

Through the Lens of an Anxious Art Therapist: A Heuristic Self-Inquiry

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Abstract

My integrative project includes a heuristic inquiry about my experiences of being an art therapist with anxiety and a digital art show about these experiences. Following Moustakas' (1990) six steps of heuristic inquiry, I created a series of ten art images and journaled about them. To provide context for my inquiry, this paper includes an introduction to anxiety and anxiety disorders, including my experiences. The literature review considers art therapy to address anxiety and art therapists' experiences with mental distress. When I revisited my artwork and journaling, I identified four main themes in my lived experience with anxiety. Fight, flight and freeze; the reoccurring sensations; the unknown and developing understanding; and the lack of control versus wanting control. I created a digital art show of my art images to spread awareness, to share space for people going through anxiety, and to provide some insight for people who may be unfamiliar with the experiences of anxiety.

Through the Lens of An Anxious Art Therapist, the Digital Art Show created as part of this project is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mB66Zb8dHio&t=33s>

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Through the Lens of an Anxious Art Therapist: A Heuristic Self-Inquiry

I have lived with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) for most of my lifetime. In my experience, anxiety is often misunderstood and stigmatized. I have found that descriptions in the literature are generalized and do not always represent my lived experience. Although there is some literature about art therapy to treat anxiety, the literature about what it is like to be an art therapist with anxiety is sparse.

For my Integrative Project at the Winnipeg Holistic Expressive Arts Therapy Institute, I completed an arts-based heuristic inquiry about my experiences as an art therapist living with anxiety. By offering a view from the inside, I want to provide a voice and a community for others who may be walking through similar experiences. I want to invite outsiders to learn and understand what it could be like to be an art therapist with anxiety. I want to help end the stigma.

Informed by heuristic inquiry methodology (Moustakas, 1990), I created a series of art images about my anxiety and wrote about them to witness my process. I reviewed all of the images and my writing and identified many themes about what anxiety “looks like.” I narrowed these themes down to four: wanting to fight, flight, or freeze; reoccurring sensations; the unknown and developing an understanding; and the lack of control versus wanting control. I created a digital art show and narrative about my experiences with anxiety.

While this journey of self-inquiry can be a lifelong experience, I have learned more about myself than I ever have before. I will continue to work with my experiences and be curious. I have not often shared my artwork with others. The thought of people being able to analyze my art can feel vulnerable and exciting at the same time. I am feeling some vulnerability and anxiety in sharing about my experiences, but I have learned to follow my motto: “Do something every day that scares you.”

Being a Student Art Therapist with Anxiety

I have worked in a Regional Health Authority for five years as a Mental Health Proctor III and was working there before pursuing my educational journey in art therapy. This job includes providing rehabilitative support and skill developments for adults and seniors with mental health challenges. This job has allowed me to develop a greater understanding of the diversity of mental health issues, beyond the knowledge that could be shared in literature. This experience has also provided some personal growth and challenges for my anxiety. Being a support for others, while also going through my personal journey, gave me more gratitude and allowed for some of my healing to occur.

I have traveled to two communities for my practicum sites during my educational journey as an art therapist. There were some anxieties that would arise around the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the seasonal road conditions and driving into areas with limited cellular range. When doing my practicum sessions with my clients, I experienced imposter syndrome around being an art therapist. With each community I work in being unique in their own way, this provided some diversity in my learning of how to improve myself as a therapist. This experience has continued to allow me to explore what it is like to be “comfortable with being uncomfortable.” These experiences have provided many ways of challenging my anxiety including the uncertainty, being in new environments and meeting new people.

As someone who has dealt with my own anxiety for most of my life, I have learned and developed an awareness of my experiences. As a student art therapist with anxiety, I have been learning to acknowledge the sensations and feelings that come up in my body when I am doing art therapy with a participant. I am becoming more aware of my bodily responses, thoughts, and triggers.

There are many times where my thoughts feel scattered, and I am constantly trying to mentally prepare for all the possible scenarios that I think my clients might bring into the session. Some days it takes more time to ground and regulate before and after sessions with clients and to mentally prepare for the next session to come.

I tend to have a sense of nervousness and some social anxiety when it comes to meeting new people, including new clients. Self-intrusive thoughts come from time to time. There are many experiences of self-doubt and imposter syndrome. I have had many restless nights from constantly overthinking everything about my art therapy work. It is almost like my brain just will not shut off.

There is often plenty of worry. Worry of not taking care of myself properly, worry for my clients, and worry that I am doing more harm than good in each session with clients. My anxiety has given me this overly cautious behavior in how I reflect and respond in everything that I do. These thoughts and experiences can be overstimulating, it is important to remind myself to take a step back and breathe.

As an art therapist with anxiety, I feel that there is a need for research about this topic. This is the time to normalize that art therapists and other healers often go through their own journeys of mental health recoveries and self-care.

Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders

For some, anxiety may be a term or label that they read about in a psychology textbook. It may be a term that is used to describe someone and their actions. Some see anxiety only on the surface and describe it as an intensity in emotions. There is even societal stigma associated with anxiety. An outsider to anxiety may see anxiety as a mental break down. A common view is that

people with anxiety are overwhelmed by their emotions and their mind is in a hyper-alert state (Beck & Haigh, 2014).

