

Rehabilitation: Art Therapy Project

April 28, 2023 – July 29, 2023, Kyiv, Ukraine

Russia's military aggression has brought trials to the lives of every Ukrainian. As a result, many people are experiencing stress, exhaustion, fatigue, devastation, anxiety, frustration and uncertainty. At the same time, the war is reinforcing traditional social roles: warrior for men and guardian for women. Some women, along with men, took up arms and stood to defend their homeland. For most women, the mission to protect and organise their own lives and the lives of their children in the war was the same crucial. They left their hometowns, where it had become dangerous to stay, and found themselves in completely unfamiliar places that provided physical safety and the chance to survive. According to reports, some 20 million Ukrainian citizens have either moved abroad or remain internally displaced. Migration, as Leon and Rebeca Grinberg note in their article *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration*¹, in itself, even outside the context of war, brings "disastrous changes" to a personality and inevitably leads to the disorganisation of some mental structures. In favourable circumstances, these "disastrous changes" become a source of development and growth, but in other circumstances, they can lead to latent pathology and become a trigger for the onset of serious mental disorders. According to the WHO, 50% to 80% of refugees have mental disorders.²

Meeting the child's physiological needs is not enough for the child's psychosocial development. A child has an innate developmental programme that is the core of their maturation and unfolding potential. The implementation of this programme is highly dependent on the social environment. An unfavourable environment can threaten a child's inner world. For instance, a mother who is

¹ Psychoanalysis and Culture. A Kleinian Perspective. Ed. By D.Bell, Karnac Books, 1999

² Parenthood and Immigration in Psychoanalysis: Shaping the Therapeutic Setting Edited By Marie Moro, Geneviève Welsh, London, 2022. – 170 p.

constantly exposed to a traumatic situation may not be able to be an adequate social partner for a child due to her mental state. Insufficient sensitivity of the mother to the child's emotional needs leads to frustration in the child's communication and emotional needs, disruption of emotional regulation, cognitive functions and social skills. Thus, following the above considerations, both children and their mothers are in equal need of psychological rehabilitation in crisis circumstances.

In order to provide psychological support to women and children, the Rehabilitation: Art Therapy project was launched. The project was initiated by Taisiya Savchuk-Polishchuk, the President of The Aleksandr Savchuk Foundation; the project was advised by Natalia Shpytkovska, the CEO of the M17 Contemporary Art Center. The idea of the project was developed under the supervision of project manager Nata Katerynenko, head of the NGO "MITEC" («МИТЕЦ»), co-founder and editor-in-chief of the "MITEC" («МИТЕЦ») portal.

The Rehabilitation: Art Therapy project was created as an artistic and psychotherapeutic rehabilitation programme for mothers and children affected by Russian aggression and in need of psychological support.

The aim of the project is to support the sound mental health and psychological resilience of mothers and children in conditions of crisis through art therapy.

The project programme included 16 workshops in various art forms led by artists and 16 psychological reflection groups with professional therapists over 4 months. During the first hour of the session, two artists worked separately, each with a group of children or a group of mothers. The second hour was dedicated to meetings with psychologists. The adult participants in the psychological reflection groups had chances to realise and analyse their own feelings, as well as to share their experiences and thoughts that arose during the workshops. For children, the psychological therapy group was introduced in the form of games and training exercises, that were designed to relieve emotional stress, restore a sense of security, and increase self-esteem and self-confidence.

Art workshops were held by artists Nikita Vlasov, Yuriy Pikul, Khrystyna Holovko, Oleksandra Makarska, Svitlana Ostrovska, Yuriy Syvyryn, Vyacheslav Snisarenko, Lyudmyla and Vadym Shapovalov.

Psychological support was provided by Natalia Kolokoltseva, a practical psychologist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist, and Anzhela Timakova, a practical psychologist and certified ICF coach.

