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The Practice Path and Value Exploration of Visual Expression in College Students' Art Therapy

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Abstract: Modern college students commonly suffer from diverse psychological troubles, including academic stress, interpersonal communication anxiety and confused self-identity. Traditional campus mental health education approaches are restricted by rigid teaching forms and insufficient emotional resonance, failing to adapt to students' complex and subtle psychological demands fully. As a core carrier of art therapy, visual expression relies on intuitive visual symbols such as graphics, color combinations, and picture compositions to break through the limitations of verbal expression. This study adopts theoretical frameworks of art therapy and visual psychology to explore innovative practical strategies of visual expression-based art therapy for college students. A complete implementation system is constructed from four core dimensions: cognitive deconstruction, emotional regulation, self-identity establishment and group mutual empowerment. Furthermore, this paper systematically discusses the practical value of this intervention mode in optimizing psychological education, promoting aesthetic literacy development, shaping healthy personality and improving campus psychological ecology. The research findings can provide practical references for the integrated development of mental health education and aesthetic education in university contexts.

Keywords: College students; Art therapy; Visual expression; Psychological education; Practical strategy

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1. Introduction

Current higher education emphasizes holistic talent cultivation that integrates morality, intelligence, physical fitness, aesthetics and labor education. The in-depth integration of mental health education and aesthetic education has become a key developmental direction of university educational reform. Against the backdrop of rapid social transformation, contemporary college students face intense academic competition, severe employment pressure, complex interpersonal relationships and massive online information impact, which trigger latent, diversified and normalized psychological dilemmas. Conventional psychological

intervention methods, including offline counseling and thematic psychological lectures, mainly focus on rational ideological guidance, which can hardly address students' subconscious emotional disorders. Art therapy has unique non-verbal intervention advantages, which can effectively make up for the deficiencies of traditional psychological education and become a flexible means to alleviate college students' psychological problems. As the most accessible and adaptable form of art therapy, visual expression does not require professional artistic skills or an aesthetic foundation. Students can externalize inner negative emotions and realize spontaneous psychological healing through painting, collage, color graffiti and other visual creation behaviors. Based on college students' psychological characteristics and growth demands, this research constructs a systematic practical framework for visual expression art therapy, analyzes its inherent educational connotation and practical value, and aims to help universities build a normalized, life-oriented and high-quality psychological aesthetic education system.

2. Feasibility foundation of visual expression in college students' art therapy

2.1. Theoretical foundation: Interdisciplinary theoretical support for visual therapy practice

Visual expression art therapy is a cross-disciplinary practical achievement formed by the integration of art psychology, expressive therapy and educational psychology, with a complete and rigorous theoretical system. From the perspective of art psychology, visual symbols represent the most primitive and direct emotional carrier for human beings. Visual elements such as lines, colors and spatial layouts can directly act on individual subconsciousness. Different from verbal expression that is easily affected by psychological defense mechanisms, visual creation can truly reflect individuals' inner emotional states and implicit psychological demands. Expressive art therapy theory further confirms that non-verbal artistic creation is a dynamic process of emotional release and cognitive revision. Active artistic creation can reduce students' psychological resistance to intervention, transforming passive psychological guidance into active self-exploration and self-healing. This interdisciplinary theoretical system provides solid theoretical support for the standardized and targeted implementation of visual expression art therapy on campus.

2.2. Practical foundation: Adaptability to college students' psychological characteristics and campus scenarios

College students in late adolescence have highly active self-awareness but insufficient psychological resilience. When confronting study pressure, social adaptation difficulties and employment confusion, most students are reluctant or unable to accurately describe their inner troubles through verbal communication, due to self-esteem and defensive psychology. Traditional one-on-one psychological counseling easily triggers students' alertness and resistance, resulting in poor intervention effects. In contrast, visual expression forms including graffiti, simple painting, and material collage feature high privacy and interest. There is no fixed standard or right-or-wrong judgment for creation results, which allows students to release emotions freely without psychological burden. Combined with the mature educational venue and organizational conditions of universities, visual expression art therapy is highly compatible with campus educational scenarios and college students' psychological characteristics, laying a solid practical foundation for large-scale promotion and normalized implementation.

3. Innovative practical strategies of visual expression in college students' art therapy

Combined with the core logic of visual therapy and the actual growth status of college students, this study abandons rigid and formalized intervention modes and constructs a set of operable, promotable, and professional visual expression therapy systems from four dimensions: emotional catharsis, cognitive reconstruction, personalized growth empowerment, and campus group co-healing.

3.1. Emotional catharsis via visual creation: Build an immersive release mechanism for negative emotions

The accumulation of implicit negative emotions is the primary cause of college students' common psychological problems. Most anxious, confused and depressed emotions are hidden in the subconscious layer and cannot be eliminated through rational communication and verbal venting. Centered on the emotion externalization theory, this practical strategy converts abstract inner emotions into tangible visual symbols through free visual creation, so as to realize natural emotional release and fundamentally relieve psychological pressure [1]. This mode breaks the shackles of standardized artistic creation, focuses on immersive and free expression, and is suitable for all college student groups with different psychological states.