It is common for people to experience nervousness and anxiousness in a situation. Most of the time these are temporary feelings and thoughts, and they tend to come and go. An example of “normal” anxiety that most people experience can be preparing for a job interview. They may feel the sensations associated with anxiety and nervousness leading up to the event. Once the job interview is done, they often experience a sense of relief and are no longer feeling anxious or nervous.

With anxiety disorder, it may not necessarily be only a job interview that could cause a person to feel anxious. There may not necessarily be any reason to feel anxious, and yet one still does. A person with anxiety disorder may avoid the job interview completely to prevent themselves from getting their anxiety triggered from the situation.

Anxiety Disorders as Described in the DSM-5

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychological Association, 2013; DSM-5) provides an overview of anxiety disorders, which include generalized anxiety disorders (GAD), panic disorder and phobia-related disorders, including social anxiety. According to the DSM-5, anxiety in a person includes excessive fear (American Psychological Association, 2013). While fear is usually a response to an obvious danger, with an anxiety disorder the fear has more focus on the anticipation of a threat. A sense of worry is a common theme among all anxiety disorders. As described in the DSM-5 an essential feature of generalized anxiety disorder is

excessive anxiety and worry (apprehensive expectation) about a number of events or activities. The intensity, duration, or frequency of the anxiety and worry is out of

proportion to the actual likelihood or impact of the anticipated event. The individual finds it difficult to control the worry and to keep the worrisome thoughts from interfering with attention to tasks at hand. Adults with generalized anxiety disorder often worry about every day, routine life circumstances, such as possible job responsibilities, health and finances, the health of family members, misfortune to their children, or minor matters (e.g., doing household chores or being late for appointments). (American Psychological Association, 2013, p. 222)

In addition to the sense of worry, feeling on edge, being easily fatigued, difficulty with concentration, irritability, muscle tension, and disturbed sleep are some of the additional symptoms that one may experience with anxiety. Muscle tension may lead to trembling, twitching, feeling shaky or muscle aches to occur. Somatic symptoms also may arise, such as sweating, nausea, or diarrhea. Further, symptoms of autonomic hyperarousal sometimes occur such as accelerated heart rate, shortness of breath and dizziness, and some conditions can be associated with stress. People may experience different symptoms of anxiety but typically not all of them. There is a diversity in anxiety disorder.

Literature Review

To provide context for my self-inquiry, the following includes reviews of articles about art therapy and anxiety, literature about art therapists' experiences with mental distress, and about art therapists' art making.

Anxiety and Art Therapy

Art Therapy is a form of mental health therapy that combines psychotherapy and the use of the arts as a form of creative processing. The use of art therapy can allow for self-exploration and developing deeper understanding of oneself. Sometimes it is difficult to express any thoughts or

feelings verbally. The use of art makes room to express thoughts or feelings that may be difficult to articulate otherwise (Canadian Art Therapy Association, 2020).

Although there is limited empirical evidence about the effectiveness of art therapy to treat anxiety (Abbing et. al, 2019), a number of benefits to using art therapy to address anxiety are described in the literature.

Art therapy offers an alternative to verbal and cognitive interventions (Abbing et. al, 2019; Chambala, 2008; Triantoro, 2019) and can support people with anxiety to express themselves without directly talking about their anxiety symptoms. Sometimes verbalizing anxiety can cause people more anxiety than what they are already experiencing; expressing oneself through form, color, and design is often more beneficial than relying solely on words for self-expression and communication (Abbing et. al, 2019; Chambala, 2008). According to Borkovec (1994) “worrying and verbal activity can interfere with emotional processing and prevent adaptive coping in individuals with anxiety” (as cited in Abbing et al., 2019, p. 2).

Individuals with anxiety often experience worry and rumination (American Psychological Association, 2013) which can be characterized as “a dominance of excessive and unproductive thinking” (Abbing, et al., 2008 p. 2). Art therapy can offer an alternative to cognitive approaches which keep people in their “thinking mode” which can in turn enable worry and rumination (Abbing, et al., 2008).

Further, due to the ambiguous causes and nature of anxiety, identifying the cause of worry and exposing clients to it may be part of the treatment. Art making can provide a container and can invite people to dig deeper into themselves and bring a sense of understanding. Art therapy can provide people with anxiety the opportunity to reflect, identify, and learn more about their experiences (Chambala, 2008).

Art Therapy to Reduce Anxiety

Safaria and Yunita (2014) completed an experimental study about the efficacy of art therapy for anxiety reduction amongst adolescent victims of cyber bullying. Study participants in the control group engaged in art therapy interventions over five sessions, starting with recalling situations in which anxiety was involved and moving through to art making as a form of release.

Sessions also supported relationship building with the other participants in the group. They were able to recognize and acknowledge their anxiety, and explore possible fears and triggers amongst their peers. This created a safe space unlike the cyberbullying they experienced. The results indicated that art therapy interventions reduced anxiety in the participants in the control group. A key factor to the impact of the therapy progress can be influenced by a participant's willingness to attend and take part in the group. The use of group therapy had benefits as it allowed for participants to develop a sense of belonging and a community to share amongst each other (Safaria & Yunita, 2014).