The theory and methodology of the Rehabilitation: Art Therapy project is based on the theoretical and practical principles of using art as a means of psychocorrection and rehabilitation, the psychoanalytic concept of understanding the nature and mechanisms of fine arts, the psychology of personality development and the psychological characteristics of child-parent relationships.

The analysis of modern innovative technologies of psychological support for individuals in the circumstances of crisis shows that one of the most effective, gentle and friendly methods of psychocorrectional influence is art therapy as a specialised form of psychotherapy based on art, primarily visual, and creative activity.

The use of artistic and psychotherapeutic techniques in wartime can effectively serve as a tool for diagnosing anxieties, providing relief from the significantly disturbed during wartime psycho-emotional needs, and gaining new experiences of reflective activity and self-regulation of the emotional state. According to L. Firsova³, art-therapeutic technologies are based on archaic art forms that were preserved in folk art and which are characterised by naivety, ingenuousness, and reliance on the symbolic language of the unconscious. Such art forms are a source of human mental health. In most cases, artistic work evokes positive emotions and is aimed at achieving the desired changes in self-awareness, therefore it helps to overcome apathy, frustration, the effects of psychological trauma, and helps to form a more positive outlook on life.

The advantages of using art compared to other forms of psycho-correctional work include the predominantly non-verbal nature of interaction. When working

³ Фірсова Л. С. Арт-терапія в педагогічній роботі / Л. С. Фірсова. – К., 2011. – 98 с. [Firsova L.S. Art therapy in pedagogical work / L.S. Firsova, Kyiv 2011, 98 p.]

with adults, unconstructive mechanisms of psychological defence that might occur in the process of usual verbal contact are eliminated or reduced, and therefore, an adult can assess their feelings and perception of the world around them in a more balanced way. When working with children, the non-verbal nature of interaction helps children of all ages, including those with underdeveloped speech (*the youngest child participating in the project was 4 years old*), to express their feelings, needs and motivations for their behaviour.

The participants of the Rehabilitation: Art Therapy project were internally displaced persons. They found themselves in difficult living conditions and an unfamiliar social environment. Creative activity is a means of unity and can stimulate the desire to expand interpersonal relationships, to regain a sense of belonging to a particular social group and society as a whole.

The innovation of the Rehabilitation: Art Therapy project is in the following:

- Art workshops are delivered by professional painters and sculptors
- Art-therapeutic methods used in the workshops include drawing, clay therapy and collage
- Nondirected method of workshops and reflective groups
- Workshops and reflective groups are organised for mothers and children separately

The rationale for the importance of workshops by professional artists and sculptors can be based on a psychoanalytic understanding of the nature and mechanisms of fine art. According to the psychoanalytic concept, artistic activity is related to fantasies and dreams since, like them, it plays a compensatory role and relieves mental tension caused by unsatisfied natural and cultural needs. Fine art is a compromise form of their satisfaction, which is carried out not directly, but indirectly, that is, through artistic images. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, separated the artist's fantasies from those of the average person. For an average person, "access to pleasure from the sources of fantasy is very limited". The artist, on the other hand, is able to use the sources of fantasy to the extent that they achieve an incredible energy release. The artist resorts to the realm of fantasy,

not being satisfied with reality, he distances from reality and transfers all the interests to the reconstruction of desires in the world of imagination. "The psychic constitution of the artist is expressed in the ability to sublimate and the plasticity with which the artist satisfies their desires. While the average person does not know how to enjoy and be satisfied with fantasies, the artist knows how to handle them so that they lose their personal connotation and can please us" [Freud, 1916].

British psychoanalyst Hanna Segal⁴ in her paper "A Psycho-Analytical Approach to Aesthetics" stated, that the artist aims to create a world of their own. One of the main differences between art and imitation or superficially "pleasing" artworks is that neither imitation nor "pleasing" artworks ever achieve the creation of a completely new reality.

