

# Principles and Intervention Studies of Art Therapy for Anxiety and Depression in Adolescents

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**ABSTRACT:** Anxiety and depression are major psychological issues among adolescents, causing numerous negative impacts on their learning and daily lives. Currently, common intervention methods include pharmacotherapy and psychological interventions, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. As a non-verbal intervention method, art therapy relies on self-expression and emotional release, offering a unique therapeutic pathway for addressing anxiety and depression. Through visual art forms, art therapy helps individuals externalize their inner emotions and psychological conflicts, thereby facilitating self-awareness and emotional regulation. This paper aims to introduce the principles and classifications of art therapy, as well as its practical application in treating anxiety and depression among adolescents, to provide new insights for improving therapeutic outcomes in this field.

**Keywords:** Art therapy, Anxiety, Depression, Adolescents

## I. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical period for an individual's healthy development. During this stage, adolescents must navigate both physical and psychological growth while learning to manage interpersonal relationships and academic pressures; therefore, ensuring good mental health is particularly important. Anxiety and depression are common psychological issues among adolescents and can have negative impacts on various aspects of their lives, including social interactions and cognitive functioning. According to the "2022 Survey Report on Adolescent Mental Health" (2022), jointly released by the Institute of Psychology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and other institutions, approximately 14.8% of adolescents are at risk of depression to varying degrees, with 4.0% classified as being at high risk of severe depression and 10.8% at low risk of mild depression. According to sample data from Chongqing, the prevalence of anxiety among adolescents reached 34.6%, while that of depression reached 9.9%; 5.6% of adolescents exhibited both conditions simultaneously (Shen Yan et al. The Ministry of Education and 16 other departments (2023) issued the "Special Action Plan for Comprehensively

Strengthening and Improving Student Mental Health Work in the New Era (2023 – 2025)," emphasizing the promotion of student mental health through the integrated development of all five aspects of education and the strengthening of mental health education. Therefore, to safeguard the healthy growth of adolescents and address their emotional issues, finding practical and feasible intervention methods is an urgent priority.

Existing interventions for anxiety and depression have certain limitations regarding treatment sustainability, side effects, and accessibility. Traditional pharmacological treatments may also impose a significant physiological burden, making it necessary to seek safe, low-cost, and more acceptable alternative approaches. Non-pharmacological treatments are gradually becoming a focus of research, and there is a need to identify safe and low-cost therapeutic approaches. Art therapy, which utilizes non-verbal forms and integrates with artistic expression, offers unique advantages in psychological intervention. This paper aims to explore the use of art therapy to improve adolescents' psychological well-being and alleviate anxiety and depressive symptoms.

## II. ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

Adolescence is a critical period for an individual's physical and psychological development. During this stage, adolescents undergo rapid physiological and psychological changes and growth, and must face and manage a series of issues related to interpersonal relationships, academic life, and cognitive transitions. These factors influence adolescents' psychological state, potentially triggering negative emotions and leading to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Research indicates that the comorbidity rate of anxiety and depression among adolescents is 29.3% (Wang Meng, 2024).

### 2.1. Anxiety

Anxiety is a common natural response characterized by tension and worry when facing stress, challenges, or uncertainty (Zung, 1971), such as feeling nervous before a speech. Anxiety typically lasts for a short period and does not significantly impact daily life. Anxiety disorder, however, is a mental health condition characterized by persistent, excessive worry and fear; this worry often lacks a clear cause and interferes with daily functioning. Surveys indicate that the prevalence of anxiety disorders is 7.3% (Baxter et al., 2013). Mainstream methods for assessing anxiety include the Self-Rating Anxiety Scale and the Beck Anxiety Inventory.

### 2.2. Depression

Depression is one of the most common mental health disorders. Angold (1992) posits that depression reflects a negative emotional state, characterized by persistent low mood and feelings of distress. Domestic survey reports indicate that the prevalence of depression among adolescents is 27.44% (Luo Fusheng et al., 2009). Cicchetti et al. (1998) classified depression into three types based on severity: depressive disorder, depressive symptoms, and depressive mood.