Art Therapy with Adults with Anxiety Disorders

Chambala (2008) offered an eight-week, weekly art therapy groups with adults in a psychiatric unit. The participants included adults and older adults with various mental illnesses and co-occurring anxiety disorders. Each session included psychoeducation about anxiety and clients could share what they knew about the topic. This assisted the clients to develop a better understanding of the diversity of anxiety and its symptoms and how it resonates with themselves.

Art directives were offered for clients to create images about their anxiety, including how their anxiety appeared and about coping strategies they used. Art also was used in response to guided imagery while practicing relaxation. Various mediums were provided for diversity in

expression. The participants were given the opportunity to share their work if they wished to. Some were more willing than others to participate.

Clients were invited to contribute their artwork for two public exhibits about anxiety disorders. The exhibits provided an opportunity for clients to “share their personal knowledge about the topic by communicating through the creative process of art making” (Chambala, 2008, p. 189).

Chambala (2008) reviewed the clients’ artwork and identified some common characteristics, namely wide range of colour usage, abstract images, and working rapidly. Some participants said they used different colours to show different emotions related to their anxiety. Others noted that were also used to represent all the thoughts that ran through their minds.

Abstract images were used to represent their anxiety and were a way “to make the invisible visible” (Chambala, 2008, p. 188). This exploration sometimes helped clients gain a deeper understanding of their experience with their anxiety. “This modality provides a concrete statement which is helpful in pointing out other areas for useful exploration” (Landgarten 1981, p. 137, as cited in Chambala, 2008, p. 188).

Most of the clients had a quick response when invited to make artwork that represented their experience with anxiety. They used many broad strokes and bold marks. “This response appeared to reinforce the fact that most people are familiar with anxiety and can envision it as a problem that many others share” (Chambala, 2008, p. 189).

Chambala’s (2008) article suggests that the art therapy group was a safe space for participants to come together and explore their healing. Art making provided them opportunities to reflect, learn, and acknowledge their on-going experiences with mental health.

These articles point to how art making can support expression and understanding about experiences and roots of anxiety in ways that cognitive approaches and verbalizing alone may not. Expressing and understanding can support deeper change.

Art Therapists and Anxiety

In her article, reviewed about, Chambala (2008) introduced herself as an “anxiety sufferer.” Other mental health professionals may have been reluctant to disclose their experiences with mental distress due to society’s negative attitudes (Stanley et. al., 2011, as cited in Huet and Holttum, 2016).

Huet and Holttum (2016) conducted a survey of art therapists about their personal experiences with mental health distress during their art therapy training, and about their perceptions about the effects that their experiences of mental distress might have on their practice. They sent their survey to 26 art therapists who had self-identified as having mental distress; 20 completed the surveys. Those who responded noted experiences with depression, anxiety, and other diagnoses and problems. The results of the survey indicated that most of the respondents had been a mental health service user at some point in their journey as a trainee or as an art therapist. Participants who reported that they did not disclose fully about their mental health distress cited fear of stigma or being judged. “The findings from this small sample of art therapists with experience of mental distress suggest that disclosure is not easy” (Huet & Holttum, 2016, p. 102). The study also suggests that it may be common for art therapists to seek mental health supports to heal themselves while also doing work to heal others.

Regarding effects on their practices, respondents reported that they had increased empathy for their clients, could offer hope for recovery, and were interested in advocacy, among other effects. Chambala’s (2008) personal experience with anxiety may have supported her to design and

facilitate the art therapy program she developed. Huet and Holttum (2016) advocated for more research about how to support art therapy trainees who have mental distress, including how to normalize the experiences.

Art Therapists' Art Making

As described in the literature, art therapists engage in their own art making to respond to and reflect about sessions with clients and for self-care, among many other purposes.

Ulrich (2008) explored the use of personal art making for art therapists and the role it plays as a way of coping. A survey was created and sent out to a sample of members of the American Art Therapy Association. The results of the survey indicated that all the participants took part in their personal art making and that when there was an increase in life stressors, a majority spent less time on art making. A majority also indicated that there was a significance to the use of personal art making in their life. Most of the participants indicated that they would do personal art making a few times a year. Being an art therapist and the use of personal art making can play a significant role in self-care and self-discovery.

Chambala (2008), wrote that there is a history and a contemporary interest in exhibiting art by “people with mental illness” (p. 189). She noted that through exhibitions, clients are able to raise awareness about mental illness as well as providing experiences for clients to be seen as artists. These exhibitions could be a model for art therapists to share and raise awareness about their experiences with mental distress.

My Self-Inquiry Journey

I experienced a lot of anxiety around the thoughts of doing a research project. Insecurities and self-doubts arose. I would “shut down” trying to think of a topic I could possibly write about. I had a difficulty finding something that I resonated with. I wanted to do a project that had passion

and meaning for me. After having a conversation with my thesis advisor, and sharing my vulnerabilities and anxiety, I realized that there was a topic right under my nose – exploring my experiences as an art therapist living with anxiety.

