



Art therapy online: considerations for adapting art therapy at People Know How

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Abstract

This article will discuss the important points to consider to maintain an effective therapeutic relationship when adapting art therapy to take place online. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, People Know How are in the process of adapting their Arts Therapies project to their blended model of both online and in-person services. The challenges present through online technologies can be alleviated by prioritising active communication, feedback, the establishment of boundaries, and the distribution of resources for young people. Consideration of these elements will allow for an effective Arts Therapies project at People Know How, to continually support the mental health and wellbeing of the young people during a particularly difficult time.

Keywords

Art therapy, wellbeing, young people, mental health, zoom fatigue, COVID-19, blended model, connectivity, creativity

Key points

- People Know How are in the process of adapting their Arts Therapies project to fit their 'blended model', involving some new online and socially distant elements.
- Switching to online technologies has caused practical issues with accessibility and connectivity, alongside concerns surrounding the potential of 'zoom fatigue' to disrupt the therapeutic relationship.
- These challenges can be considered and minimised at People Know How by paying particular attention to active communication, feedback, the establishment of boundaries, and the distribution of resources for young people. Other charities and organisations have taken these factors into account when recently developing online (art) therapy projects.
- Art therapy and the arts have a great power of encouraging togetherness, community spirit and "creative chain reactions" (Potash et al 107) as part of online networks.
- Art therapy remains a vital resource for many people across the world, particularly during times of heightened stress where the opportunity for self-expression can have a significant benefit on young people's mental health. Scholars have demonstrated how online art therapy is achievable when involving a flexible approach to new challenges, adapting to encourage self-expression, connection and wellbeing.

Introduction

People Know How are working to adapt their Arts Therapies project to a blended model of delivery, part of their Positive Transitions service supporting children and young people. In light of this, this article will evaluate the important points to consider when adapting art therapies to operate online and will suggest what should be implemented into People Know How's sessions to ensure the wellbeing of the young people at the charity is continually prioritised. Different organisations, including local ones such the Teapot Trust charity, NHS Education for Scotland, and The Family Institute at Northwestern University in America, have adapted therapy services to operate remotely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their recent reviews have stressed the necessity of maintaining a therapeutic relationship and have highlighted that there should be a focus on facilitating active communication online to ensure the therapeutic relationship is maintained. The reception of regular feedback from the young person is important to ensure the therapy is accessible, beneficial, and that they have all the resources required. Active communication and regular feedback are also vital when prioritising privacy, confidentiality and the establishment of boundaries during the process of art therapies, particularly during a tenuous and stressful time where online technologies can exacerbate anxieties and cause 'zoom fatigue'.

In conducting a systematic review which evaluated the results from school-based art therapy, Moula outlines the correlation between art therapy and the improved mental health of young people, concluding that "art therapy is effective in improving children's quality of life; anxiety; self-concept; problem-solving skills, attitudes towards school; emotional and behavioural difficulties" (88). Art therapy operates as a form of "non-verbal, emotional relief" (Moula 89), particularly valuable for children and young people, who can have more difficulty expressing emotions verbally at a younger age where vocabulary and skills are less developed. Significantly, Moula emphasises the expression of emotions for children as essential to mental health,

especially when working through trauma or bereavement, which are notably heightened during health crises (89). This is furthered by Potash et al analysis of the role of art therapy practices during different pandemics and epidemics. During the Ebola epidemic in 2014-15, "art in the context of psychosocial support groups allowed for the expression of emotions both positive and negative—gratitude, love, sadness, fear, anxiety, depression, anger, disbelief, grief—while engendering a sense of control in a safe environment. Art making altered perspectives and combated disconnection." (Potash et al 105). This indicates that art therapy is a vital resource for mental health during pandemics and epidemics where difficult emotions, experiences, and losses can be heightened, and emphasises the importance of art therapies continuing remotely, to continually prioritise the mental health of the young people at People Know How during a difficult time.

Art therapy can be defined as "a form of psychotherapy that uses art medium as the primary mode of communication. The main aim of art therapy is to enable psychological change and personal growth within a psychotherapeutic relationship, in a safe and facilitating environment" (British Association of Art Therapy, 2014; Moula 89). People Know How foster this safe environment and therapeutic relationship through their Arts Therapies project for young people, with use of "different materials, exercises and artistic methods for young people to communicate their emotions and explore the support they need." ("Arts Therapies"). Yet, a recent webinar conducted by NHS art therapists voiced concerns around the technological impact on this relationship, stating that during art therapy: "the quality of the relationship is at the centre" (Art Therapies Webinar 03:33) and that "there are many fears and challenges in a virtual environment", which offers a significant difference in communication to a physical environment, with a main concern being, "will we still be able to have this quality of relationship?" (Art Therapies Webinar 04:05-04:11). Through evaluation of how other organisations have mediated issues of disconnect, this article will reflect

upon the important aspects to consider when conducting the blended model.

