

Everyday Objects: A Tangible Reminder for Mental Well-Being

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Abstract: The long struggle for bringing awareness to mental health did only get amplified during pandemic. In fact, it became worse with people bound to be in isolation and not having connection with their communities. As humans, we need social set-ups to sustain and keep ourselves in sync with emotions and stimulation around. In the recent mental health survey conducted by Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH, 2020) in collaboration with research technology and consumer data collection company Delvinia report that adult Canadians are reporting high levels of moderate to severe anxiety, loneliness and feelings of depression as high as early in the pandemic. As a creativity enthusiast, my area of interest lies in tangibility of ideas and co-creation. How complex problems could be addressed by co-creating solutions that could be realized by their physicality, especially during the times when everything drastically moved online. It has proven to be the toughest time for various communities to stay aware about mental well-being and keep a regular check.

Practical Implications: Going further deeper in understanding the contribution of art in mental well-being, one can find many resources and ways in which communities could gain self-help by practicing art.

Keywords: Anxiety; Art Therapy; Community; Drawing; Pandemic; Mental Health; Well-being

1. Introduction and Background of Research

To better understand the relation of art and mental well-being, I performed a research experiment in my living space during early surge of pandemic in 2020. With such a sudden shift and unpredictability around our day-to-day lives, and confinement to small spaces that make it worse, the most common activity that emerged out of these months of isolation activities were – painting, drawing, etc. People started coloring and creating things to share on Zoom calls with their communities. For me it was meditative to draw and it also helped me concentrate in the details of being in present.

Keeping that in consideration, this experiment will enable youth as well as elders to have tangible reminders around them in regards to their mental health. Through community workshops and in-person making sessions with community organizations, participants will be encouraged to paint everyday objects in their living space with either their self-portrait, or a drawing that resonate with them on those objects. These drawings will then be considered as tangible reminders for their mental well-being. In these workshops, participants will also be encouraged to learn beginner breathing exercises to deal with anxiety and these reminders will play part of their routine lives and keep them aware of their mental health.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the research based on the relation between art, art therapy, and mental health. I provide a background of the current mental health stats of Canadian population and how art could be used to support mental health in pandemic context. Throughout the review, I highlight various ways that state why



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and how these tangible reminders could be embedded in people's day-to-day lives. Finally, I end by pointing out limitations in the existing literature and exploring potential expansion for future research.

2. Art as self-expression during Covid – 19

Activities like photography, painting, sculpting, and drawing self-portraits are relaxing hobbies that can help lower your levels of stress and leave you feeling mentally calm. Not only does art provide a distraction from your negative thoughts, you may find yourself able to communicate your feelings through paint without the use of words. This meditative-like activity eases the mind and trains you to concentrate on details in your environment (Upson 2018).

Art gives individual a way to relate and express with shape, color, form, etc. The subjective aspect of art is not limited or reliant on any rules, it is free and liberating. Also, art can support to connect and express and understand themselves better.

In the unprecedented age of COVID-19, isolation and heightened fears are just a few other symptoms that can increase depression among many. Add to the lack of control over the situation, and those who suffer from depression might find it all the more difficult to deal with situations of “self-containment”, “quarantine,” and “alienation.” Any coping mechanism that can reduce the stress and sense of fight/flight/freeze can only be a benefit, especially when typical support systems and mental health specialists are stretched thin. Having outlets for emotions in place, as well as routines to build around self-awareness of such emotions, can proactively help support individuals who are inclined towards depression/depressive episodes (Braus and Morton 2020).

3. Indoor Plants as Tangible Reminders

An interesting finding identified by NASA in one of the published articles on 2007 states plants clean air and water for indoor environment. This study was done before pandemic, however, during COVID-19, sales of indoor plants risen immensely. I resonated with this and it made me connect back to my plants in the studio space where I live and work in Toronto, Canada, in between all the lockdowns and constant physical distancing announcements.

This finding made me look out for more data around plants being housemates for most individuals living by themselves in urban landscapes in these uncertain times. And I found out many research articles on plants improving productivity, reducing stress levels, as well as contributing to boost one's mood. To fill the gaps and come up with a tangible solution of combining art, mental health, and plants; I thought of making a self-portrait on my favorite Peruvian cactus's vase that has been housed with me for more than 2 years.

The initial rationale behind this initiative was to generate awareness among people and communities about their own mental health through making tangible reminders. The concept involves engaging them in painting self-portraits (not necessarily professionally drawn refined portraits) on the vases of their house plants to start with. As plants need nourishment for growth, humans need self-care too. Watering plants, seeing their face(s) on the pots every time will act as a tangible reminder to nourish their mental health.

4. Research Scope and Rationale

The activity where an individual could draw a tangible reminder on the objects around, I chose a plant vase, was also proposed in one of the gatherings I participated online with the neighborhood community. The community was of the elderly people who I used to meet Bi-weekly before pandemic to make things with hands and engage them in some activities for creative stimulation as well as exchanging personal stories.

This community crossed my mind at first when I thought of this experiment. While everything moved to Zoom calls, this idea still had a space for physical making aspect and required minimum resources as the stationary that is

required in this is could be as simple as a drawing pen. This idea in all capacity also holds the potential to be adapted by different communities across the globe.