I have found that descriptions about anxiety in the literature are generalized and do not always represent my lived experience. Although there is some research and literature about art therapy to treat anxiety, the research about what it is like to be an art therapist with anxiety is sparse. I got curious about the questions, “How could I share my lived experience with anxiety, and what it is like to be an art therapist with anxiety?”

I decided to paint and draw a series of images to provide an “inside” view of my experiences living with anxiety. I hope that my work might bring awareness so that others experiencing anxiety might feel a sense of connection and not feel alone in their processes. I also hoped to offer important information to those who may not have an inside view and help in developing more of a sense of understanding.

Self-care

Self-inquiry can be a powerful process and I knew it could be triggering for me at some points. As part of the self-inquiry process, it was important to ensure safety for myself and my wellbeing. I accessed my own therapy resources as needed and decided that I would not invite others to see my journals. Knowing that my journals would not be shared supported me to express freely.

Methodology

I decided to use arts-based heuristic inquiry as my methodology. Potash (2019) wrote that “arts-based research can build on the practices that art therapists engage in with their clients to facilitate their own search for meaning and expression” (p. 121).

Arts-Based Inquiry

Psychoanalyst Carl Jung was foundational in using arts for self-inquiry, or self-analysis. Jung used art making for his own self-analysis and believed that self-analysis allowed clients to be an active participant in the process and to develop more of understanding about themselves and be less dependent on the therapist (Malchiodi, 2012).

Jung believed that for some people, making art was a way to connect with unconscious processes and images and to bring them forward into consciousness. He encouraged people to paint what they saw within (Swan-Foster, 2016). Jung developed a process he called Active Imagination which can be applied to the art making process from being present, to creating the art, then analyzing the entire image (Swan-Foster, 2016). In reflecting about my self-inquiry process, I recognized that I was engaged in processes similar to Active Imagination. Art making has been an outlet for me to go deeper into myself and bring the unconscious into my conscious world.

Contemporary art therapists and arts-based researchers have been informed by Jung's work. McNiff is credited with introducing arts-research in art therapy (Kapitan, 2018). Citing McNiff (1998, 2011, 2013, 2018), Potash wrote that arts-based research requires acceptance of "art making as a tool for revealing ideas, understanding the world, and enabling us to know something that cannot be known in any other way" (p.119). He noted that "even if images are at first obscure, ambiguous, or confusing, ultimately they offer symbols and metaphors that guide us, as well as point to further questions" (p.119).

In arts-based research, the image leads and facilitates moving beyond what one knows toward the possible, or seemingly impossible. Arts-based research can free and expand tacit knowledge beyond the cognitive, linear ways of understanding (Barone, 2001). Arts-based research offers researchers an opportunity to dig deeper into their senses and develop more understanding

and awareness about themselves. They may gain curiosities that help guide them through the research process.

The Open Studio Process as Arts-Based Inquiry

Allen (1995), an artist and art therapist who was informed by Jung's work, initiated what became known as the Open Studio Process. She identified guiding principles of Intention, Attention and Witness. Not only does the Open Studio Process provide personal healing and insight, it also can provide a new lens into the field of arts-based research (Allen, 2012; McNiff, 2012). My arts-based processes reflected principles of the Open Studio Process, particularly as I paid full attention to my art making and to witness my images and writing about them.

Heuristic Inquiry

Heuristic Inquiry is a process initially developed by Moustakas (1990). Moustakas described heuristic inquiry as a "passionate yet disciplined commitment to examine a question intensely and continuously until its discoveries are illuminated" (Kapitan, 2018, p. 193). Heuristic Inquiry is carried out systematically in six steps: Initial Engagement, Immersion, Incubation, Illumination, Explication, and Creative Synthesis. The following describes my inquiry through these phases.

Initial Engagement

This is the step where the researcher explores interests or concerns and often creates a question associated with the concern.

Inquiry begins with a concern that calls out to the researcher with important social meanings and personal, compelling implications for practice. There may be a feeling of "invitation" for self-dialogue that eventually evolves into a research question or focal concern. (Kapitan, p. 193)

In my case, I had discovered an interest for exploring more about my experience with anxiety. This eventually lead me deeper into the question of: What is it like to be an art therapist with anxiety? This question is important to me personally and has social importance. I hope that my inquiry and paintings will help to inform others about anxiety. I decided not to explore related literature at this point. It was important for me to create some artwork first so that my perspectives were not influenced by the perceptions in the literature and research that had already been done.

Immersion

This is the step where the researcher digs deeper into themselves and further explores the question they have come up with. During this exploration, they develop a deeper awareness about their experience. My immersion and exploration through art making allowed for a greater understanding about my experience with anxiety to occur.

In my immersion process, I created ten pieces over four months. I created each piece based on what I was experiencing at the time. Some of my art pieces took nine hours to two days to complete. Once I started working on my pieces, there was some difficulty to move away from the process. I discuss my art making process further in the reflection section.