Maintaining a therapeutic relationship

The main concern when adapting art therapy online is how online technologies may disrupt the therapeutic relationship, which is central to art therapy, as Moula highlights, the “personal growth” of the client is bound within “a psychotherapeutic relationship” (89).

A recent People Know How article examined ‘zoom fatigue’ during COVID-19 and its negative impact on mental health and communication, highlighting how continuous partial attention, the active engagement of the brain on various tasks “for long periods of time can create anxiety and requires a large amount of focus, leading to zoom fatigue.” (Kinahan 2). Kinahan importantly notes that “video calls limit the ability of the brain to pick up and interpret non-verbal cues, which are crucial within social interaction.” (2). These non-verbal cues are also a vital element of the communication between the therapist and young person during art therapy. Burgoyne and Cohn outline the importance of non-verbal cues for therapists and how they are reduced when switching to teletherapy “feedback from clients’ non-verbal behaviours and facial expressions is far more limited as it is impacted both by the technology and the equipment the client and therapist are using” (979). Burgoyne and Cohn also recognise the problem of ‘zoom fatigue’ for the therapeutic relationship, noting how “the lack of visual breaks and need to maintain a constant gaze and hyper focus to compensate for the flattening quality of the medium is demanding.” (980). Zoom fatigue is clearly outlined as having the potential to disrupt the relationship between the young person and therapist as well as exacerbate anxieties, therefore how technology can be a challenge through its ability to cause practical and emotional disconnect is an important factor to consider when adapting art therapy for an online service. However, organisations have outlined strategies for ensuring active communication and flexibility to maintain wellbeing. As Burgoyne and Cohn state, “our therapists generally have found that they

need to manage their expectations” and “slow down.” (980) when approaching these potential issues. Therefore, a level of flexibility and use of active communication could be considered when students and therapists plan for online art therapy at People Know How.

Active communication

Recent reviews of adapted therapies have shown there should be emphasis on facilitating active communication, to make up for the possible loss of non-verbal cues from online technologies. This includes encouraging as much engagement from the client as possible, to curb potential anxiety, reduce ‘zoom fatigue’ and prioritise the therapeutic relationship. Burgoyne and Cohn discuss factors to take into account to facilitate active communication, as a result of a review of their services for families that had shifted to 100% teletherapy during COVID-19. For instance, they demonstrate ways to keep remote therapy sessions engaging for young people, such as flexibility in changing the duration of sessions; “there are many examples of teens responding well to teletherapy when sessions are shorter and more frequent.” (Burgoyne and Cohn 983). They also discuss that for children, “in the virtual environment, having a flexible plan and a variety of toys, props, and materials has proven essential. With one 11-year-old client with ADHD, changing the structure of the session itself proved helpful. The therapist distributed several five-minute breaks throughout the session, each with different activities to choose from. Each post-break transition became an opportunity to help the client practice re-focusing.” (Burgoyne and Cohn 981). Therefore, ensuring the focus and communication between young person and therapist can be helped through the construction of an active and flexible environment, including breaks and particular objects to ground, focus, and switch attention away from the virtual environment itself and onto the process of therapy and self-expression.

The emphasis on situating attention away from the virtual environment, and grounding it

within the act of active communication between therapist and client, is also demonstrated through the NHS art therapy webinar. They conducted a role play of an online art therapy technique. This involved an online one-to-one video call of a grounding technique, where the client was asked to select an object they wished to work with (Art Therapies Webinar 16:42-22:17). This demonstrated a flexible approach, including an element of choice, that focused on the client's needs. The therapist of this role play illustrated that, "part of the work is about trying to be very transparent and show what your mind is thinking" (Art Therapies Webinar 23:09), outlining the importance of "using empathic validation...to check in with people, to help people feel supported, heard and validated" (Art Therapies Webinar 23:28). The therapeutic relationship was maintained to a strong degree as the client worked with plasticine alongside the therapist and described how it made them feel. It prioritised the communication between therapist and client through experiencing the art object at the same time, which also tackled the possible disconnect from being onscreen, "having the 'making' as well meant there were natural breaks in eye-contact which could mediate the intensity of the gaze" (Art Therapies Webinar 24:44), which is important when considering the alleviation of 'zoom fatigue' during art therapy sessions at People Know How.