Depressive mood typically refers to an emotional state characterized by mild low mood and a lack of interest in activities, often triggered by objective life events such as unemployment or poor exam results. Depressive mood is transient, usually lasting no more than two weeks, and may resolve on its own.

Depression, also known as a depressive disorder, is a mood disorder within the clinical spectrum. It is characterized by a persistent negative and low mood, which may be accompanied by physical symptoms such as headaches and generalized fatigue. It significantly impacts daily life and, in severe cases, may lead to suicidal behavior. Currently, treatment primarily involves pharmacological intervention, though psychological counseling is also an effective approach. Major assessment scales include the Self-Rating Depression Scale and the Beck Depression Inventory.

### III. ART THERAPY

#### 3.1. Definition of Art Therapy

Art therapy (drawing therapy) is a form of art therapy that combines drawing with therapeutic techniques. It utilizes nonverbal expression to allow clients to freely express themselves through the drawing process, thereby promoting mental health and emotional expression. It falls under the broader category of art therapy. Art therapy is a form of psychological projection technique that allows people to express their inner emotional experiences in a nonverbal environment through color, shape, and line, thereby achieving relaxation, stress relief, and emotional improvement (Johnstone et al., 2018).

Art therapy is suitable for people of all ages, particularly those who find it difficult to express their emotions directly through language. Meng Peixin (2009) found that clients often struggle to articulate their pain verbally, whereas the nonverbal nature of art therapy effectively addresses this issue, ensuring that treatment is not limited by language or constrained by varying levels of expressive ability. Clients generally exhibit low resistance to art therapy, are easily engaged, and demonstrate high acceptance. Furthermore, as it places no requirements on the client's cultural background or artistic skills, it offers significant practicality in implementation.

The specific implementation of art therapy is typically guided by the therapist, who selects different art forms and activities based on therapeutic goals, the participant's needs, and emotional state. Participants in art therapy do not need a relevant artistic background or professional artistic skills; the focus is on expressing emotions and gaining insights through drawing in a safe environment. Art therapy does not concern itself with the quality of the artwork but rather focuses on the creative process, emphasizing the interaction between the artwork and the individual. It provides participants with ample space to express themselves, enabling them to achieve personal change and growth—that is, the process is more important than the result (Yazdanpanah et al., 2022).

By focusing on the creative process, participants can redirect their attention to the act of drawing, temporarily escaping the pressures and anxieties of reality and achieving psychological relaxation. During the drawing process, participants can explore and understand themselves, build self-confidence, accept their shortcomings, and thereby enhance their sense of self-worth (; .Art therapy facilitates self-expression; as participants project their subconscious onto the canvas during the painting process, it helps awaken self-awareness and cultivate an individual's capacity for self-reflection (Zhu Jingyi & Xia Mu, 2024). Exposure to art therapy based on painting and crafts can improve the overall health-related quality of life for children with cancer (Abdulah & Abdulla, 2018).

#### 3.2. Classification of Art Therapy

Art therapy takes many diverse and flexible forms and can be adapted to different settings based on specific therapeutic goals to achieve treatment objectives.

Based on the format of participation, art therapy can be divided into individual art therapy and group art therapy. The two differ in terms of target populations, therapeutic processes, and modes of interaction. The number of participants also varies: individual art therapy typically involves one client working with one therapist, while group art therapy involves a group facilitator and group participants.

Art therapy is a clinically established practice with mature techniques, which can be broadly categorized into three types: free drawing, thematic drawing, and Gestalt drawing. Free drawing, also known as non-thematic drawing, is the most basic form of art therapy. Free drawing imposes no specific subject matter, allowing participants to express themselves freely without constraints. Participants can choose colors and patterns according to their preferences to express inner feelings, release emotional tension, and deepen their

understanding of their inner selves (Li Hongwei & Wu Di, 2016).