When the world around and inside a person is shattered, when their loved ones are lost or "broken into pieces", and when the person is in hopeless despair, they have to recreate their own "world" anew, put the fragments together, breathe life into the "dead parts", and recreate the life of the inner world and their self. Artist, like any other person, naturally finds themselves in destructive, traumatic circumstances, but unlike others, they are able to cope with them by creating something new, creatively working through the challenges and trials. During the workshops, the artists had the opportunity to share this ability with the project participants, so that the latter were able to expand their range of ways of overcoming life's challenges, actualise their resources, and balance and harmonise their own mental systems.

The variety of art therapy technologies is wide and diverse, however, in the Rehabilitation: Art Therapy project, we focused on drawing, clay therapy and collage as the most appropriate for the participants' expected needs for finding and restoring mental resources, strengthening resilience and resistance to stress in wartime.

Drawing is a creative process that allows one to bypass the "censorship of consciousness" and therefore to feel and better understand oneself, express one's thoughts and feelings freely, free oneself from conflicts and anxieties, appreciate the

⁴ Segal H. (1952). A Psycho-Analytical Approach to Aesthetics // International Journal of Psycho-Analysis. 1952. №33. C.196-207.

significance of one's feelings, and increase one's own value and significance. Any kind of drawing restores a person's sense of their own "boundaries", which is extremely therapeutic for people who have been forced to leave their homes. By drawing, such people release their desires and dreams, which can reduce the level of mental tension, stress, fears, anxiety disorders, etc.

Clay therapy is a type of art therapy that effectively relieves tension and anxiety. Modelling transforms tension, releases muscle stiffness, and restores a sense of control, which is especially important in times of war when people experience a loss of ability to influence the situation, life, and reality in general.

Clay is a unique plastic natural material that can be used to reach our subconscious mind. When people work with clay during therapy, genetic memory is often revealed. When offering to sculpt with clay, you should allow creating freely, to fantasise, and when trying to correct something, to give the product a more expressive shape, a person begins to add details to it, and in this way unconsciously harmonises and restores their own inner world.

A **collage** is a technique in the visual arts, the essence of which is to form the desired image from materials of different colours and textures that are glued to the surface. The collage helps to actualise and release the painful experiences associated with the destruction that the war brought into the lives of Ukrainians.

The third characteristic of the Rehabilitation: Art Therapy project describes the specifics of managing workshops. When running workshops, the directed or nondirected forms of group management can be used. The directed form of workshops involves directly setting a task in the form of a subject, guiding the search for the best form of expression of this subject and interpreting the meaning of the work received.

With a nondirected form, the participant is given the freedom to choose both the topic and the expression. In psychology, it is generally accepted that all kinds of subconscious processes are reflected in artistic products through spontaneous creativity. By doing so, a person nonverbally conveys their inner world, their problems and feelings, and learns to understand and analyse their emotions. That is

the reason for the Rehabilitation: Art Therapy project used a nondirected form of workshops. Through free expression, participants accessed the manifestation of suppressed, traumatic and unconscious feelings, and regained a sense of freedom of choice and control over their own lives, which is crucial for internally displaced persons. This allowed the participants to control the "depth" of immersion and therapeutic intervention, thus bringing it to the level of stimulating self-correction, self-healing and self-development.

The artist provided the participant with emotional support and, if necessary, technical assistance in giving maximum expressiveness to the product of creativity. However, it was the nondirected form of workshops and reflective groups that ensured the compassionate and friendly nature of the psycho-correctional impact.

The last, fourth, characteristic of the Rehabilitation: Art Therapy project emphasises the need for separate organisation of activities for mothers and children. The war leaves its mark on everyone, though in a different way. Mothers and children can feel and experience the same events in completely different ways. Sometimes their feelings can be complex and contradictory. For example, a child may not understand why the mother is crying, but feel sorry for her and empathise with her, and at the same time be angry with her because the mother is forcing to leave the usual place and abandon your favourite toys, move to another city or country. Another example is that a mother experiencing a traumatic situation often holds back her emotions because she feels guilty towards her child. In order to provide the most complete and free access to their own emotions and feelings in the Rehabilitation: Art Therapy project, we decided to run separate workshops and reflective groups for mothers and children.