Witness Writing. A reflective journal was used to create dialogue and witness my art during the art making experience. This journal was used as a form of self-dialogue, reflection, and witnessing my work in the heuristic process. I allowed space for freedom in the reflective writing, noting on the art making process and any wonders or questions that may have come up. This allowed ideas, thoughts, feelings, and images to unfold and get expressed naturally. I enjoyed doing this process as it gave me the opportunity to think freely and release any feelings or thoughts that occurred. Reflective journaling gave me a sense of closure from the art making and from the conscious thoughts that had arisen.

Incubation

In this phase, the researcher removes themselves from the intense focus of the immersion phase for a temporary period, allowing creative awareness to emerge. “At the point of saturation, the question is put aside. This natural shift occurs when prolonged focus demands a temporary retreat from unwavering attention” (Kapitan, 2018, p.194). The incubation phase enables the inner tacit dimensions to reach deeper into the unconscious. After the incubation phase, different ideas may come to light.

I left my art images and written responses in an incubation phase for two months while I went about my daily life; I went to work, did some hiking and visited friends.

Sometimes during my art making process information that was difficult to identify or to explain verbally brought more curiosities to light. During the incubation phase I was able explore further to make sense of what was eventually brought to surface.

Illumination

In this phase, the unconscious may bring itself into the conscious realm, and the researcher may gain insights and new meanings. This phase allows for plenty of self-reflection and sometimes unexpressed ideas and experiences occur. For me, the incubation and illumination phases were somewhat overlapping. What really came up for me during this time was curiosity for continuing the process further as time goes on. I felt like I was getting deeper into my experience with anxiety, but that there was still a way to go. I had many reflections about how this art making process had had an impact on my day-to-day life. During the process of art making, I noticed I had more sensitivities to my anxieties and was experiencing an increase in how I was feeling, and when I stopped, things had changed, and I was able to be more grounded.

Explication

This is the phase where the researcher examines the new learnings and insights that they have discovered about their question. As described by Gilroy (2006),

concentrated attention in the explication phase creates a more complete knowing of the key discoveries, bringing logic to bear on the inquiry in order to discern general patterns in the data that emerge from intensive analysis (as cited in Kapitan, 2018, p. 194).

This phase provided me the opportunity to fully examine what had been brought into the conscious realm, with the purpose of understanding the different layers of meaning. I had explored my art and writing for themes. I had reduced possible distractions and as I witnessed each image my mind cleared, I was focused and curious and very present. I spent an afternoon in this process. When I took a break and came back, I noticed additional things I had not previously seen.

I placed all my art pieces together in an area surrounding me, along with my journaling about each piece. (Figures of the images are on pp. 24-26). I started the layout with one of my grounding images (Figure 1) and then continued through each image, that built up the intensity of my anxiety experience (Figures 2 to 9). I ended with my self-care image to regulate and gain closure of my process (Figure 10).

I explored each piece in detail. I analyzed the colors, images and symbols that arose, and explored any thoughts of curiosity about these images. As tacit thoughts that came up, I tried to explore them with how I felt they could be best described. I also reflected on the “aha” moments of the incubation and illumination phases. When going through each image, I also looked back at my journaling that went with each image. I noticed things in the images that I had noticed before and began to highlight themes and patterns, along with reflecting on the entire experience.

I identified several themes, which I integrated and narrowed down to four. The themes consist of 1) Fight, flight, and freeze, 2) The reoccurring sensations, 3) The unknown and developing understanding, and 4) The lack of control versus wanting control.

Creative Synthesis

This is the phase when the researcher has become very familiar with all the data and works to clarify and communicate what they have learned.

Using the experiences and understandings that have been gathered are brought together to create a whole. While I explored all the information that came up for me, I was able to narrow it down into four core themes. I discuss these in the Results section. I also decided to create a digital art show to present my art and learnings.

Themes

Fight, Flight, and Freeze

There were many times when my anxiety made me freeze in the moment. Figures 7 and 8 reflect my experiences during art making, along with reflection on past experiences. When in a freeze state, I often felt like I was not able to process or comprehend any information being given to me in the present moment. I did not know what to think or how to feel. My thoughts in my brain and my body would shut down completely, making me feel disconnect (Figures 3 and 5).

When experiencing flight responses in my anxiety, I often had patterns of wanting to escape the reality of an anxiety attack. I would try to ignore the sensations that would arise, which often lead to a “snowball effect” later. I always felt better removing myself from situations that brought me a certain level of discomfort. I often would turn to others for constant reassurance (Figures 1, 2 and 10).

My fight response would occur in my anxiety in hopes of getting some control back when I was feeling out of control during my experiences with anxiety. My anxiety would motivate me to do all that I could do in each situation, even if it felt like it was not enough. I wanted to have more power over the experience (Figures 6 and 9).

The Reoccurring Sensations

The sensation of vibrating was something that occurred often throughout my body during the art making process. There is so much vulnerability in sharing these deep levels of myself in my art. The vibrating sensations seemed to roam throughout my art making which are often the common sensation I feel when I experience my anxiety. The vibrations resonate strongly in my chest area, and they expand to other areas of my body (Figures 3, 7 and 8). There is a tightness in my chest, almost like wanting these vibrations to be released. If the vibrations are not dealt with, this leads to more sensations of a panic attack. This sensation was a common theme emotionally released in my artmaking (figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8 and 9).