There are many types of thematic drawing. Classic thematic drawings include drawings of trees, houses, and people, as well as the House-Tree-Person (HTP) drawing, which combines all three. The house, tree, and person represent the participant's projections of family, environment, and self, respectively (The House-Tree-Person drawing is one of the most widely used drawing methods today. It requires participants to draw a house, a tree, and a non-stylized figure on a blank sheet of paper; otherwise, there are no restrictions, and participants are free to express themselves. In practice, art therapy has given rise to a variety of non-classical thematic drawing techniques, including mandala drawing, free drawing, drawing emotions, landscape composition, the eight-card repetition test, the nine-square grid, the psychological magic pot, multidimensional addition drawing, drawing a safe haven, the family line of time, the life line, collaborative drawing, drawing with eyes closed, drawing with the non-dominant hand, mountain climbing drawings, and river crossing diagrams (Yan Hu, Chen Jindong, Guo Ping, Huang Fei, Zhu Sihao, & Xie Xiaoyan, 2016, pp. 23–27).

Gestalt drawing, also known as “completion drawing,” involves the therapist providing an incomplete shape or set of lines, and the participant using their imagination to create upon the original incomplete image, thereby completing the pattern (Wang Yifei, 2024). Through the process of completing the drawing, clients explore their inner world and gain insight into their relationships with themselves and others.

Mandala drawing therapy is a specialized form of art therapy that utilizes the creation of mandala patterns to achieve relaxation and self-exploration. Mandala patterns are symmetrical, circular designs that typically feature complex geometric structures and repetitive motifs (as shown in Figure 1). Drawing mandalas helps individuals focus, meditate, and regulate their emotions, bringing inner peace and balance through a sense of visual order. Jung believed that mandala patterns symbolize an individual's self-integration and psychological balance. He introduced this concept into art therapy to help patients explore, integrate, and heal themselves, which had a significant influence on the subsequent development of art therapy (Tong Xin, 2017).

Mandala painting creates a protective space for participants by addressing both the external environment and internal psychology. During the painting process, participants are able to let down their guard and immerse themselves fully in the activity. In this state, they can authentically express and understand themselves, thereby enhancing their sense of self-worth. The mandala's circular, enclosed structure provides participants with a sense of security, allowing them to express themselves freely in a safe environment, attain inner peace, and release pent-up negative emotions. Mandala drawing helps participants adopt a more objective perspective to reflect on past life events and emotional experiences, allowing intangible feelings to transcend the limitations of tangible language (Sun Jiakang & Li Xian, 2024). Research indicates that mandala drawing can promote the development of drawing skills in children with autism and comprehensively enhance their psychological functioning (Lu Xiaoping, 2021).

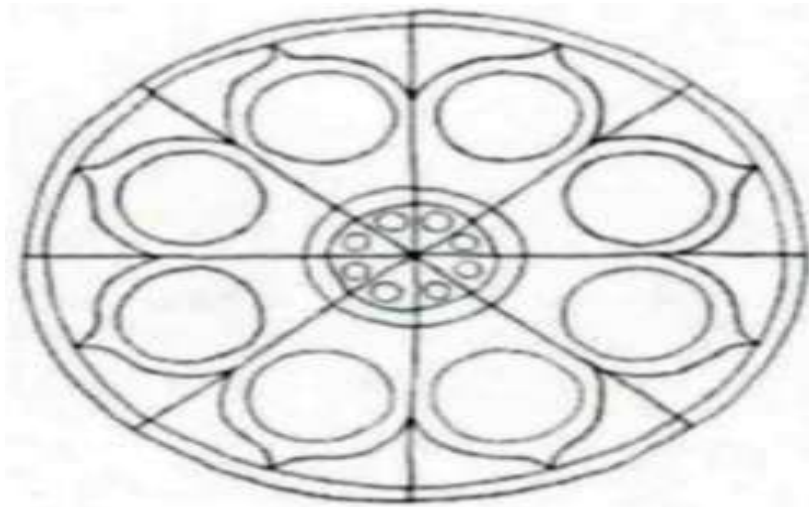


Figure 1: Mandala Patterns (Lu Xiaoping, 2021)