Universities can build hierarchical visual catharsis scenarios according to students' psychological conditions. For ordinary students with daily low mood and study pressure, schools can open regular free doodle workshops after class, providing colored pens, drawing paper, pigments and collage materials without setting fixed themes or creation rules. Students can freely create according to their inner feelings and vent emotions through the change of line thickness and color shade. For students with mild psychological distress, themed emotional painting activities can be carried out with themes of "personal pressure perception", "inner true voice" and "emotional fragment recording", guiding students to capture subconscious emotions and complete visual expression. Meanwhile, a judgment-free creation mechanism is established. Teachers only provide on-site observation and psychological guidance during activities, without evaluating the aesthetic level or content quality of students' works. This ensures the autonomy and sense of security of student creation and provides a stable emotional venting channel for college students.

3.2. Cognitive reconstruction via guided creation: Correct negative cognitive biases of college students

Cognitive bias is the deep-seated cause of college students' self-denial, social anxiety and academic pressure. Many students form negative self-cognition and extreme thinking modes due to one-sided judgment of self-value and growth setbacks, thus falling into persistent psychological predicaments. Based on cognitive reconstruction theory, this practical path adopts structured visual creation to guide students to sort out self-cognition, revise negative thinking biases, and realize the upgrade from simple emotional release to deep cognitive repair.

A closed-loop working mode of "thematic guidance + creation reflection + cognitive reconstruction" is adopted in specific practice. Firstly, schools carry out cognitive sorting-oriented visual creation activities, setting structured themes such as self-portrait creation, growth track mapping and future self-image design. In the process of sorting out personal growth experiences and completing exclusive visual works, students can objectively recognize their own strengths, growth confusion, and cognitive misunderstandings.

Secondly, peer sharing sessions are organized to encourage students to explain their creative ideas and work connotations in small-group communication. With positive peer interaction and professional teacher guidance, students can break through one-sided negative cognition. For example, students with self-denial can reshape self-value cognition by optimizing self-portraits and sorting out growth highlights; students with academic anxiety can draw pressure decomposition diagrams to distinguish controllable and uncontrollable pressure factors, so as to form a rational view of success and failure. Finally, teachers guide students to revise and optimize their initial negative works by adjusting color matching, optimizing picture composition and adding positive visual elements. The revision process corresponds to the positive reshaping of individual psychological cognition, realizing the dual improvement of visual works and psychological state.

3.3. Personalized growth empowerment: Cultivate positive psychological quality through differentiated visual therapy

The fundamental goal of art therapy is not only to alleviate existing psychological problems, but also to help students build stable positive psychological qualities, enhance psychological resilience and autonomous adjustment ability. Based on positive psychology theory, the personalized visual growth path focuses on students' long-term psychological growth and personality improvement. It breaks through the limitations of passive psychological intervention and stimulates students' inner potential through differentiated visual creation, so as to shape optimistic, confident, and resilient psychological traits and realize the transformation from trauma healing to growth empowerment.

This strategy adheres to individualized and growth-oriented principles to avoid stereotyped intervention modes. On the one hand, targeted healing schemes are formulated according to students' personality characteristics and psychological states. For introverted, reserved and socially anxious students, static visual creation forms such as delicate watercolor painting and handbook collage are recommended to help them calm their inner mood and build effective self-dialogue channels. For impulsive and emotionally unstable students, dynamic creation modes such as texture painting and splatter art are adopted to cultivate their emotional control ability and stable personality. On the other hand, a whole-process growth recording system is established to encourage students to create serial psychological growth works [2]. By comparing creative works at different stages (monthly or per semester), students can intuitively perceive their psychological changes, thereby enhancing self-recognition and growth confidence. In addition, open and innovative visual creation activities can fully mobilize students' imagination and creativity, further strengthen their self-identity, and cultivate positive and independent personality traits.

3.4. Group co-healing and circle empowerment: Build a healthy campus psychological ecosystem

Single individual healing has obvious limitations in long-term psychological intervention. A positive campus psychological atmosphere and sound peer support system can effectively improve the sustainability of art therapy effects. Based on group dynamics theory, this research takes visual art activities as the communication carrier to build a teacher-student and peer mutual healing circle. It helps students get rid of individual psychological isolation, constructs an all-participatory and immersive campus psychological healing ecosystem, and realizes the organic integration of individual self-healing and collective psychological empowerment.

Universities can build a multi-level normalized activity system to promote sustainable development of visual healing education. First, campus visual art healing clubs can be established to recruit students with psychological adjustment needs and mental health enthusiasts. Regular collective creation, work appreciation and psychological sharing activities are held to build a stable peer mutual support mechanism and relieve students' psychological loneliness. Second, visual healing courses are integrated into the second classroom and compulsory mental health education courses. Schools can set up elective courses on art therapy and thematic practical courses to systematically explain the internal connection between visual expression and psychological adjustment, and teach students basic self-healing skills, so as to improve their autonomous psychological adjustment ability. Third, campus visual healing work exhibitions are held to display positive and growth-oriented student works. The public display of excellent works can spread positive psychological energy, provide spiritual encouragement for creators, and create a campus atmosphere of active self-healing, positive growth, and inclusive mutual assistance, which provides environmental guarantees for college students' mental health development.