I noticed physiological and emotional responses that took place as I went through-as I created different images. Each image I created represents an aspect of my experience with anxiety and being an art therapist with anxiety. When working on images that involved a sense of calmness, I experienced the sensations associated with the feeling of calmness in my body and I felt very happy and relaxed when creating those images (e.g. Figures 1 and 10). I was feeling plenty of comfort.

When creating images leading up to anxiety, I noticed the intensity of my anxiety increase as time went on. The physiological responses and panic attacks became more common. I was able to explore this further to try and understand the areas that were affected by the physiological and emotional responses. As time went on, I continued to learn more about myself and was able to dig

deeper into the roots of my anxiety and trauma responses. This journey has allowed me to learn and develop a deeper understanding about myself that I did not have before.

The Unknown and Developing Understanding

Often when experiencing levels of anxiety, I am absent from the present moment and disconnected from my body. If someone were to check in and ask, “what is wrong?”, most of the time in the moment I would not know. There is difficulty in identifying what triggered the anxiety in the first place. Sometimes I may feel lost, or like I am in a never-ending spiral (figures 3 & 4). Once I can settle, I am able to reflect, and I often wonder what triggered my anxiety in the first place. In my art, the fear and worry from the unknown become very present, and the more I get curious about it, sometimes I develop more of a sense of understanding as to what triggered me (Figures 7, 8 and 9).

The Lack of Control versus Wanting Control

When I experience my anxiety, I am often triggered by things I cannot control. When I feel a lack of control, I experience a sense of defeat. Sometimes this has allowed me to give my anxiety more power than it truly deserves. I would feel lost, confused, and many self-intrusive thoughts would occur (Figures 3 and 9). I have had the mental battle with myself my whole life as I tried to fight back these thoughts and feelings and I crave the need for control. When it comes to being an art therapist with anxiety, there are times when my mind and body feel that sense of being out of control. I regain my power by acknowledging my mind and body and reground by reminding myself to breathe. I refuse to be suffocated by the lack of control (Figures 1, 6 and 10).