Each meeting within the Rehabilitation: Art Therapy project involved the following stages:

1. Exploratory stage

This stage is intended for the participant to explore the environment, art materials, study their properties and limitations in use.

2. Choosing a topic for creative activity, emotional involvement in the process of creative activity

At this stage, the participant independently determines the topic of the creative work, chooses the plot, composition, and considers the sequence of implementation.

3. Artistic activity

This stage involves the participant's individual creativity (drawing, modelling, etc.) to explore their own struggles and experiences.

This stage also involves indirect diagnostics of the participant's psychological problems. At the first sessions, as a rule, participants tend to work with accustomed and familiar means, and only as they overcome psychological defences do they begin to experiment with plots, colours, techniques of implementing visual activities, etc. and the process becomes more emotionally intense.

4. Release from unpleasant emotions and experiences

In the process of creative activity, the participant depicts an object (plot, story) that is associated with their trauma, unpleasant memories, feelings. The transformation of these experiences into an artistic image leads to catharsis and release from unpleasant feelings and emotions.

5. Reflective analysis

This stage involves reflection, analysis, and comprehension of the products of their creativity and related feelings. Discussion follows in a relaxed atmosphere, spontaneous "mutual therapy" in the form of friendly expressions of positive programming and support. The atmosphere of emotional support and care allows participants to achieve a positive experience of understanding, acceptance, success, restore self-esteem, and correct their self-image.

When working with children, a reflective analysis through a conversation is ineffective due to the age-related limitations of the ability of children to verbalise their own experiences. In this case, it is advisable to correct behaviour and emotional state through playful activities. Analysing children's play, Freud notes that it is unfair to think that a child frivolously estimates the world they create; on the contrary, they treat play seriously, with inspiration and enthusiasm. The antithesis of play is not a serious attitude to life, the reality itself. A child realises the difference between the world they create and reality. During play, a child can

go through painful experiences and reproduce in play what has caused them suffering and grief in life. In order to reduce high levels of fear and anxiety, guilt, and negativism, games aimed at relieving physical and mental stress, responding to aggression, emotional stabilisation, and restoring a sense of boundaries and support will be effective.

Results Achieved

The artistic and psychotherapeutic project "Rehabilitation: Art Therapy" lasted from 28 April to 29 July 2023. In total, the project engaged 27 women and 35 children. According to the results of the final survey, 100% of participants rated the project as interesting, beneficial and effective. All the women noted that this was the first project where mothers were involved in the art process on a par with their children. According to one of the participants, such involvement, as well as the attention and support they received from the project team, made them "feel like babies who are taken care of". In our view, it was the set of activities that was created within the project that provided the major rehabilitation work.

Participants rated the project organisation as "very good". A considerable role in this was played by the project manager Nata Katerynenko; the benevolent and welcoming atmosphere was created by the team of the M17 Contemporary Art Center and the National Academy of Arts of Ukraine.

All workshops held within the framework of the project were highly rated. This confirmed the correctness of the artistic activities chosen, which are most effective for self-regulation of the psycho-emotional condition in crisis circumstances. It was a sound decision to start the project with a workshop for adults with black ink, and for children with clay. Drawing with black ink provided an opportunity to gain experience in creating something new and good out of "black", out of the symbolic "darkness" that women have fallen into because of the war. The use of black as a means of creation gave the participants a sense of control and triggered the dynamics of processing traumatic experiences, turning "bad" into "good".

