Using Art Therapy to Address Cognitive Symptoms of Parkinson’s Disease

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ABSTRACT

Parkinson’s disease affects millions of individuals worldwide. The physical symptoms of PD are devastating. In the same sense, the cognitive symptoms of PD also have a profound effect on afflicted individuals. This study examined the cognitive impairments of Parkinson’s disease and how they can be treated using art therapy. The author of this study met with one individual who suffered from cognitive impairment due to Parkinson’s disease. The two met for eight sessions over a six-week period. During this time, an A-B-A single-subject research design was established, with multiple baselines. Over the course of six weeks, the participant partook in various art therapy directives. The results of this study indicated that art therapy helped decrease the participant’s level of depression and helped maintain the participant’s current level of dementia, partially supporting this research study’s hypothesis. The results of this study underscore the need for further research in this area.

Keywords: Art Therapy, Baseline, Cognitive Impairments, Parkinson’s Disease (PD), Physical Symptoms

Parkinson’s disease (PD) is a slowly progressive disease of the brain. There are approximately 1.2 million people with PD in the United States and Canada. 60,000 people are diagnosed with PD each year (Lieberman, 2002). PD affects brain cells that produce dopamine, a neurotransmitter used by the brain to control movement (Elkis-Abuhoff, Goldblatt, Gaydos, & Corrato, 2008). The physical and emotional symptoms of this disease affect each individual differently. Physical symptoms of PD include resting tremor, muscle rigidity, and poor balance. Emotional symptoms of PD include anxiety and depression, among other things.

Many people with PD experience varying levels of dementia, and some also suffer from psychosis. The cause of cognitive impairment in PD is multi-faceted. Some cognitive dysfunction could occur as the result of Parkinson’s medications, such as levodopa and anticholinergic drugs (Ehrt, Broich, Larsen, Ballard & Aarsland, 2010). Another possible cause for cognitive...
impairment in people with PD is the effect that the disease has on brain cells (Cummings, 1992). Whatever the cause, cognitive impairment in PD is a key component of the disease.

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study was to examine the use of art therapy in the treatment of people who suffer from cognitive impairments as a result of PD. Art therapy has been found to be effective in the treatment of people with PD (Maiorana, 1989), depression (Wadeson, 1980), dementia (Mottram, 2003), and psychosis (Crespo, 2003) as separate entities.

Art therapy can be of great aid to people with cognitive impairment due to PD. By focusing on the act of creativity, one is able to switch his or her focus from PD to the task at hand, thus lessening stress levels and preoccupation with the disease. Being able to visually communicate what one is thinking and feeling can also be very therapeutic.

**JUSTIFICATION**

Even though there is a growing amount of current literature that discusses the impact of cognitive impairment within PD, there seems to be a lack of treatment options for this particular population. The goal of this study was to examine how this population can be treated via art therapy, potentially opening the door for further research in this particular area.

**HYPOTHESIS**

The hypothesis for this thesis study was the following: Art therapy will decrease levels of depression and psychosis (specifically visual hallucinations), and maintain current levels of dementia within an individual who suffers from Parkinson’s disease. The incidence of depressive tendencies and visual hallucinations can be reduced through various therapeutic techniques, namely art therapy; however, levels of dementia are permanent and can be maintained, but not improved.

**BRIEF OVERVIEW OF STUDY**

The Parkinson’s Disease Questionnaire (PDQ-8) was administered during the first session. The PDQ-8 measures the overall health of an individual suffering from PD. Sessions one and two established a baseline for levels of depression, dementia, and psychosis (visual hallucinations). The participant and primary caregiver completed Likert scales measuring instances of depression, dementia, and psychosis. If there was more than one session in a week, the Likert scales were completed in the first session of that week.

During the treatment phase of the study, art therapy directives were provided. These art therapy directives focused on increasing self-esteem, enhancing memory recall, and strengthening the participant’s sense of self-identity.

In the sixth week, the participant was returned to a baseline. Here, the researcher again measured levels of cognitive impairment, using the same rating scales for each variable, and compared them to the first baseline period and the treatment phase of the study. During the last session, the participant and primary caregiver completed the PDQ-8 post-test. After therapy concluded, the art therapist analyzed the data obtained from the PDQ-8 pre- and post-tests, and developed graphs comparing the participant’s and caregiver’s weekly ratings of cognitive impairment. Significant differences in levels of cognitive impairment were measured using the PDQ-8 scores, Likert scales, and therapy notes.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Previous literature has painted a fairly accurate picture of Parkinson’s disease, including its various symptoms and treatment methods. The pathology of PD is highly individualized. In-
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