

EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY AS AN INTERVENTION FOR EXISTENTIAL STRUGGLES AMONG FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Existential concerns can accompany identity exploration and uncertainty during emerging adulthood. This study examined changes in existential concerns following an expressive arts intervention among female university students in Lahore, Pakistan. A single-group pre-test post-test design was used with 30 women aged 18-25 purposively recruited from a university population of 300 students attending public and private universities. Participants received eight individual sessions incorporating bilateral body mapping, guided drawing, and embodied awareness. The Existential Concerns Questionnaire was administered before and after the intervention. All participants completed the sessions and both assessments. Reported mean scores decreased from 65.86 (SD = 7.05) to 47.96 (SD = 4.58), a mean reduction of 17.90 points, or approximately 27.2% relative to baseline. The reported paired-samples test indicated a statistically significant difference, $t(29) = 11.92$, $p < .001$. These findings provide preliminary evidence of lower self-reported existential concerns. Results indicate EAT can be used to promote emotional regulation, self-awareness and meaning making in the university context. The study points to the importance of non-verbal, non-linguistic therapeutic methods that can be used to deal with existential distress in young women in higher education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Existential concerns encompass fundamental questions about meaning in life, freedom and responsibility, isolation, and the inevitability of death. Although these concerns are universal, they may become particularly salient during emerging adulthood, a period marked by substantial developmental, academic, and social transitions. University students may experience heightened existential anxiety as they navigate academic demands, identity exploration, the search for personal meaning, and uncertainty about future career paths (Munie et al., 2026). Questions about identity, purpose, personal responsibility, and the future can become particularly salient during university education. Students negotiate academic demands while making decisions about relationships, careers, and adult roles (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Arnett (2000) described emerging adulthood as a period of exploration extending from the late teens through the twenties. Within this developmental context, uncertainty can create opportunities for growth while also becoming distressing when students struggle to make sense of their experiences. Existential perspectives offer a framework for understanding distress related to the conditions and possibilities of human life. Yalom (1980) identified death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness as central existential concerns. Such concerns should not automatically be treated as evidence of a mental disorder. Their relevance to counseling depends on the distress they cause, their persistence, and their influence on everyday functioning. University-based support may therefore benefit from approaches that allow students to

examine difficult experiences without pathologizing ordinary developmental questioning (Yalom & Berry-Smith, 2012).

The present study focused on female university students. Academic aspirations may intersect with expectations about relationships, family roles, and personal identity, making this group a relevant population for examining existential concerns. Nevertheless, the inclusion of women alone does not establish that women experience greater distress than men. Understanding gender-related differences would require comparative data and direct assessment of the relevant social conditions. Expressive arts approaches use creative activity as part of a therapeutic or reflective process. In the present intervention, drawing and painting provided a medium for exploring experiences that participants might find difficult to communicate verbally. Creative work can be considered alongside conversation rather than as a replacement for it. The clinical rationale is that images, movement, and reflection may offer additional ways to approach personally significant material; whether these processes produce measurable benefit requires empirical examination. Siegel (2012) describes *mindsight* as the capacity to understand one's own internal experiences and those of others. Expressive arts therapy may offer opportunities to develop this reflective capacity by helping students explore emotions, recognize internal conflicts, and make sense of their experiences. Guided drawing offers a body-focused approach to art-making. Elbrecht (2018) describes a sensorimotor framework in which drawing movements and attention to bodily experience form part of therapeutic work. The present study used bilateral drawing and body mapping within an intervention informed by that framework. This theoretical basis does not itself demonstrate a neurological mechanism. Claims about hemispheric integration, autonomic regulation, or implicit-memory change would require measurements beyond the self-report outcome collected here.

Prior research also offers a rationale for studying creative methods in educational settings. Binson and Lev-Wiesel (2018) examined expressive arts-based experiential learning among lecturers in Thailand in relation to personal growth. Their work provides contextual support for investigating reflective creative practices, but differences in participants, aims and procedures limit direct comparison with the present study. Evidence from one educational population cannot establish effectiveness for another population or for a different psychological outcome. The relationship between existential distress and positive psychological functioning is relevant to student support. Counselling may create space for values clarification, personal reflection, and the exploration of meaning. However, reduced distress and enhanced well-being are related but distinct outcomes. A reduction in existential concerns should not be interpreted as proof of increased resilience, emotional regulation, or self-awareness unless those constructs are measured separately. The present study therefore treats existential concerns as the primary outcome and discusses possible wider applications cautiously. This study examined whether self-reported existential concerns changed following eight sessions of expressive arts work among female university students. It offers a preliminary within-person evaluation rather than controlled test of treatment efficacy. The research objective was to compare pre-intervention and post-intervention Existential Concerns Questionnaire scores.

