art forms, namely music and painting, enables re-entry military personnel to identify and express their emotions, particularly the short-term effects on their mental health and socialization skills. This, in turn, facilitates their social adaptation and psychological well-being.

3.2. Subjects of the study

The participants in this study were re-entry military personnel, i.e., veterans who returned to school to further their education at the end of their military service. These individuals have dual identities - both as former military personnel and current students. By returning to school, returning military personnel demonstrate their active pursuit of knowledge and personal growth. In an academic setting, this group may face unique social, emotional, and physical challenges. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to provide effective intervention strategies for this specific group by evaluating the effectiveness of art therapy for re-entry military personnel.

Re-enrolled military personnel enrolled in a university were selected as the study population, and all study participants volunteered to participate in this study and signed an informed consent form. 1. Had served in the military and had been discharged. 2. Currently enrolled in an institution of higher education. 3. Volunteered to participate in this study and signed an informed consent form. 4.

The final number of willing participants was 8, aged 21-28.

3.3. Research methodology

In order to evaluate the efficacy of integrated music and art therapy on military personnel who resume their studies, this study employed a pre- and post-test design with a paired-samples t-test. The following section presents the specific data analysis methods and results.

3.3.1. Pre-testing

Prior to the commencement of the intervention, all study participants were administered baseline measures, including assessments of depression, anxiety, and stress in mental health. A specific set of assessment tools was employed, namely the Mental Health Scale.

The Self-Rating Depression Scale (SDS) was developed by William W. K. Zung for the purpose of assessing the severity of an individual's depressive symptoms. The scale comprises 20 items, each of which is rated on a scale of 1 to 4, with a total score ranging from 20 to 80. Higher scores indicate a greater severity of depressive symptoms. A score of 25 to 49 is indicative of mild depression, 50 to 59 is indicative of moderate depression, and a score of 60 or above is indicative of severe depression.

The Self-Rating Anxiety Scale (SAS) is a self-report instrument designed to assess the severity of an individual's anxiety symptoms. Additionally, the SAS was developed by William W.K. Zung for the purpose of evaluating an individual's anxiety symptoms. The scale comprises 20 items, each of which is rated on a scale of 1 to 4, with a total score ranging from 20 to 80. A higher score indicates a greater severity of anxiety symptoms. A score of 45 or less is indicative of a normal range, while a score of 45-59 is indicative of mild anxiety, a score of 60-74 is indicative of moderate anxiety, and a score of 75 or more is indicative of severe anxiety.

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is a psychometric instrument designed to assess an individual's perception of stress. The PSS-10, developed by Cohen et al., is a tool for assessing an individual's level of perceived stress over the past month. It consists of 10 items, each rated on a scale of 0 to 4, with a total score ranging from 0 to 40. Higher scores are indicative of elevated levels of perceived stress. A score of 0-13 is indicative of low stress, a score of 14-26 is indicative of moderate stress, and a score of 27-40 is indicative of high stress.

3.3.2. Intervention methods

Step 1: Emotional Correspondence Octave

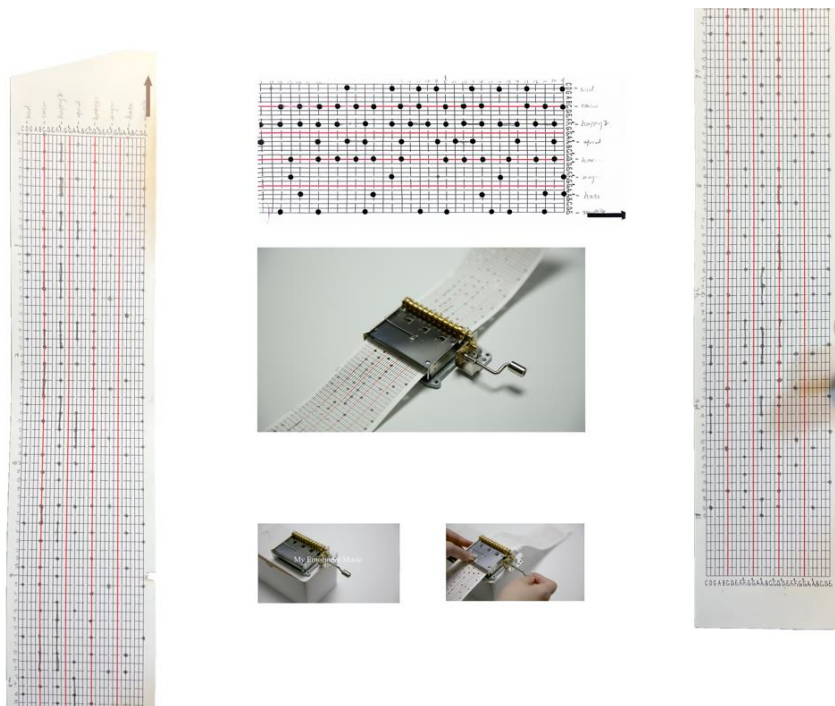


Figure 1 Eight mood music production

In this study, we first mapped the eight basic emotions proposed by Pluchek (anger, disgust, fear, sadness, anticipation, joy, surprise, and trust) onto the notes of an octave. Specifically, we punch holes in the octave paper where the X-axis represents the emotion and the Y-axis represents time. In this way, the combination of emotion and time creates a unique formula for emotional expression: emotion + time = life. In this way, subjects can express their emotions and life experiences through music.