Collaboration and feedback

The NHS webinar stresses the importance of collaborative projects that support collaborative relationships, and how this can foster an environment for feedback: "In the online space we are working creatively with the child or young person to introduce imagery, sound and making in a way that's tailored to them as an individual...engaging all the senses. We found it was really important to facilitate tactile engagement early on and explore what we need to touch, see, smell and hear that would allow us to engage the senses in a different way, be with and create alongside one another" (Art Therapies Webinar 30:38- 31:10) This also relates to consideration of youth participation theories.

Botchwey et al consider Arnstein's 'Ladder of Citizen Participation', which examines levels of participation in decision-making processes. Botchwey et al examine the role young people in this notion: "Arnstein's "A Ladder of Citizen Participation" provides useful insights into how youth can participate in decision making through partnerships with adults" (255). Considering how power operates, and the notion of 'power with' creating a therapeutic relationship that fosters collaboration and the young person's ability to voice and decide what they need, is central to effective online therapies. As the NHS webinar outlines, the "increased use of more explicit checking in, planning, and gathering feedback from the child" (Art Therapies Webinar 32:12), is essential. Therefore, collaboration is important to consider when establishing how to best support the mental health and wellbeing of young people undergoing art therapy online, as it engages active and participatory communication online, and encourages feedback.

The importance of collaborative relationships that allow for feedback is also echoed by the Teapot Trust as an essential element of online art therapy. The charity switched their art therapy services online at the outbreak of COVID-19 for young people with chronic health conditions. Their June art therapy pilot involved expression through drawing, poetry and sketchbooks, which they outline as being "helpful in supporting young people between sessions, helping them to express their emotions during the week and sharing their experiences in the group" (7). Creating this thread of reflective practice allows for the growth of the young person's wellbeing and is a means to produce feedback on how the young person is receiving the art therapy. Therefore, creating a similar collaborative space, with reflective workbooks or journals throughout the week to then discuss and expand upon as a group, would be a beneficial initiative to introduce into People Know How's services.

Privacy, confidentiality, and the establishment of boundaries

Privacy, confidentiality, and the establishment of boundaries are a vital aspect of planning online art therapies. At People Know How, the staff are in the process of setting up service user accounts for young people since COVID-19. These will be used for the Arts Therapies programme that will take place online. To maintain confidentiality, names have been made anonymous, and to undergo video calls with the young people there has to be an organised meeting between the staff member and young person prior to the call. During online therapies, young people should have a more active role in “defining and thinking about their own boundaries” (Art Therapies Webinar 27:06), as the therapists are coming into their space. This can be a positive element to online art therapy as it is a useful skill for young people to think about, how boundaries “can be translated into their wider lives beyond the therapeutic sessions” (Art Therapies Webinar 27:18). The webinar highlights the necessity of establishing safety planning with the young person before the session. This involves establishing what the young person feels comfortable to share in a space where there can be potential to be overheard. Burgoyne and Cohn also claim it is important young people cannot be overheard and feel comfortable, and offering solutions to this, for instance where “parents have offered to take a walk during this time” (983). The webinar also notes the importance of establishing in advance; “is there a safe adult at home for during or after the session” (Art Therapies Webinar 27:55) and how to contact that adult if there is risk of harm or distress to the young person (Art Therapies Webinar 27:58).

Additionally, Burgoyne and Cohn reflect on the possible connection of negative emotions to personal space. During teletherapy, “identifying what physical space the client will use for therapy has proven important regardless of the client’s initial comfort level. A location that does not carry associations that are incompatible with therapy is helpful. This is not always practical given space constraints; problem solving is often necessary.” (982).

The art therapies webinar also raises this as an important point, to be mindful of “histories of trauma that may not feel appropriate to be bringing into that personal space” if the young person is having therapy in their bedroom (Art Therapies Webinar 28:54). The webinar notes that the young person’s space can be set up in a different way during sessions to change the associations of therapy the young person may then attach to it (29:15). Therefore, the establishment of boundaries, and safe spaces that minimise the risk of young people being overheard or distressed is important for People Know How to consider as part of their adapted services. Moreover, the art packs at People Know how could be a useful tool to allow young people to set up a new, separate art space at home just during the sessions. This highlights the importance of accessible art therapies and the distribution of resources for young people.

