

# Adding colour to the healing process for mental health sufferers

Ameera Huda - 14 Jun 2024, 07:15 AM

Art is known to have the properties that enable people to better express their emotions, paving the way for better treatment.

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Lim Sue Lyn, an art therapist at HumanKind, with one of her clients during an expressive therapy session.

**PETALING JAYA:** Painting, keeping a journal, dancing, music and storytelling have traditionally served as avenues to express one's thoughts and emotions.

Unknown to many, these art forms also help one to navigate mental health issues – a process known as expressive therapy.

For practitioners Shaundtrya Ganesan and Lim Sue Lyn, it is all about tapping into the inner self to ease emotional trauma and pain.



*Shaundtrya Ganesan.*

Shaundtrya, a licensed associate therapist at Soul Mechanics Therapy Centre Sdn Bhd, told FMT that some people may find it challenging to verbalise their emotions.

Incorporating expressive therapy into traditional methods of treatment opens the door to a more comprehensive approach in the healing process, she said.

Poor mental health has become a serious matter in Malaysia. The 2023 National Health and Morbidity Survey shows that a million Malaysians aged 15 and above now suffer from depression, twice as many as there were in 2019.

### **Alternative way**

Shaundtrya explained that expressive therapy taps into one's abstract and imaginative side, enabling the person to express herself through a different medium.

"It's about releasing emotions, processing, gaining perspective and self-discovery," she added.

She has taken it a step further by combining expressive therapeutic techniques such as storytelling and keeping a journal with gestalt therapy, a form of psychotherapy that grounds people in the present moment by addressing past traumas or unresolved issues.

While some express their pent-up emotions through storytelling and writing, others do it through drawing. For instance, an angry person may express his ire by drawing a flame.

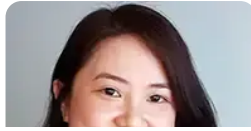
"Either way, they help a person uncover their underlying issues and factors that have led them to their current emotional state," she added.

Meanwhile, Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA) president Dr Andrew Mohanraj said expressive therapy has been documented as being effective in treating various mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance abuse disorders.

He said various studies have supported this method's effectiveness in enhancing a client's communication skills and reducing feelings of isolation through the formation of interpersonal connections.

"Engaging in creative activities can be meditative and relaxing. The focus required for artistic creation can distract from anxiety and stress, providing a calming effect and promoting mindfulness. They can also improve self-esteem and promote empowerment," he said.

### **The soft approach**



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Lim Sue Lyn.

Lim, an art therapist at HumanKind, pointed out that expressing oneself in art can be less intimidating than discussing mental health problems openly.

"This can therefore serve as a catalyst for dialogue," said Lim, who is registered with the Australian, New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association.

"You can face your issues through your artwork without being defensive or scared. Often, people start to open up after expressing themselves through art.

"It's not about aesthetics. It's about the process, about acknowledging that what they are going through is difficult. This gives tangible form to their experiences," she said.

Lim said interpersonal connection is crucial for those with depression, and art therapy can help them to open up. She explained that while traditional therapy involves only the therapist and the client, expressive therapy adds art, the third element, into the equation.

She said for those who find it difficult to express their feelings verbally, "externalising" it through art gives it form. "The thoughts and feelings can then be turned into something with meaning," she added.

### Greater awareness

Mohanraj said although more research and increased awareness of the benefits of expressive therapies were needed, there was already a clear and growing recognition of their advantages in Malaysia.

He pointed out that Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Malaya have psychosocial rehabilitation units which engage in research on various therapeutic approaches, including art therapy.

"The MMHA promotes and utilises expressive therapies in our mental health programmes and rehabilitation activities. Similarly, rehabilitation in various psychiatric units in the country also incorporate expressive therapies in their activities," he said.

Shaundrya agreed, saying the promotion of expressive therapy would in turn shift public perception of mental health.

"Mental health treatment does not just involve talking about your issues. It's about expressing and understanding yourself through colours," she said, calling for more mental health therapists to be trained in expressive therapy.

Lim agreed, pointing out that there remains a lack of specialised training and ethical oversight for art therapists. She said the provision of art therapy should be recognised as a profession given that it can help reassure patients that they are getting proper care from their therapists.

"People need to be educated on its potential benefits and it should be included as an additional therapeutic option," she said, adding that several research papers have backed the use of art therapy.

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