



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**Psychology**

**ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY ON ENHANCING SELF-COMPASSION IN INDIVIDUALS WITH SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER**

**KEY WORDS:** Self-Compassion, Expressive Arts Therapy, Substance Use Disorder

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**ABSTRACT**  
 Substance Use Disorder (SUD) is a growing concern in India due to its physical and emotional ramifications. For a patient in recovery from SUD, reversal is possible but involves psychological challenges during the withdrawal phase. This study primarily aims to assess the impact of Expressive Arts Therapy on residential patients with Substance Use Disorder in a de-addiction center. A total of 14 patients were sampled and the change in the level of Self Compassion was measured by pre test-post test method using the Self Compassion Scale Short Form. The group of patients were provided with interventions based in Expressive Arts Therapy over a span of 16 sessions spread across 5 weeks. The results of this study indicated that the pre-test mean for overall self-compassion for the group is 2.08 indicating low self-compassion whereas the mean for post-test is 3.77 indicating a rise in overall self-compassion following interventions based in Expressive Arts Therapy. However, the study duration and sample size were limited. The findings from the thesis can be used to identify the limitations in resources provided to patients with Substance Use Disorder and create effective creative body-based interventions within the framework of Expressive Arts Therapy.

**INTRODUCTION**

In India, the phenomenon of use of legal as well as illegal substances such as alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, cocaine and so on is rising among the youth and the elderly in the recent times. Speaking of the use of substances in Indian context, substances such as alcohol, marijuana, tobacco and others have their roots in ancient history and myths. But the recreational use, misuse and abuse of these substances which now also include chemical or synthetic substances, has been a development since past few decades, leading individuals towards substance dependency, abuse and addiction; precisely the Substance Use Disorders (SUD).

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defined substance use disorder as “the recurrent use of alcohol and/or drugs [that] causes clinically significant impairment, including health problems, disability, and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school, or home”. (Kruger, 2021)

Once diagnosed, Substance Use Disorder is reversible but, during the course of recovery, individuals recovering from SUD are known to face innumerable psychological and emotional challenges. These challenges mainly occur during the stage of withdrawal when the patients are observed to shut themselves down on sensory, emotional and sometimes even physical levels. Individuals in withdrawal are known to be prone to self – isolation, self – judgement and even self-harm on the account of over identification. These challenges might hamper and even slow down the recovery process.

Treatment methods such as the 12 Step Programme and Cognitive Behavioral Therapies are administered by the de-addiction centers across the globe. While these methods are known to be effective towards abstinence and relapse prevention according to the available research, literature suggests more experimentation in the area of body-based practices and emotional wellbeing along with the above-mentioned treatment methods. In the recent times, the practice of Self-Compassion, having its roots in the Buddhist philosophy, is known to show results in alleviating intense and painful emotional experiences.

Neff & Pommier (2013), define self-compassion as consisting of three main elements: self-kindness versus harsh self-

judgment, a sense of common humanity versus feelings of isolation, and mindfulness versus over identification with painful thoughts and emotions. These components combine and mutually interact to create a self-compassionate frame of mind.

As of now several Self-Compassion scales with variations in context to different populations have been developed based on the 26 item self-reported questionnaire originally created by Kristen D. Neff. Self-Compassion Scale Short Form which is a 12-item questionnaire with two sub-scales viz. Self-Care and Self-Disparagement, is considered appropriate for clinical use to measure adult participants' capacity of Self-Compassion.

Additionally, the emerging discipline of expressive and creative therapies are known to help address deep rooted traumatic experiences and process intense emotional experiences by creating a safe channel for addressing these emotional and cognitive challenges through interventions based within the framework of Expressive Arts Therapy, while building mindfulness, group bonding and kindness towards self. Expressive Arts Therapy encompasses therapeutic approaches from various creative therapies such as dance and creative movement; drama; music and visual art. The available research, even though limited in nature, provides valuable evidence of effectiveness of Dance Movement Therapy and Visual Art Therapy as a form of complimentary treatment modality for the individuals with Substance Use Disorder as well as several other mental health conditions. This study, therefore was aimed at exploring the possibility of intersecting practices based in Self compassion with Expressive Arts Therapy to address two core elements within the framework of Self-Compassion model, such as improving Self-Care and alleviating Self-Disparagement while enhancing the level of overall self-compassion.

**METHODOLOGY**

For the purpose of this quasi-experimental research study, a group of 14 individuals including men and women with the mean age of 37.92 years were selected using the method of convenience sampling on the basis of criteria for inclusion and exclusion. A written consent along with demographic details was collected from the participants of the study as well as the de-addiction center. The inclusion and exclusion

criteria is mentioned as below.

**Inclusion Criteria:**

1. The study was open for both male and female participants.
2. Age: 18 years and above
3. The participants were required to be residents at de-addiction center in Pune
4. Patients with poly-substance use disorder
5. Patients who were willing to participate during the course of the study.