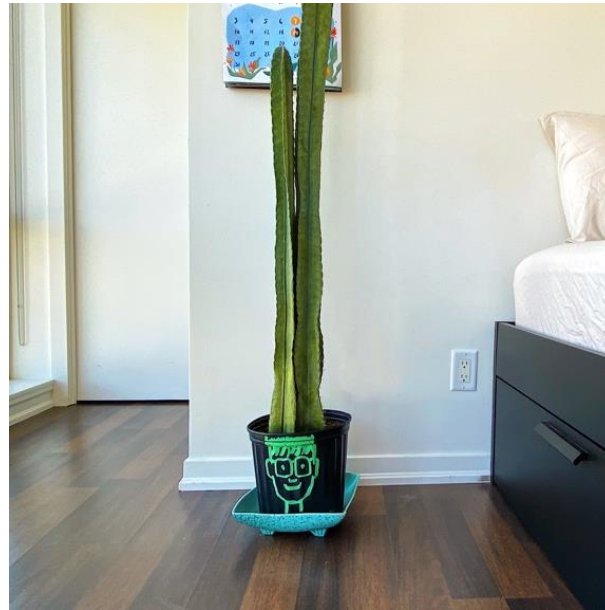


Figure 1. An image of my room with self-portrait on my plant’s vase as a tangible reminder for mental well-being. The reason of placing a portrait this way is intentional, as it gives resemblance of nurturing plant as well as your own mental health. It also serves positive ambience in the indoors especially in the times where most of our time is spent in confinement.

The supported research data validated the potential of this concept to be transformed into a bigger community art project via people sharing their self-portraits and videos further through social media by tagging their friends, family members, and neighbors, etc., just like The Ice Bucket Challenge; and encourage their community members to draw their own portraits during the times of isolation. The style used in the portraits could be a simple line-drawing as shown in the presentation considering diverse demographics.

Artworks through this initiative would come out as a piece of self-reflection for all the participants during and post the times of COVID-19. However, while working on this piece and connecting it with indoor plants, the idea does not limit it to that. Taking it beyond, in my opinion, this experiment could be adapted into any daily object that we use or engage with. Even drawing a self-portrait could be a daunting task for a beginner, therefore, the reminder could be a drawing or a text that provides the reminder clearly and makes individual resonate with it for their regular mental health reminder.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Limitations of Existing Research

Research on art used as a tangible reminder for mental health is compelling but has certain limitations. Ideas and concepts generation is the nucleus of innovation, growth and development of material culture. Nevertheless, creative professionals often get stuck or bereft of ideas during product development process (not resulting from physical, physiological, or psychological disturbances but from prevalence unawareness of strategies for creating ideas). This is a problem that paralyzes creative efforts with grave consequences for the artist/designer in particular and development in general (Ebigbagha 2019). As this experiment relies on art and serves to communities that may have a limited experience in art and expression, this research limits the scope and ways in which this could be implemented keeping in mind a creative block not only from a creative’s point of view, but also from a lens where the participant is a beginner and examine ways to eliminate barriers that restrict their access to use art as a tool for creating these tangible reminders.

Future research should also examine differences and impacts of art that resonates with self, i.e., a self-portrait, etc. and art that expresses feelings, etc. If the tangible reminders to be independent and could be enhanced by the preference of color, recall associated with the commonality of the imagery, or, a self-expression that defines one's own presence on those tangible reminders and support them to resonate on enhanced levels.

5.2. Directions for Future Research

There are additional considerations when interpreting the results from the previous experiments and the research that is to be focused in the future creation of tools in mental well-being sphere. For example, combining art therapy from the past and creating strong community network to utilize those skills for tangible reminders around. Although the current data support the challenging times Canadian population have been facing due to COVID, and how art could help reduce the anxiety levels, there is still some gaps that to be filled to take this research from an individual level to a community level. A place where participation and association to these reminders is encouraged by each other and embed it into an everyday self-check.

Other than keeping it as an individual activity for self-care and self-expression, this experiment also holds a potential to expand it to a bigger level. In the hopes of everything going back to normal, this experiment could be taken to long care homes where elders could participate and co-create with other members, and same could also be taken to youth in art and design universities to stay in check with their mental well-being. Having it as a community exercise also increases the familiarity with the idea and eliminate the stigma related to mental health if implemented in communities where these discussions are not common part of conversations.

This research experiment has a potential to adapted in various community set-ups and also have no dependency on digital tools or digital literacy, if the demographics are middle-aged to elder population. It could also be performed and expanded in different cultures as art has a route to everyone's expression and do not depend on language.

Art and design play a significant role and complement each other tremendously in the utopian world. This connection could be continued in our speculative design thinking frameworks where we constantly seek ideas that are bold and free from conventional norms, ideas that express beyond set structures and expand on flexibility. It is time that we have gone beyond traditional ways of consuming art and design and bringing it to masses. Art could make individuals empower to deal with mental health barriers and keep as a tool for self-expression in the time to come.

To this, we need more room for art and design combined, not for style and capitalism, but for values and self-care, for communities and well-being.

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