4. Multidimensional practical value of visual expression art therapy

4.1. Optimize psychological education mode and improve campus psychological intervention effectiveness

Traditional university mental health education mainly relies on theoretical lectures, individual case counseling, and crisis intervention, which are limited by low popularization efficiency, poor pertinence, and rigid forms, and are unable to meet the diversified psychological needs of contemporary college students. Visual expression art therapy abandons the rigid rational education mode of traditional psychological work, and carries out psychological intervention through flexible, interesting and life-oriented artistic forms, transforming passive psychological indoctrination into students' active self-expression and self-repair. Its non-verbal intervention feature avoids the awkwardness and sense of oppression in traditional psychological counseling. It can cover more students with latent and mild psychological problems, making up for the defect that traditional psychological education overemphasizes crisis intervention while ignoring daily psychological adjustment [3]. In addition, visual works can intuitively reflect students' real psychological states, helping teachers accurately capture potential psychological risks and realize early detection, early intervention and standardized guidance. This mode effectively enriches the carrier of campus psychological education and improves the refinement and normalization level of university mental health work.

4.2. Promote the integrated development of aesthetic education and improve the holistic education system

The core mission of university aesthetic education is to cultivate students' aesthetic literacy, shape sound personality and nourish spiritual growth through aesthetic education. Traditional art education focuses too much on professional skill training, while mental health education emphasizes rational psychological guidance, resulting in a lack of effective connection between the two disciplines. Visual expression art therapy realizes the deep integration of aesthetic education and mental health education, breaking the disciplinary barrier between skill-oriented art teaching and rational psychological education. In the process of visual creation, students can perceive the aesthetic charm of color, line, and spatial composition, thereby improving their artistic appreciation ability and aesthetic literacy. At the same time, artistic creation helps

students complete emotional regulation and psychological repair, realizing the dual realization of aesthetic cultivation and psychological education functions. This integrated education mode expands the practical boundary of university aesthetic education, extends art education from simple skill teaching to the in-depth level of spiritual nourishment and psychological growth, optimizes the holistic talent cultivation system of universities, and echoes the fundamental task of moral education in new-era higher education.

4.3. Boost students' self-construction and shape sound personality traits

Adolescence and early adulthood are critical stages for the formation of self-cognition and personality development. Most college students' psychological troubles stem from vague self-positioning, incomplete self-awareness and immature personality development. The visual creation process is essentially a deep self-dialogue process for students. In the whole process of emotional release, cognitive sorting, and psychological reconstruction, students can face their true inner state, abandon negative thinking modes, and correct wrong self-cognition. Systematic visual healing practice helps students gradually establish rational self-awareness, stable emotional regulation ability, and a positive life attitude. Long-term participation in visual creation activities can enable students to form the habit of autonomous psychological adjustment, learn to face pressure rationally and accept self-deficiencies, and effectively get rid of negative psychological traits such as inferiority, anxiety and impetuosity. It plays a positive role in shaping students' confident, tolerant, resilient and peaceful healthy personality, and lays a solid psychological foundation for their lifelong growth and development.

4.4. Improve campus cultural ecology and build an inclusive growth atmosphere

Campus culture has a subtle penetrating influence on students' psychological growth. A positive and inclusive campus atmosphere can effectively relieve students' learning and life pressure. Visual expression art therapy integrates mental health education into daily campus life through normalized and popular artistic activities. It breaks the social stereotype that "psychological adjustment equals mental illness", guides students to view psychological distress correctly and actively pay attention to mental health.Diversified visual healing activities, work exhibitions and peer support circles make active self-healing and mutual inclusive growth become a new campus trend, effectively eliminating students' psychological shame and defense mentality[4]. Meanwhile, rich and diverse student visual works enrich the connotation of campus cultural construction, create a warm and healing campus cultural atmosphere, and provide immersive spiritual nourishment for students' all-round development.

5. Conclusion

With the advantages of a low participation threshold, strong scene adaptability, and outstanding emotional empathy effect, visual expression, as a typical practical form of art therapy, highly matches the psychological growth characteristics of contemporary college students and the innovative development demands of university education. Based on interdisciplinary theoretical foundations, this study constructs a four-dimensional practical system covering emotional catharsis, cognitive reconstruction, personalized empowerment and group co-healing, forming a set of operable and normalized campus art therapy implementation paths. Meanwhile, it systematically clarifies the multidimensional value of this mode in optimizing psychological education, upgrading aesthetic education effects, shaping healthy personality and

improving campus psychological ecology. In the context of new-era higher education, further promoting the practical innovation of visual expression art therapy and deepening the integrated development of aesthetic education and mental health education can effectively solve the pain points of current campus psychological education work. It is conducive to promoting college students' mental health and comprehensive quality improvement, and injecting new vitality into the high-quality development of university moral education and talent cultivation work.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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