

Creative Arts Therapy with Thailand's Mobile Arts Therapy Group

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Abstract

This article describes the variety of therapeutic creative arts sessions conducted by the all volunteer Mobile Arts Therapy group (MAT) during Thailand's unrelenting flood crisis of 2011-12. The MAT group concentrated their efforts in the Bangkok region's flood relief centers and was comprised of students from Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok University, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang, and Srinakharinwirot University as well as artists from the James H.W. Thomson Foundation. Additionally, as normal modes of communication, organization, and transportation were severely flood impaired, the social media tool *facebook* was recruited as the central communication medium for organizing the volunteers. The creative arts therapy activities included the drawing of facial expressions, mime, drama, and improvisation, 3D modeling, handicrafts, singing and the playing of musical instruments. The anecdotal feedback from session participants included a marked reduction in anxiety with an increase in a sense of communal belonging.

Keywords: *Creative Arts Therapy, Art Therapy, Music Therapy, Flood Relief Centers, Thailand, Art for Survivors*

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Introduction

This article focuses on the arts therapy activities during Thailand's massive flooding in 2011 where 62 out of 70 provinces were inundated and millions were affected. Many were displaced for weeks and others for over a month. This article describes the creative arts activities provided by Mobile Arts Therapy (MAT) group which was established in the early stages of the crisis on October 14, 2011 by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bussakorn binson, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University and Ms. Krittiya Kaweewong, a former PhD. student in Fine Arts program with support from the volunteer artists of James H. W. Thompson Foundation and the Chulalongkorn University Alumni Association. The group's activities took advantage of the online resource Facebook to coordinate relief center activities and it enabled more volunteers to become involved as well as reducing the time, staff, and effort traditional modes of communication would entail.

Defining Creative Arts Therapy

Creative Arts Therapy is an expanded form of art therapy, which includes drama, music, movement, together with 2D and 3D artistic expression as its primary mode of communication and may include a synthesis of more than one mode within a session. It is a process that combines internal and external experiences and instills them into a creative entity where both it and the process used are considered. It is a form of therapy where participants are encouraged to express and understand their emotions through artistic expression and through creative processes. There exists a three way interchange between the participant or group and the creation. It is held that one may reconcile emotional conflicts and foster self-awareness and personal growth through the creative process.



Figure 1. Author Bussakorn Binson making her way to the temple's flood relief center at Wat Jan in northern Bangkok. Images in this article are provided by Alan Kinear except where noted.¹

Creative Arts Therapy can help people physically, visually and auditory (drama, visual arts and music) express emotions that they may not otherwise easily expressed through conversation. It assists by providing a pathway to share, externalize, one's feelings (creating a distance or a connection). In other words, Creative Arts Therapy can help regain a sense of control over one's emotions. Creative Arts Therapy is a process-orientated method.

The American Art Therapy Association's definition of art therapy adds the following details:

"Through creating art and reflecting on the art products and processes, people can increase awareness of self and others cope with symptoms, stress and traumatic experiences; enhance cognitive abilities; and enjoy the life-affirming pleasures of making art. ...It is based on the belief that the creative arts process involved in artistic self-expression helps people to resolve conflicts and problems, develop interpersonal skills, manage behavior, reduce stress, increase self-esteem and self-awareness, and achieve insight. Art therapy integrates the fields of human development, visual art (drawing, painting, sculpture, and other art forms), and the creative process with models of counseling and psychotherapy."

Shared Emotions Via Pantomime and Facial Card Drawings

The sessions were held in relief centers usually located in a temple's community building, schools or university sports centers. The participants were primarily children along with a few adults.

It begins with an activity utilizing stylized facial cards that represent the range of human emotions. They were asked to think of their feelings when the flood hit and project and choose another card for how they want to be in the future. Next with the art materials provided they were asked to draw their own version of the two faces they had selected and personalize them as they wished.



Figure 2. The facial card activities at the Wat Jan flood relief center.¹



Figure 3. Participants personalizing their selected facial cards.¹

Then as a group sitting in a circle, each would describe from their drawing one of their faces/emotions and then the person next to them would do their best to act it out (like charades or pantomime) to share and externalize each one's feelings. It also creates a fun event for the others to see how each one tries to act out another's experience and feelings. So in a sense, this type of group work is both art and "drama" therapy.



Figure 4. The person to one's right would do their best to pantomime their feelings & experience.¹

The second activity at the temple's flood relief center at Wat Jan was to have the group begin by sitting and contemplating what they would grab to save and take with them as the flood hit. There were many pictures of items placed in the center of the group for them to view and then choose from for example: pets, pictures of family members, phones, food, toys etc. Then individuals would share their reasons for choosing their selection. This have the participants consciously realize what is really important to them even though they have lost many things and no longer have a comfortable life at home.