The purpose of this step is to help re-entry military personnel create a piece of music that reflects their emotions and their lives through music, thus facilitating their understanding and expression of their own emotions.

Step 2: Emotional color and shape design



Fig. 2 Color and shape design of emotions

Next, we chose specific colors for each emotion and designed corresponding emotional shapes. Under the guidance of the therapist, the subjects used these colors and shapes to create their own emotional paintings. This step was designed to further help the returning soldiers understand and express their emotions through visual art.

Step 3: Integrating Emotional Music and Emotional Painting



Figure 3 Applying colors and shapes to the picture

Finally, we combine the emotional music created by the subjects with the colors and shapes of the emotions and integrate them into a complete emotional painting. In this way, each subject receives a little song that reflects his or her emotions and an emotional painting, thus achieving emotional fulfillment and self-expression.

This integrated art therapy approach is designed to help returning military personnel better understand and process their emotions and improve their emotional expression and mental health. This study evaluates the effects of art therapy on the social adjustment and mental health of reenlisted soldiers by combining two art forms: music and painting.



Figure 4 Demonstration with Veterans

3.3.3. Pre- and post-test data

Table 1 Self-rated Depression Scale (SDS)

	Hu wei	Zhang Le	Wei Jia	Zhou Ruoyu	Liu Feng	Huang Shan	Yan Xi Bo	Zhang Jun Wei
Pre-intervention test score	45	55	60	52	30	58	25	35
Intervention Posttest Score	40	48	52	45	28	50	22	30

The results in Table 1 show that participants were assessed before and after the intervention to quantify the effect of the intervention. Before the intervention, the participants' mean score on the Depression Self-Rating Scale (SDS) was 45.00 (standard deviation = 13.16); after the intervention, the mean score decreased to 39.38 (standard deviation = 12.12). Using a paired samples t-test, we found a t-statistic of 5.67 (p-value = 0.001), indicating that the participants' scores were significantly lower after the intervention than before, and the difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This result suggests that the implemented intervention was effective in alleviating the participants' depressive symptoms.

Table 2 Self-Assessment Scale for Anxiety (SAS)

	Hu wei	Zhang Le	Wei Jia	Zhou Ruoyu	Liu Feng	Huang Shan	Yan Xi Bo	Zhang Jun Wei
Pre-intervention test score	70	65	75	68	45	72	35	55
Intervention Posttest Score	62	58	67	60	42	65	30	50

The results in Table 2 show that participants' anxiety levels were assessed by pre and post-intervention tests to quantify the effect of the intervention. Before the intervention, the mean of the participants' Self-Assessment Scale for Anxiety (SAS) scores was 60.63 (standard deviation = 14.02); after the intervention, the mean decreased to 54.25 (standard deviation = 13.31). Using a paired-samples t-test, we found a t-statistic of 6.13 (p-value = 0.0005), which indicated that participants' scores were significantly lower post-intervention than pre-intervention, and the difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This result suggests that integrated music and art therapy has a significant effect in alleviating the anxiety symptoms of military personnel who are resuming school.

Table 3 Stress Self-Rating Scale (PSS)

	Hu wei	Zhang Le	Wei Jia	Zhou Ruoyu	Liu Feng	Huang Shan	Yan Xi Bo	Zhang Jun Wei
Pre-intervention test score	28	32	35	30	20	33	22	25
Intervention Posttest Score	21	25	28	24	18	27	19	22

The results in Table 3 show that participants' stress levels were assessed through pre- and post-intervention measures. Before the intervention, the mean value of participants' stress self-assessment scale (PSS) scores was 28.12 (standard deviation = 5.85); after the intervention, the mean value decreased to 23.50 (standard deviation = 4.97). The paired samples t-test showed a t-statistic of 7.24 (p-value = 0.0002), indicating that the PSS scores were significantly lower after the intervention than before the intervention, and the difference was statistically

significant ($p < 0.05$). This result suggests that the intervention was effective in reducing the stress levels of the participants.

4. Conclusion

In summary, this study verified the positive effects of integrated music and painting therapy on the mental health and social adaptation of re-entry military personnel. Through art therapy, re-enrolled military personnel are not only able to express and deal with complex emotions and alleviate symptoms such as PTSD, anxiety and depression, but also enhance self-knowledge and emotion-regulation ability, social interaction with students of the same age, and facilitate adaptation to campus life. Compared to traditional psychotherapeutic approaches, art therapy provides a nonverbal avenue for emotional expression that is particularly well suited to address the unique psychological and social challenges faced by veterans. Therefore, it is recommended that integrated music and painting therapy be widely used in higher education institutions and re-entry military service centers to help more veterans transition smoothly to civilian life and achieve full psychological and social rehabilitation. Future studies should further explore the specific implementation methods and long-term effects of different art therapy forms to optimize intervention strategies and enhance the quality of life and well-being of re-enlisted military personnel.

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