Accessibility and resources

Accessibility is incredibly important to prioritise when considering art therapy online. Digital exclusion can be a barrier to young people accessing art therapies, and it is vital to ensure that young people have internet access and access to art resources. This is emphasised by the art therapy webinar which discusses the importance of identifying the tools required before the session starts, for instance in music therapy, and the instruments for video calls: “what may need to be sent out, borrowed, or what can we create at home” (Art Therapies Webinar 47:10). People Know How has available art resources to allow for inclusivity, which is vital when prioritising the tackling of inequality and ensuring arts therapies can take place successfully online. Their emergency COVID-response project, Computer Delivery, is a solution to this, “we began Computer Delivery when lockdown began, refurbishing donated devices and delivering them to people in Edinburgh and East Lothian experiencing digital exclusion, in partnership with Venture Scotland. The project grew popular quickly, demonstrating the effect that lockdown has had in revealing the prevalence of digital exclusion in our communities” (Baldacchino). Furthermore, as part of their group sessions

for young people, Pupils Know How, they have been delivering arts materials for online group sessions. This has been an effective strategy, acting as a support network for young people, and fostering self-expression to boost wellbeing. This demonstrates that forms of expression through art can take place online within the charity and be accessible.

Community and ‘creative chain reactions’

Prioritising accessibility through the use of various online resources also emphasises community support and wellbeing, as a vital benefit of art therapy. Potash et al discuss the importance and benefits of online “creative chain reactions” (107) crafted through art therapies; that art therapists have the ability to amplify hope through online communities which “can make far reaching and lasting positive impacts that can spread easily through our social media and internet connections” (Potash et al 107). The Teapot Trust’s online resource bank demonstrates a ‘creative chain reaction’: “in addition to being able to provide art therapy online, we have been adding to the resource hub on our website, which now features lots of video and worksheet activities from our art therapists... ‘Emotion Cards’, which can help children understand what they are feeling and be able to share their emotions with others more easily.” (9). People Know How has the ability to produce similar creative chains through resource banks and their strong online and social media presence.

Therefore, there is a clear sense of the arts encouraging wellbeing and togetherness, with many art therapists establishing innovative ways to maintain a sense of community spirit fostered by art therapies. Another example of this was in Australia. During the outbreak of the pandemic, forms of ‘window therapy’ emerged, originating at a care home in Sydney which involved art drawn on either side of the window by the artist and the residents, in order to engage residents with the arts and boost mental health (Walker). Despite challenges, flexible approaches to support an effective therapeutic relationship and the

wellbeing of the client are demonstrated as achievable. Burgoyne and Cohn evaluate in their conclusion the continuing importance of teletherapy “despite changes in delivery, our experience with respect to bonds, in the context of the pandemic, is that our existing clients were grateful to have no lapse in their treatment and many reported they felt cared for” (980). It is clearly demonstrated that forms of remote therapy, despite the challenges outlined, can continue to benefit mental health and allow for the creative self-expression of young people at People Know How.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the challenges of adapting online arts therapies for young people are raised by a variety of organisations. Technology has the potential to cause practical and social disconnect, and heighten anxiety and zoom fatigue. The transition to online art therapy sessions as part of the blended model at People Know How involves recognition of these concerns, particularly the negative impact of zoom fatigue on online communication, and the subsequent reduction of non-verbal cues that are essential to art therapy and the therapeutic relationship. However, organisations have demonstrated through their recent changes in practices the continued ability to maintain a beneficial therapeutic relationship remotely. This will be achievable at People Know How through prioritising active communication, by regularly checking in with young people to establish their needs and maintaining a level of flexibility to adapt the therapy to suit what is beneficial to them during and after the sessions. Accessibility is vital to tackle digital exclusion, inequalities, and to ensure the young person has the resources needed for effective therapy. Moreover, the establishment of safe spaces and boundaries is necessary to ensure the safety and comfort of the young person, reflected in People Know How’s new confidentiality policy for online video calls. The arts and online arts therapies continue to generate valuable connections and ‘creative chain reactions’ (Potash et al) where resources are shared to encourage the creative

expression and wellbeing of young people, and People Know How has the ability to foster these creative networks. Despite challenges posed by remote art therapy switches, flexibility and the consideration of clear and active communication for an effective therapeutic relationship can allow for new and innovative forms of art therapy online, that continue to operate as an essential resource to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people at People Know How.

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