### 3.3. Principles and Effects of Art Therapy Interventions for Adolescent Depression and Anxiety

#### 3.3.1. Principles of Art Therapy

Art therapy promotes emotional expression and psychological integration through nonverbal means, with its core mechanism lying in projective expression. Through the free creation of colors, lines, and shapes, individuals can externalize their inner emotions and conflicts via symbolic imagery, thereby reducing emotional repression and internal tension. Structured forms such as mandala drawing, due to their symmetry and central structure, can create a sense of order and safe boundaries, allowing clients to enter a meditative state of focus during the creative process, thereby reducing anxiety and stress (Curry & Kasser, 2005).

From a neuroscientific perspective, the right hemisphere of the brain plays a key role in emotional processing, visuospatial processing, and artistic expression. Research indicates that the right hemisphere is not only involved in the recognition and expression of negative emotions such as sadness and fear but is also responsible for functions such as color recognition, spatial perception, and visual imagery. The act of painting activates and modulates neural networks associated with the right hemisphere, facilitating more effective emotional processing and externalization (Li Qiong et al., 2020). Furthermore, artistic creation promotes neuroplasticity, activates the mirror neuron system and interoceptive pathways, and provides a biological basis for interventions targeting emotional issues, including depression and anxiety (Strang, 2024). Within this framework, art therapy serves both expressive and regulatory functions. Through stable schematic structures and the controllable experiences formed during the creative process, it helps clients establish a sense of security and psychological boundaries, thereby reducing the diffuse anxiety triggered by uncertainty (Curry & Kasser, 2005). Projective drawing, such as the House-Tree-Person Test, also demonstrates that visual expression can reflect an individual's internal conflicts, providing important clues for identifying risk factors and understanding emotions (Pan Rundé, 2008).

#### 3.3.2. The Effects of Art Therapy

Art therapy has demonstrated significant intervention effects in emotional regulation, psychological healing, and social adaptation. In terms of emotional improvement, art therapy can effectively alleviate anxiety and depression ( ). Mandala coloring has been shown to significantly reduce anxiety levels, with intervention effects superior to free drawing; structured drawing forms may reduce tension and stress by inducing a meditative state of attention (Curry & Kasser, 2005). Art therapy interventions have also demonstrated positive effects in clinical and special populations. Studies on children and adolescents undergoing cancer treatment

found that after several art therapy sessions, participants' anxiety levels decreased significantly, and their levels of self-acceptance improved markedly (Liu, 2023).

In the adolescent population, art therapy not only facilitates emotional release but also enhances self-awareness and emotional regulation skills. Through the drawing process, adolescents can more clearly identify their sources of stress and emotional experiences, thereby enabling the timely expression and regulation of negative emotions (Jiang Yu, 2022). Group art therapy has also shown positive results in addressing exam anxiety; students are able to express the negative emotions caused by exams through their artwork and gradually restore emotional balance during the therapeutic process (Yuan Li, 2024).

In terms of interpersonal and social adaptation, art therapy plays a promotional role in enhancing communication skills and improving parent-child interactions. Relevant studies indicate that art therapy not only improves an individual's emotional state but also exerts a positive influence on repairing parent-child relationships and enhancing family emotional support (Chen Guo et al., 2017). Mandala drawing has been found to evoke positive emotions and enhance subjective well-being; its effects in promoting self-awareness and self-understanding also provide significant support for psychological growth (Chen Canrui, 2013).

Through nonverbal artistic expression, art therapy enables clients to externalize emotional conflicts and reconstruct their self-narratives within a controlled and safe environment. Through the combined effects of visual-kinesthetic engagement and neuroplasticity mechanisms, it facilitates emotional regulation, psychological healing, and enhanced well-being. Compared to traditional pharmacological treatments and language-based psychological counseling, art therapy has lower requirements regarding age, educational background, and language proficiency, making it more accessible and applicable. It thus offers unique advantages in the intervention of emotional disorders among adolescents.