Research Objectives

- To evaluate the effectiveness of expressive arts therapy in reducing existential struggles among female university students.

Hypothesis

- Expressive arts therapy would likely to reduce existential struggles among university female students.

II. METHOD

Research Design

A single-group pre-test post-test design was used. All participants received the intervention, and their scores before and after participation were compared. There was no control group or random assignment. The target population comprised 300 female students from public and private universities in Lahore, Pakistan. A purposive sample of 30 women aged 18-25 years was recruited. The Existential Concerns Questionnaire (ECQ; Van Bruggen et al., 2017), 22-item questionnaire was used to screen for existential concerns. Higher scores were interpreted as

indicating greater existential concerns. Sample selection was guided by the study objectives and the feasibility of delivering individual intervention sessions. All 30 participants completed the eight-session intervention and both the pre-test and post-test assessments.

Intervention

The intervention comprised eight structured individual sessions informed by Elbrecht's (2018) somatic approach to guided drawing. Activities incorporated bilateral body mapping, drawing or painting with both hands, attention to bodily sensations, and reflection on identity and existential concerns. Participants used materials such as crayons, oil pastels, and paint. The session sequence progressed from orientation and initial exploration toward reflection and closure.

Session 1 involved orientation, rapport building, explanation of the therapeutic process, exploration of expectations, and baseline ECQ administration.

Session 2 introduced the art materials and bilateral body mapping. Activities attended to sensations such as tension and movement, with reflective journaling and deep breathing included in the session.

Session 3 used symbolic drawing to explore identity, values, and life purpose. Bilateral mapping provided a means of representing existential concerns visually.

Session 4 involved bilateral painting on A4 paper. Participants used both hands to express emotional intensity while attending to bodily sensations and emotional containment.

Session 5 focused on identity, relationships, and personal narratives through symbolic representation and bilateral creative expression.

Session 6 emphasized rhythmic movement, creative activity, bodily awareness, and the exploration of stress-related experiences.

Session 7 used reflection and art-making to consolidate material explored during earlier sessions. Emotional, cognitive, and bodily experiences were considered together.

Session 8 involved closure, reflective synthesis, and post-intervention ECQ administration. The immediate post-test provided the outcome used in the quantitative comparison.

Procedure and Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institute Research Ethics Board (IREB), the University of Lahore, on December, 2025 (Approval NO. UOL/IREB/25/15/01/03). Participants were recruited from public and private universities in Lahore and screened using the Existential Concerns Questionnaire (ECQ). Eligible participants received information about the study's purpose, assessment procedures, and intervention before providing written informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. The ECQ was administered before the intervention to assess baseline existential concerns. Participants then attended eight structured individual sessions incorporating bilateral body mapping, guided drawing, and reflection on bodily sensations and existential experiences. The ECQ was administered again after the final session to assess changes in existential concerns.

III. RESULTS

Table I: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age in years	18-21	12	40.0
	22-25	18	60.0
Educational level	Undergraduate	20	66.7
	Graduate	10	33.3
Living arrangement	With family	22	73.3
	Hostel or independent	8	26.7
Family system	Nuclear	17	56.7
	Joint	13	43.3

Of the 30 participants, 18 (60.0%) were aged 22-25 years and 20 (66.7%) were undergraduate students. Most lived with family (73.3%), and 17 (56.7%) belonged to nuclear family systems. Table 1 presents the participant characteristics. All 30 participants provided both assessments and completed the intervention.

Table II: Descriptive Statistics for Existential Concerns

Assessment	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Observed range
Pre-test	30	65.87	7.05	52-79
Post-test	30	47.97	4.58	39-56

Note. *n*= no. of participants, *M*=Mean, *SD*=Standard deviation

Mean ECQ scores were lower after the intervention. The pre-test mean was 65.87 (*SD* = 7.05) and the post-test mean was 47.97 (*SD*=4.58). Observed ranges were 52-79 and 39-56, respectively (Table 2). Lower dispersion at post-test does not establish that every participant improved or that responses were identical across individuals.

