

Integrating Peak Experiences Through Art Therapy: Anchors of Healing in Trauma

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ABSTRACT

Psychological integration is central to healing yet often overlooked in clinical practice, especially in trauma-informed and culturally diverse contexts. This paper offers insights into defining integration and explores how integrating peak experiences that occur after psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and trauma-related symptoms, can facilitate psychological healing. These findings are based on a doctoral study that examined the lived experience of integrating peak experiences through art therapy, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Arts-Based Research (ABR). In a doctoral study, participants engaged in semi-structured interviews, interwoven with two art therapy sessions to access and integrate embodied memory, emotion, and symbolic material. Of the thirteen participants, five explored peak experiences that occurred after significant psychological pain, trauma, and anxiety. This paper focuses on these five participants and the findings that illustrate how the integration of peak experiences can become essential in dealing with trauma. Findings revealed that the creative process within art therapy catalyzed a movement from emotional fragmentation to coherence, fostering resilience, clarity, and deeper self-awareness. The findings highlight how integration is not merely retrospective meaning-making, but a transformative rehabilitation process that alters one's worldview and strengthens relational and intrapersonal connections. Participants described increased emotional regulation, renewed purpose, and spiritual grounding—outcomes aligned with recovery from depression, anxiety, and trauma. The use of both IPA and ABR methodologies provided access to verbal and non-verbal components of integration, resulting in a practical, culturally informed approach to supporting clients in therapeutic rehabilitation. IPA's idiographic focus and the expressive insights from ABR enable a multidimensional analysis of how peak experiences—often marked by awe, conflict, and ineffability—can be harnessed for growth. This work contributes to innovation in mental health treatment by presenting a model of integration that honors both verbal and non-verbal, personal and collective, cognitive and symbolic dimensions of healing.