**Exclusion Criteria**

1. Patients within this group who had severe medical conditions.
2. Patients having physical disability such as an amputated limb.
3. Patients who got a discharge during the time period of the study.
4. Patients who were admitted to the de-addiction center after the first two weeks of the study.
5. Patients who developed severe withdrawal symptoms during their stay at the de-addiction center.
6. Patients who did not give their consent for the study.
7. Women who were pregnant during the time frame of the study.

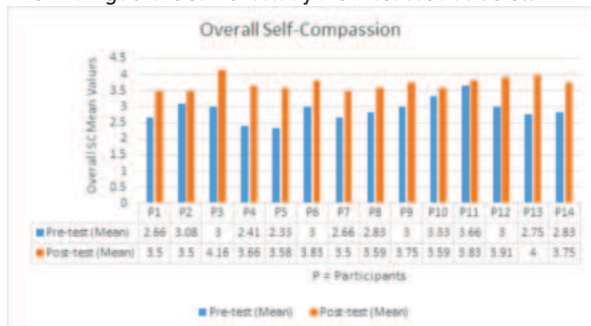
The study was conducted over a time frame of 16 sessions spread across 5 weeks. Each session aimed at addressing an element within the framework of Self-Compassion through interventions primarily based in creative movement, rhythm circles, drama and visual art.

In order to evaluate the change in the capacity for self-compassion following interventions based in Expressive Arts Therapy, a self-reported 12 item questionnaire of Self-Compassion Short Form was administered before and after the 16 sessions respectively. The descriptive data was then obtained and analyzed using Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test with the help of IBM SPSS version 29.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In this study, capacity for overall Self-Compassion was measured and evaluated using the Short Form of Self-Compassion Scale as suggested by Raes, Pommier, & Gucht (2011). The two factor subscales developed by Hayes, Lockard, & Locke (2016) within the framework of Short Form of Self-Compassion Scale consist of Self-Disparagement and Self Care and help to gain a deeper insight on the level of enhancement of Self Compassion. Self-Disparagement (Items 1, 4, 8, 9, 11, 12) indicate the perception of patients about themselves with regard to impatience, disapproval, and judgment toward oneself. Self-Care (Items 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 10) is an indication of presence of tenderness, patience, and empathy towards oneself.

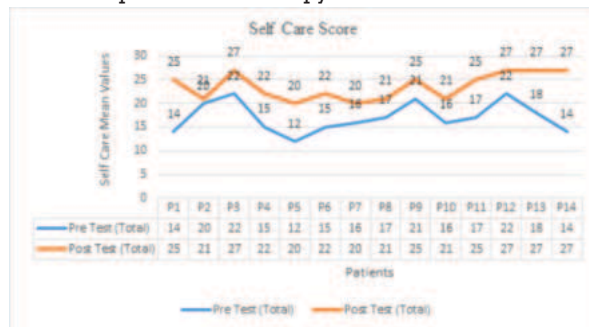
The findings of the current study are discussed as below:



**Figure 1: Overall Self-Compassion**

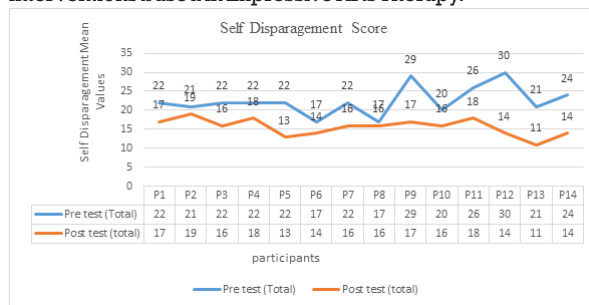
Figure 1 describes the pre and posttest mean scores of overall Self-Compassion of each participating patient of the current study indicating a significant rise in overall Self Compassion

for all the participants of the study following interventions based in Expressive Arts Therapy.



**Figure 2: Self-Care**

Figure 2 describes the pre-test and post-test mean scores of subscale of Self Care indicating a rise in Self-Care following interventions based in Expressive Arts Therapy.



**Figure 3: Self Disparagement**

Figure 3 describes the pre-test and post-test scores of subscale of Self-Disparagement indicating a decline in contributing factors of Self-Disparagement following interventions based in Expressive Arts Therapy. The average of mean score for overall Self-Compassion pretest and posttest was 2.80 and 3.77 respectively. The results indicated a significant rise in the level of Self Care whereas a significant decline was observed in the level of Self-Disparagement following the sessions in Expressive Arts Therapy.

The patients during the course of the current study underwent an intense process that was divided in five phases. Each phase of this process was designed in congruence with the core components of the framework Self Compassion which are Mindfulness, Self-Kindness and Common Humanity as developed by Neff K. D., (2003). The core components were addressed through creative interventions comprising of art-based activities, games and verbal sharing. The process was later culminated in a therapeutic performance through which patients told stories about their own journey of addiction ending with a vision to recover and begin anew.

