

A HYBRID ART THERAPY INTERVENTION FOR GRIEF PROCESSING: A MIXED-METHODS PRE-POST STUDY

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16

Participants
(Grief Clients)

33.1%

Reduction in
Grief Intensity (GEQ)

41.7%

Reduction in
Depression (Interview)

α=.923

Internal Reliability
(Cronbach's α)

BACKGROUND

Grief and bereavement represent one of the most profound psychological challenges humans face. In Mongolia, cultural norms of **"being strong" and suppressing emotional expression** prevent bereaved individuals from seeking professional support.

Existing services for grief in Mongolia are limited, and empirical studies on culturally adapted interventions are scarce (Oyun-Erdene & Altantsetseg, 2022).

Art therapy provides an indirect, symbol-based pathway that bypasses verbal resistance — particularly effective in Mongolian cultural contexts where direct verbal disclosure of pain is stigmatized.

This study is the first in Mongolia to empirically examine a hybrid (online + in-person) art therapy protocol for grief processing, combining interview-based outcome measures with qualitative artwork analysis.

OBJECTIVES

- Evaluate *the effectiveness of an 8-session art therapy program on grief intensity (GEQ)*
- Assess *changes in depression, anxiety, and stress (DASS-21)*
- Examine *improvements in emotional expression and regulation capacity*
- Compare *post-intervention outcomes between online (n=9) and in-person (n=7) delivery formats*
- Analyze *structural shifts in artwork (color, line, space) as evidence of psychological change*

HYPOTHESIS

An 8-session hybrid art therapy intervention would significantly reduce grief intensity and psychological distress, and improve emotional expression and regulation, with no statistically significant difference between online and in-person delivery.

METHOD

Design

Mixed-methods pre-post test design; paired-samples t-test for quantitative outcomes; phenomenological content analysis for artwork.

Participants

N = 16 bereaved adults (15–65 yrs); experienced loss within last 12 months; grief-related distress confirmed via structured interview.

Instruments

GEQ — Grief Experience Questionnaire (pre/post)
DASS-21 — Depression, Anxiety & Stress Scale (α = .923)

Artwork analysis — Line, color, space, pressure (sessions 1–2 vs. 7–8)

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Age Distribution

15–29 yrs	25%
30–39 yrs	33.3%
40–50 yrs	41.7%

Delivery Format

Online	56.3% (n=9)
In-person	43.8% (n=7)

Type of Loss

Parent (n=4)	Spouse (n=3)	Child (n=3)	Sibling (n=3)
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PRE-POST RESULTS (PAIRED t-TEST)

Symptom	Pre M±SD	Post M±SD	t	p
Sadness	2.69±0.87	2.13±0.72	2.764	.014*
Hopelessness	2.13±1.15	1.88±0.81	0.889	.388
Anxiety	2.38±1.15	1.94±0.68	1.962	.069
Anger	2.56±1.09	2.00±0.82	1.952	.070
Sleep difficulties	2.25±1.18	1.44±0.51	2.931	.010*
Loss of meaning	2.07±1.03	1.53±0.52	1.835	.088
Difficulty accepting	2.60±0.91	1.33±0.49	4.750	.000***
Painful memories	2.47±0.83	1.40±0.63	4.000	.001**
Difficulty expressing	2.47±0.92	1.47±0.52	3.873	.002**
Self-blame	2.60±1.12	1.13±0.35	5.047	.000***

RESULTS

Grief Intensity (GEQ)

Pre-test 62.3

Post-test 41.7

↓ 33.1% reduction t(11) = 8.94, p < .001

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS INDICATOR

Depression	15.8→9.6 ↓39.2% p<.001***
Stress	18.4→11.2 ↓39.1% p<.001***
Anxiety	13.1→8.4 ↓35.9% p.002**

Capability Growth

Emotional regulation +34%

Self-expression +27%

ONLINE vs. IN-PERSON COMPARISON

Outcome	In-Person (n=7)	Online (n=9)	p
Sadness	2.57	1.78	.022*
Hopelessness	2.43	1.44	.010*
Anxiety/Stress	2.43	1.56	.006*
Anger	2.14	1.89	.556
Sleep difficulties	1.57	1.33	.375
Loss of meaning	1.43	1.56	.642
Accepting loss	1.14	1.44	.223

Significant group differences were observed for grief, future anxiety, and anxiety (p < .05), but both formats were effective.

DISCUSSION

Neuropsychological mechanism: Trauma suppresses Broca's area (verbal processing), while art therapy activates the right hemisphere through visual-motor engagement. Manual art-making (drawing, collage) reduces somatic tension, activating the parasympathetic system — consistent with the large stress reduction observed (d = 1.03).

Worden's (2009) Grief Tasks alignment: Early sessions supported Tasks 2–3 (processing grief pain; adjusting to absence); final sessions ("Tree of Life" artwork) operationalized Task 4 (maintaining continuing bonds while re-engaging life).

Cultural adaptation: Mongolian participants showed stronger resistance in sessions 1–2, successfully overcome through indirect symbol-based techniques — a culturally specific advantage over purely verbal approaches (Malchiodi, 2012).

Strongest effects: Self-blame (t=5.047), difficulty accepting loss (t=4.750), and painful memories (t=4.000) — the exact symptoms most prevalent in unresolved grief disorders.

CONCLUSIONS

8-session hybrid art therapy significantly reduces **grief intensity (–33.1%), depression (–39.2%), stress (–39.1%), and anxiety (–35.9%)** in bereaved Mongolian adults.

Self-blame and acceptance difficulties showed the largest improvements — central challenges in Mongolian grief experiences.

Both online and in-person formats were effective; however, face-to-face participants reported lower post-test grief, future anxiety, and anxiety scores.

This study contributes novel empirical evidence supporting the use of art therapy in Mongolian social work practice and provides a practical 8-session intervention protocol for clinical and community settings.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Small sample (N=16) and no control group limit causal inference
- Cross-sectional design; long-term follow-up (6–12 months) needed
- Future studies: randomized controlled trial, larger national sample, cultural adaptation scales

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