Art Images

Figure 1

Floating



Figure 2

The Calm Before the Storm

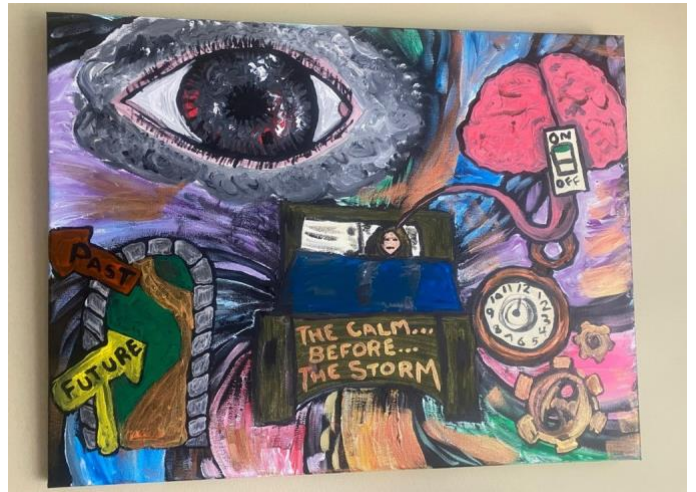


Figure 3

Lost



Figure 4

Demons



Figure 5

Through the Lens



Figure 6

A Wounded Healer



Figure 7

Jitters

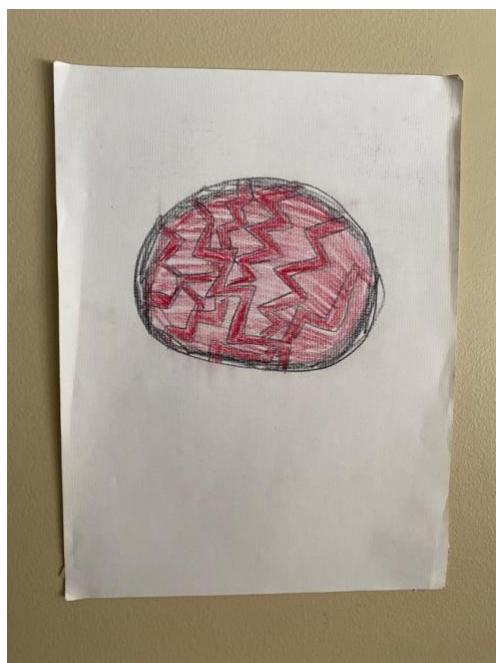


Figure 8

Vibrating

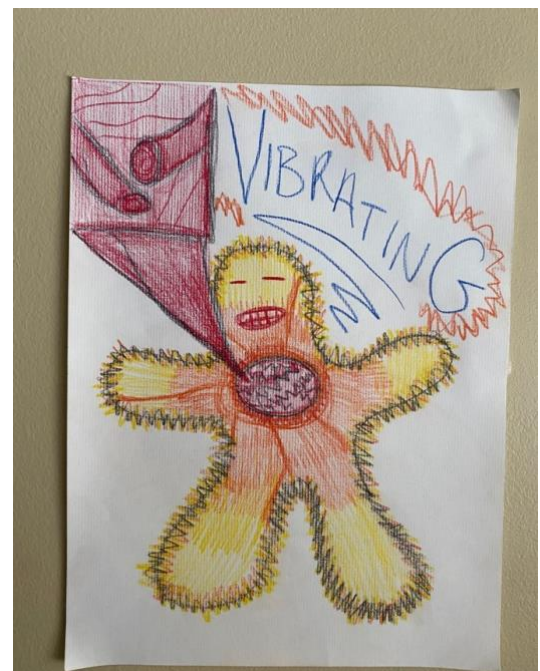


Figure 9

The Voice



Figure 10

A Break from Reality



Reflections about My Art Making Process

A medium that I have commonly used in my art making is acrylic paint on canvas. I have enjoyed using this medium for years. I have learned that acrylic painting has been a container for myself to assist in sharing my emotions and thoughts that may come up. Using this medium has made me feel safe in doing so. Paint flows more freely and is considered a fluid media. Fluid media often leads to a more affective experience (Hinz, 2020).

I also explored using other mediums such as coloured pencils during my self-inquiry journey. Some of the images in which I used coloured pencils were times when I felt I needed more of a sense of control. According to the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC), resistive media may evoke cognitive responses since they are easily controlled (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978, as cited Hinz, 2020). For me, cognitive responses seemed to come forward when using the coloured pencils. As examples, the images in Figures 6 and 7 were created in the moments of an anxiety attack. They were each created at different times. During an anxiety attack, I feel a sense of being out of control, when all you want is a sense of control. I used paint to make the other images when I was more grounded and able to feel that sense of comfort and safety in using acrylics again.

As described by Hinz (2020), the cognitive component emphasizes facts and logical thought, the symbolic component is concerned with intuitive, mythical, and idiosyncratic thought” (p. 123). While some cognitive components may have come up in my artwork, many symbolic elements occurred as a way of representing different experiences on my journey with anxiety. For example, eyes are a common symbol in my artwork. I consider eyes to be the windows to the soul. I included eyes as a lens to show the inside of myself as anxiety is often an invisible battle.

Conclusion

As a person living with generalized anxiety disorder, I have found that anxiety is often misunderstood. Descriptions of anxiety that I have read seem generalized; it may not be possible for a person to fully understand anxiety unless they have experienced it themselves. I wanted to show what anxiety looks like from the “inside.”

I used my personal experience with anxiety, and as a student art therapist with anxiety, as a focus for an arts-based self-inquiry. Following Moustakas’ (1990) steps of heuristic inquiry, I created ten art images and journaled about them. Through witnessing my artwork and journaling, I identified four main themes in my lived experience with anxiety. Fight, flight and freeze; the reoccurring sensations; the unknown and developing understanding; and the lack of control versus wanting control.

I created a digital art show of my art images to spread awareness of this important topic. I wanted to share my experience to provide a voice and a community for others who may be walking through the same experience as me. I wanted to provide some insight for people who may be unfamiliar with the experiences of anxiety.

While my journey of self-inquiry might be a lifelong experience, for now I have learned more about myself than I ever did before. I will continue to work with my experiences and be curious. This is a sign of growth.

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Appendix

Through the Lens of An Anxious Art Therapist Digital Art Show Transcript

My name is Abby Bohun, and I have lived with generalized anxiety disorder for most of my lifetime. As a final project to complete my art therapy training, I created a series of paintings about my experiences with anxiety and being an art therapist with anxiety. Growing up, I was someone who had a passion for doing arts and crafts. As I got into my teenage years, I developed an interest in painting. There was a time when I did recycled art and landscape images, I moved away from this, and I had a craving for creating abstract images. During some of the challenging moments in my life, I used my art as an outlet to cope and express any feelings or thoughts. I have learned with time that my acrylic painting is my container for my emotions. My art has been my therapy.

I experienced a lot of anxiety around the thoughts of doing a research project. I had many insecurities and self-doubts arise. I would “shut down” trying to think of a topic that I could possibly write about. I felt pressure as I had a difficulty finding something that I felt I resonated with. I wanted to do this project with more passion and meaning. After having a chat with my thesis advisor, and sharing my vulnerabilities around this whole thing, I realized that there was a topic under my nose this entire time. And I got curious about, “How could I share my lived experience with anxiety, and what it is like to be an art therapist with anxiety?” This was only the beginning of how this project came to be. I have found that descriptions about anxiety in the literature are generalized and do not always represent my lived experience. Although there is some research and literature about art therapy to treat anxiety, the research about what it is like to be an art therapist with anxiety is sparse.