#### **IV. ART THERAPY INTERVENTION FOR ADOLESCENT ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION: INTERVENTION PROTOCOL**

In art therapy, drawing is the core component. Deep engagement in artistic expression—specifically drawing and coloring mandala patterns—helps individuals enter a meditative state, thereby reducing their experience of anxiety (Curry & Kasser, 2005). Art therapy sessions typically last 30 – 45 minutes and can be conducted as individual or group interventions. The entire process includes a preparation phase, a creation phase, and a reflection phase. The activity can be combined with anxiety and depression scales (such as the SAS or SDS) for pre- and post-test comparisons to assess the effects on emotional regulation.

##### **4.1. Steps for Mandala Drawing Practice**

**Preparation Phase (approx. 5 – 10 minutes):** Before formal creation begins, the therapist must assess the client's current state of anxiety or depression, including recent stressful events, emotional fluctuations, and physical sensations, to determine appropriate mandala themes and structures. Individuals with anxiety tendencies typically exhibit scattered attention and unstable experiences; therefore, the preparation phase places greater emphasis on fostering a sense of safety and control over the external environment. Those with depressive tendencies often experience emotional sluggishness or lack of motivation, requiring supportive dialogue to gradually awaken their willingness to participate. The therapist prepares drawing paper, watercolor pens, and circular drawing tools, and creates a quiet, non-judgmental creative environment—providing stable cues for those with anxiety and a gentle space for emotional activation for those with depression.

**Creative Phase (approx. 20 – 25 minutes):** Select a theme based on the client's concerns and emotional state, such as "Emotional Mandala" or "The Self in the Present Moment." Conduct a brief 1 – 2-minute meditation or mindfulness exercise before painting to help anxious individuals gradually reduce physiological

arousal and assist depressed individuals in enhancing their awareness of internal emotions. The creative process uses a circular boundary as its basic framework, guiding clients to freely express patterns, textures, or symbolic elements within a structured space. The circular frame provides a distinct sense of stability, helping to reduce the fragmented attention associated with anxiety; repetitive and symmetrical lines establish a sense of rhythm, thereby reducing anxiety-related physiological responses. As clients with depression fill in the colors, they can gradually experience a psychological shift from passivity to proactivity, enhancing their sense of self-efficacy. The entire creative process emphasizes the continuity of “focus—awareness—expression,” enabling individuals to transform and regulate their experiences of anxiety or depression through visual imagery.

**Work Review Phase (approx. 10 minutes):** After the artwork is completed, the therapist and client jointly review the process of pattern and color use, guiding the client to describe their attention, emotions, and bodily sensations during the painting. For example: “In which part did you feel the most stable?” or “Is this color associated with a particular emotion?” During the review process, clients experiencing anxiety may notice a shift in their emotions from tension to stability, fostering a positive experience of emotional regulation; clients experiencing depression gain a sense of self-worth and support for emotional externalization through naming their artwork and constructing its meaning. The artwork review not only helps clients integrate their experiences within the painting but also reinforces the symbolic function of the mandala as an “emotional container,” allowing emotions to be seen, held, and processed.

Overall, mandala painting—through the stability of its circular structure, the rhythmic repetition of patterns, and the flow experience during the focused process—can effectively reduce anxiety levels, alleviate depressive symptoms, and promote a sense of psychological balance and self-connection. In pre- and post-assessments, these changes typically manifest as a decrease in anxiety and depression scores and a subjective improvement in emotional state.

#### **4.2. Steps for Thematic Painting Practice**

**Preparation Phase (approx. 5 - 10 minutes):** Before formal creation begins, the therapist assists the client in establishing psychological safety and creating conditions conducive to emotional expression. Individuals with depression often exhibit low mood and reduced motivation, so gentle guidance is needed to enhance their willingness to participate; those with anxiety, on the other hand, often experience tension and scattered attention, requiring a quiet, predictable setting to reduce physiological arousal. The therapist prepares art supplies and, in a quiet, comfortable environment, guides the client through brief breathing exercises or mindfulness practices to help them focus on the present moment and gradually return to their inner world. The therapist then uses symbolic questions to help the client form initial mental images, such as: “If your inner world were a garden, what would it look like?” “What elements would be present?” “If your emotions were a plant, what form would it take?” These questions activate the client’s metaphorical experience of their own emotions, laying the foundation for subsequent visual expression.