Working with clay, due to the natural origin of the material, as mentioned above, brings genetic memory to life. This was evidenced by one of the clay workshops, where women turned to their "roots" and recalled the experiences of their grandmothers and great-grandmothers who also lived through the war. The conversation continued during a reflection group, enabling them to feel and experience the connection with the survivors of the previous wars, to revive family ways of overcoming difficult times, strengthening their hope and faith in the victory of life.

A collage workshop revealed a powerful therapeutic potential in processing the expressed difficult experiences: what was destroyed, shattered, broken was symbolically restored through the creation of a new composition. Changing the colour of the image, adding any further elements to the picture symbolically creates a new and beautiful piece of art from the "fragments of wreckage". Besides, as women noted, this kind of art can be easily practised at home, together with children.

According to Hanna Segal, the artist is not aiming to make a "pretty" or even "beautiful" form, but the artist is focused on the essential task of recreating their destroyed inner world, and the resulting form will depend on how well the artist has coped with this task. For a majority of the women, it was the first time they had painted as adults. We observed much uncertainty they had before they started (although some of them easily plunged into a new activity), as well as doubts. However, with the support and help of the artists, the participants' self-esteem increased, and they found confidence and belief that any new activity (and both IDP children and women have to deal with new things every single day) is worth doing. Working with the artists and observing their impact on the project participants, it is obvious that the greatest asset of the workshops is the influence of the artist's personality in the process of psycho-correctional work. The result and success of the project were reflected in the exhibition of the project participants' artworks organised on the premises of the M17 Contemporary Art Center.

All participants expressed their intention to use creative activity in the future to enhance their mental health. Therefore, we can state that within the framework of

the project we managed to introduce / pass on to the participants the knowledge of the resourcefulness of art and visual activity.

Psychological reflective groups were rated by all the participants as beneficial and effective. Probably, the high appreciation of the work of reflective groups is associated with a positive atmosphere of mutual support and understanding. The group's container space, created by the group leaders, allowed each participant to share their individual story, to speak out freely, without being criticised, to be heard and supported.

On completion of the sessions, 100 % of the participants reported a significant improvement in their emotional state as a result of their participation in the project. The impact and positive changes in interpersonal relationships were not defined as a project goal, but 60 % of respondents reported significant improvement in their relationships with others. 40 % mentioned that their relationships "improved in general". This is likely to be due to an improvement in their general psycho-emotional state and an increased ability to emotional self-regulation.

Mothers assessed the positive change in their children's behaviour and psycho-emotional state, as observed by 100 % of the respondents. Some participants noted that their relationships with their children grew into more openness, which allowed them to expand their social circle and establish new social relationships. The project gave mothers and children an impetus to strengthen family ties and spend more time together.

Throughout the project, mothers had a chance to get answers to personal queries. The main questions from mothers related to the peculiarities of children's response to traumatic events, first aid for children during panic attacks, separation, and adolescence.

The project received no critical comments. The participants expressed the following suggestions: to increase time for creative activities and expand the types of artistic activities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The feedback we received gives us grounds to believe that the project, which combines art workshops and reflective groups, is highly effective in correcting the psycho-emotional condition and developing resilience to stress.

It would be worth extending the duration of the project to 6 months, as well as increasing the duration of the workshops and reflection groups to 1.5 hours. This would allow more participants to implement art as a way of self-regulation of negative psycho-emotional states.

The issue of an open (variable group composition) or closed (permanent group composition) group remains controversial. However, for IDPs, the open group format is likely to be more organic. It reflects the unstable situation in which women find themselves and their ability to continue living and creating in such circumstances: to learn something new, build a home, raise children, and engage in professional activities under new circumstances.

The project has achieved its goals and objectives. The value of the Rehabilitation: Art Therapy project is in identifying the theoretical and practical aspects of organising artistic and psychotherapeutic rehabilitation for mothers and children affected by war and seeking psychological resource recovery, mental health correction, and building resilience to stress in wartime.

Project photo reports and interviews are available to public access here:

<https://academyart.org.ua/artherapy>

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