The non-verbal nature of art, be it any kind, has been known to allow individuals to express feelings freely and process intense emotional experiences while in an overwhelmed state of mind and body. Marian Chace, the founder of Dance Movement Therapy in the west, mentions the significance of dance as a means of communication which is a basic human need. Halprin, (2000) in her book says that dance or movement as a primary form of expression becomes significant as it has the capacity to encompass all the other art forms such as music, painting, writing and drama.

During the interventions of the current study, participants were able to communicate their disturbing state of mind through mirroring, embodying and by using movement metaphors.

Diehls (2008) in his study briefly mentions the significance of words and imagery used by substance abusers as a way of

their defensive mechanism. On the other hand, in the current study, the use of words which appeared either as deep reflection or as defense were later turned into a shared experience as reflective choreographies and skits. Prominent themes that emerged during this process were Mistrust vs Trust; Imbalance vs Balance; Restriction vs Freedom; Anger vs Peace and Distance vs Joy. These themes helped participants acknowledge the polarities allowing them to transcend from states of self-disparagement to states of self-care.

Creativity provides opportunities for self-discovery and growth. (Kavanaugh, 2017). As a result of the process of the interventions based in Expressive Arts Therapy, the group of patients were observed to have become more aware and mindful about themselves and those in their environment. There was a visible reduction in self-pity, shame and other feelings related to Self Disparagement. The group activities and team based interventions addressed the need of shared human experience leading towards enhancing the aspect of shared space of reflection while alienating judgement towards self.

Rebecca Milliken, M.A. ADTR (2010) in her study emphasized on the significance of movement empathy and shared expression. Since, 'common humanity' was one of the primary components of this study, the shared expression and kinesthetic empathy extended into a shared sense of belonging for the participants which eventually helped them step out of feelings of isolation and over-identification. Even though literature related to application of expressive therapies for individuals with SUD is not too extensive, a few studies suggest that treatments based in creative therapies can be effective.

Torres, (2016) in her study described about a dance based programme which was developed for children with Substance Use Disorder. The current study in contrast has laid the foundation for not only dance but, for the expansive nature of expressive therapies such as drama, visual art and music which encompasses an approach focused on addressing the psychological needs of the participants. Moreover, the current study is developed for a group of adults under treatment for overcoming SUD.

Furthermore, a qualitative study conducted by Lynn Johnson, (1990) beautifully expressed the complimentary role of creative therapy sessions in congruence with 12 Step Programme along with the role of a creative therapist as a catalyst in the process of recovery. Taking inspiration from his words during the present study, a safe space was created for the participants to re-discover their capabilities which led them towards regaining agency of self and the choices they made.

Adedoyin, Burns, Jackson, & Franklin, (2014) informed that according to Alfred Adler, the father of School of Individual Psychology, creativity allows a person to experience him or herself as a whole being. Attempting tasks that are unknown to the body and mind awakens courage and opens doors for a rewarding feeling.

Similarly, through its non-verbal and exploratory nature, Expressive Arts Therapy offers methods and tools that allow an individual to make an attempt to go beyond personal limitations; physically, cognitively and emotionally to find a fuller expression of self.

**LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study was a quasi-experimental one group pre-test post-test research which was conducted for one sample group. Even though the results suggest that the data collected and analyzed was highly significant, considering the small sample size, the reliability of the study cannot be scientifically stated and generalized. Furthermore, the tests that were conducted

to collect the data were self-reported in nature which may have yielded biased responses.

In addition, the current study only measured the quantifiable outcomes which expresses only a part of the whole experience and lacks the thorough expanse of data that emerged as a part of observation of non-verbal communication, personal reflections and verbal articulation by the participants during the course of the study.

Moreover, the results are not solely based on the application of Expressive Arts Therapy as participants underwent other procedures such as the 12 Step Programme; Yoga and meditation and outdoor games at the treatment center.

Since this study was solely focused on assessing the impact of Expressive Arts therapy in context to enhancement of Self Compassion, the aspect of presence of co-morbidity of other psychological conditions was not taken into consideration.

Lastly, the absence of scientific tools to measure the observed and felt expression of the body did not allow the researchers to evaluate the complete extent of the outcome which emerged through bodily expressions and an experience of a felt sense.

**CONCLUSION**

The current study was an intervention based one group pre-test post – test study which indicated the need and significance of body based/ psycho-somatic practices within the purview of recovery from Substance Use Disorder. The interventions, even though conducted on one sample group, displayed a positive shift laying down the foundation for future studies as the intersection of Expressive Arts Therapy with the concept of Self Compassion for the population of Substance Use Disorder is an unexplored area. In conclusion we can say that this study opens new doors for experimentation and explorations for the discipline of Expressive Arts Therapy while it is in its nascent stage in India.

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