Because I have had experiences with my anxiety for a long time, there were so many things I have become more aware of as my anxiety would arise. There were also so many things that I did not have answers to. I could not understand why these reoccurring thoughts and responses would take place. In the moment when experiencing an anxiety attack, I would feel lost and unable to identify anything. My heart rate changes, sometimes emotions arise, hyperventilation occurs, and my entire body is shaken to the core. Many self-intrusive thoughts arise, and they sometimes make me feel like I'm in a crisis. Sometimes I did not even know why. I feel like shutting down. There were many times when I had to phone a friend or family member to remind me how to ground myself. Sometimes it's difficult to do this on my own. It is also difficult sharing vulnerability and asking for help. I appreciate the supports I have had to assist in these situations. There are many times when it felt easier to walk away from given situations just to avoid feeling those sensations associated with anxiety. I have continued to become self-aware about my experience and as time continues, I have been learning to face these challenges, as they do not always simply just "go away." I decided that there was an importance in sharing my story, in hopes that others who may be going through a similar experience feel heard or understood.

Many may believe that the anxiety is just a simple "meltdown" but when a person is experiencing this, it is so much more than that. I wanted to take this opportunity for my project to gain more of an understanding about my experiences with anxiety, and to explore what this looks like from my insider perspective. I have created this digital art show to share this experience with you all. I would like to use this opportunity to spread awareness and reduce the stigma around mental health. And to normalize that as therapists, there is always room for our healing.

There were some traumatic events that occurred in my childhood years that I have internalized and tried to suppress. As a result, I have high anxiety. A common way for how I responded to situations that brought up my anxiety or made me feel uncomfortable, is I would try to remove myself from the situation. When I started attending post-secondary education fresh out of high school, the intensity of my anxiety seemed to “snowball” and increase drastically. I was at a point in my life where I did not want to see or visit people and I isolated myself from others. I isolated myself from all situations and I became very insecure. I went into a depression and stopped taking care of myself. There were many restless nights as my brain would not “shut off” and at the same time I would be feeling extremely exhausted. I had panic attacks often and they were common whenever I had to write a test or an exam. There was a point when the intensity was so high that I wanted to drop out of university to not feel this discomfort anymore. I had a mental battle with myself, leaving me with feelings and thoughts of imposter syndrome or that I was always a failure and never good enough for anything. The self-intrusive thoughts made me feel like I was useless.

There was a turning point in my life when I took control and created a change in my environmental stimuli. I sought therapy; I went through a few therapists, trying and find the right fit for me. The resources that they provided me with did not seem to be suitable for how I could regulate. It was the same suggestions given all over, learning to breathe. This suggestion is useful when I catch a build-up of a panic attack at the right moment. There were many times when I was not successful at this. I could not understand why I kept having my anxiety triggered, and I started to feel that these were “normal” behaviours for everyone.

I took medication to help with my depressive mood and to reduce my anxiety. I remember talking to my psychiatrist about how doing simple tasks were very triggering. This

was when he suggested being open to communicating with myself and to try and put myself in some of those “uncomfortable” situations and to reflect with myself after the fact to see how the situation went and to be aware of how it made me feel. This felt nerve-wracking, but I trusted his advice and decided to give it a chance. This exploration allowed me to realize that some of those situations were not as uncomfortable as I thought they were in the first place. I developed a motto in my journey, “Do something every day that scares you.” I have continued to explore this motto into my everyday life. I noticed that there have been significant improvements in my wellbeing. I have started to gain a better quality of life. The mental battle with myself is very difficult and this has not been easy for me. I knew that I was not happy in the mindset and state I was in. I felt a sense of determination to do something about it. This took years to gain that spark. I learned to never give up and celebrate each step one day at a time. This is where I discovered my love for hiking and walking alone in nature. It is almost like a step away or break from reality, from day-to-day life and my anxiety.

In my undergraduate studies, I had an interest for the field of psychology. I had a fascination for the study of human behaviour. In my studies I had the opportunity to learn about others and especially gain many different self-discoveries about myself. There was a point in my path where I was feeling I was ready to extend my educational journey and that is when I discovered the Winnipeg Holistic Expressive Art Therapy Institute. Psychology and my art being my two loves, I felt that this would be a great fit for me. There was a lot of fear in starting this new educational journey. My anxiety was present due to this being a big life change. When going through my courses and attending internships, many different levels of vulnerability would arise, and I felt a lot of imposter syndrome

Touching on the surface of my personal experience of what it is like being an art therapist with anxiety, there tends to be many times where my thoughts feel scattered, and I am constantly trying to mentally prepare for all the possible scenarios that I think my clients might experience or bring into the session. Some days it takes more time to ground and regulate before and after sessions with clients and it takes some time to mentally prepare for the session to come. I tend to have a sense of nervousness and some social anxiety when it comes to meeting new people. Self-intrusive thoughts come from time to time. There are many experiences of self-doubt and imposter syndrome. There are many restless nights from constantly overthinking everything. It is almost like my brain just will not “shut off.” There is often plenty of worry. Worry of not taking care of myself properly, worry for my clients, and worry that I am doing more harm than good in each session I work in. My anxiety has given me this overly cautious behaviour in how I reflect and respond in everything that I do. While most of these thoughts and experiences can be over stimulating, it is important to remind myself to take a step back and breathe.

One day at a time. And I remind myself each step- do something every day that scares you. I have come a long way to get here, and I am not stopping now!