**Creation Phase (approx. 20 - 25 minutes):** During this phase, clients freely construct their inner world through imagery, using the theme of the “Garden of the Mind.” They are allowed to freely choose colors, lines, and shapes, with minimal requirements regarding form or technique, providing temporary relief from the lethargy and self-criticism associated with depression. The highly focused engagement in drawing helps anxious clients detach from excessive worry and reduces cognitive overload. During the drawing process, clients depict the layout, scenery, vegetation, or symbolic emotional elements of a garden on a blank sheet of paper, using visual expression to present the structure and changes in their psychological experiences. Free creation reinforces a sense of control over emotions and, to some extent, promotes positive psychological suggestions and emotional regulation—such as experiencing hope and the possibility of recovery when choosing brighter

colors or constructing images of growth.

Reflection Phase (approx. 10 minutes): After the artwork is completed, the therapist and client jointly review the content of the drawing, using guided questions to promote emotional awareness, meaning-making, and positive cognitive restructuring. For individuals with depression, the reflection process helps identify themes of emotional stagnation and gradually restore the ability to imagine the future; for those with anxiety, it emphasizes identifying internal sources of tension and reestablishing a sense of control. Typical questions include: “What part of the garden attracts you the most or stands out to you?” “What emotions do these colors or symbols represent for you?” “If you were to improve this garden, where would you start?” Through such questions, clients can integrate their visual experiences into a clearer understanding of emotional patterns and develop positive expectations for future psychological change. When the drawing activity is conducted in a group setting, sharing among participants can further enhance emotional resonance, social support, and self-understanding, thereby strengthening the intervention’s psychosocial benefits.

In thematic drawing, the creative process itself serves as a spontaneous form of psychological regulation. The selection of colors, symbols, and composition helps clients express their emotions in a safe environment, thereby reducing the sense of emotional isolation associated with depression and the hypervigilance associated with anxiety. During the concluding phase, the therapist provides constructive feedback to help clients recognize their own expressions and changes, and to transfer the insights gained from the drawing into their daily lives, thereby reinforcing positive experiences in emotional regulation.

## V. SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

As a unique form of psychotherapy, art therapy differs significantly from traditional therapeutic approaches. Its most distinctive feature lies in its use of nonverbal expression, which transcends the limitations of verbal communication and offers a new channel of communication for clients who struggle to accurately articulate their emotions or experiences through words. Through drawing, clients can express their emotions and thoughts more freely, externalizing unconscious emotions and conflicts in visual form. Art therapy can access psychological levels that other therapeutic approaches struggle to reach, offering the potential for in-depth exploration and resolution of deep-seated emotional issues.

Currently, most research on art therapy, both domestically and internationally, focuses primarily on empirical studies, with an emphasis on its therapeutic effects and specific application scenarios. In the early stages, the operational procedures of art therapy were often unclear and lacked standardization. Scholars such as Yan Hu have driven the standardization of art therapy processes, significantly enhancing the practicality and consistency of its implementation and laying the foundation for its widespread application.

Chinese culture has a long-standing tradition of using painting to express emotions and heal the soul, such as in traditional landscape paintings that convey emotional sentiments. However, modern art therapy primarily originated in Europe and the United States and has been deeply influenced by Western cultural contexts throughout its development. Therefore, the further development of art therapy in China can integrate localized imagery and techniques. This requires both an in-depth analysis of pictorial imagery within the Chinese cultural context and adjustments and optimizations in technical theories, practical operations, and assessment tools.

The future development of art therapy can also integrate emerging technologies, utilizing more diverse tools to expand application scenarios. For example, AR technology can provide a more dynamic and interactive creative environment for art therapy, allowing clients to freely express their emotions and thoughts through a virtual canvas.

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