Table III: Paired Pre-test Post-test Comparison of ECQ Scores

Statistic	Value
Complete pairs	30
Mean reduction in ECQ score	17.90
95% CI for the mean reduction	[14.83, 20.97]
<i>t</i> (df)	11.92 (29)
<i>p</i>	< .001
Cohen's <i>d</i>	2.18
Reduction relative to baseline	27.2%

Note. ECQ=Existential Concern Questionnaire, CI=Confidence Interval

The mean reduction was 17.90 points. The paired-samples comparison was statistically significant, *t* (29) = 11.92, *p* < .001, with a 95% confidence interval for the reduction of (14.83, 20.97). The reduction corresponded to approximately 27.2% of the baseline mean. Cohen's *d* derived from the reported *t* statistic and 30 pairs, was approximately 2.18 (Table 3). The direction of the change was consistent with the hypothesis.

IV.DISCUSSION

This study examined existential concerns before and after an eight-session expressive arts intervention among female university students. Participants reported lower ECQ scores following the intervention, with a mean reduction of 17.90 points. The result supports as temporal association between participation and reduced concerns in the observed sample. The intervention provided repeated opportunities to approach identity, values, relationships, and distress through visual and embodied activities. Creative work may offer a useful starting point for reflection when participants find direct verbal expression difficult. This interpretation is compatible with the guided drawing rationale described by Elbrecht (2018). Bilateral art-making may provide an embodied way to explore experiences that are difficult to express verbally. In the resent intervention, drawing, painting and bilateral body mapping offered complementary opportunities for sensory engagement, symbolic expression, and reflection on existential concerns. These activities may have supported participants' engagement with difficult emotional material and contributed to the observed reduction in existential concern scores. However, the study did not assess the processed underlying this change or compare bilateral activities with other approaches. Their specific contribution therefore remains uncertain and warrants further investigation (McNamee, 2006).

The direction of improvement is broadly consistent with research on art therapy and adult anxiety. Abbing et al. (2019) found benefits in a randomized trial involving women with diagnosed anxiety disorder, while Huang et al. (2025) identified potential effects across randomized studies but emphasized limitations in evidence quality. These studies concern related outcomes rather than existential concerns specifically. Consequently, they provide context for the findings without validating this particular protocol or explaining its reported effect size. The university context also matters. Emerging adulthood involves exploration and decisions that can make existential questions

particularly salient (Arnett, 2000). A reflective intervention may provide a structured opportunity to engage with those questions rather than avoid them. Research on expressive arts-based experiential learning in educational settings offers a related rationale for examining personal growth (Binson & Lev-Wiesel, 2018). The findings have a potential connection with positive psychology through the exploration of meaning and personal identity. That connection should be developed through direct measurement. Reduced existential concerns do not necessarily imply increased life satisfaction, resilience, purpose, or emotional regulation. Measuring these outcomes separately would help determine whether expressive arts approaches support positive functioning as well as alleviate distress. Purposive recruitment, the feasibility-based sample size, and the restriction to female students in Lahore limit generalizability. The uncontrolled design prevents firm causal conclusions.

The value of expressive arts therapy is highlighted, particularly, bilateral body mapping as a successful intervention for reduction in existential struggles with young adult university students. This suggests that creative, nonverbal and embodied approaches to therapy can be meaningful adjuncts to traditional counseling and mental health services and provide a flexible and engaging means for individuals to explore complex emotions, personal identity and life purpose. Practically, mental health practitioners, counselors, and university support services can have expressive arts techniques as part of their programs in order to address psychological distress among students, developing self-awareness and adaptive coping strategies. Future studies should incorporate more rigorous research designs, such as randomized controlled trials with larger and more diverse samples of participants, and long-term follow-up research to assess the degree of sustainability of intervention effects. Additionally, looking at different modalities of expressive arts therapy and using a combination of qualitative methods to capture the lived experiences of participants can help us better understand how these interventions help participants process their emotions and make meaning out of them. Overall, these findings suggest that expressive arts therapy is not only a creative and flexible approach to mental health support but also a worthwhile tool in promoting wholesome psychological well-being, personal growth and resilience in populations suffering from existential and transitional challenges.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study found a significant reduction in self-reported existential concerns following an eight-session expressive arts intervention incorporating bilateral body mapping and guided drawing among female university students. ECQ scores decreased by approximately 27.2% relative to baseline, providing preliminary support for further investigation of creative, embodied approaches to existential distress. Structured art-making and reflection may offer opportunities to explore concerns about identity, purpose, and meaning within university counselling.

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