Figure 5. Deciding what they would like to rescue from the floods.¹

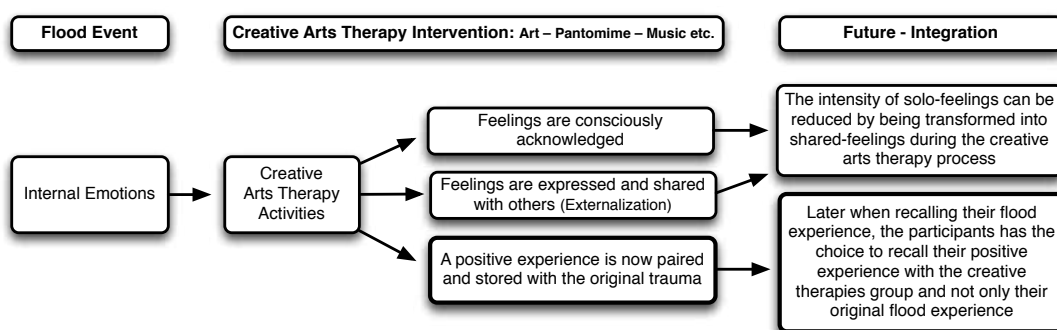


Figure 6. A flowchart diagram of the creative arts therapy intervention process.

Through these activities of expression and sharing of ones experiences the impact of negative emotions can be reduced through externalization and acknowledgment by others. The group activities brings people closer together and while we serve as facilitators and cannot reduce the water level or its impact ourselves, we can however, provide a pathway to reduce the intensity of their feelings via acknowledgment of their experiences as being true for them via externalization through artistic expression, sharing, and listening.

Shared Stories Via 3D Models and Clay

At the relief center in Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University's sports facility the Mobile Arts Therapy group offered another version of art therapy centered around 3 dimensional models and characters and objects free-modeled in plasticine clay. It was an opportunity for younger kids to burn off some energy while working together to figure out how to assemble the models and then create or portray their flood experience by building a scene with figures they create. Towards the end of the session kids had the opportunity to tell and share their story to the group.

Flood Story Telling Through Drama

Another session recruited art students from Chulalongkorn University to the flood relief center at the Songkanong School in the Sampran District where the

residents have been displaced for over 2 months by water over 1 meter deep. The activities began with a relaxation sequence of guided imagery while the children layed on mats in the breeze of the open shade. This was followed by selecting and personalizing the facial expression cards as described earlier. But next during the group sharing more than a dozen university students were on-hand to bring each story to life on stage. This was followed by volunteers with a partner or two to pantomime each of their personal flood experiences.



Figure 7. Scene creation with 3D models and clay followed by sharing personal experiences & stories.¹



Figure 8. University students used three different colored fabrics to represent water-white, trees-green and brown-houses.¹



Figure 9. Students take their turns with the acting.¹

Cultural Curiosity – A New Pathway of Expression

The Mobile Art Therapy also visited the Banglen School's flood relief center which was home to 35 displaced families by the 1 meter-plus floods that persisted for over 2 months. These survivors were overwhelmed with loss and sadness, but an Indonesian volunteer decided to introduced them to the Indonesian angklung musical instrument and a modified Kecak Dance. The participants explored the new melodies of the Indonesian songs while taking comfort in the familiarity of the Thai ones.



Figure 10. Students with the Indonesian Angklung.¹

The modified Kecak Dance utilized the Thai language while maintaining the Balinese Kecak style. The lyrics expressed the circumstances and experiences of the flood with the participants being divided into three groups. One sang "Nam ma" (Nam means water, ma means coming) while they acted out the coming of the water in a wave formation. The second group was chasing the water away while singing repeatedly " Nam Lod" (water go away). The last group sang (shouted) "Hang" (dry now) as loud as they could.

This dance activity allowed the community to expressed their feelings and hopes related to their flood experiences with the aim to provide participants an opportunity to release their anxiety and their feelings of being overwhelmed during these

unfortunate circumstances. By asserting themselves through singing, shouting, and dancing, the participants reported a stronger feeling of togetherness and a renewed sense of power to continue on battling the flood waters. These music and dance activities brought forth a renewed sense of culture and belonging through the blending of Indonesian instruments and traditional Thai country music.

The participants after these dance and musical respites described themselves as being more relaxed.

Ornate Lighted Floats for the Traditional Loi Krathong Evening Celebration

Thais have a traditional holiday held during the full moon of the twelfth lunar month of the Thai calendar – which usually falls in November. During Loi Krathong people release candle-lit and decorated banana leaf arrangements to float down the river to bring them good luck, float away their transgressions, and to honor and thank the goddess of water. However, due to the severe and long lasting floods where mobility and the usual materials were nearly impossible to obtain the Mobile Arts Therapy group supplied and demonstrated what could be done with the materials that were on hand. Biodegradable items such as paper plates, colored paper, and bread rolls came to the fore.



Figure 11. Lighted Krathongs made out of bread rolls, colored paper and paper plates are set afloat during the Thai Loi Krathong celebration. Images by Niwat Manatpiyalert.¹

Conclusion

The above creative arts therapy models of therapeutic activities were developed by the Mobile Arts Therapy group during Thailand's 2011-12 flood crisis for Bangkok's flood relief centers. The participants in general, reported a reduction of stress and anxiety as well as a stronger sense of community after taking part in the activities conducted by the MAT group. The children also expressed a reduction in fear regarding future floods and pleasure from the activities and the creative expression they embodied. It is hoped these new models can be further refined to best fit the needs and expectations of survivors of future flood crises as creative arts therapy opens a pathway for trauma survivors to begin verbalizing their experiences.

Additionally, even though most of the group's volunteers had attended the single Art Therapy course at Chulalongkorn University and were trained in ways to avoid focusing on anxiety and fears, there remains no formal higher education degree program and governmental certification in Thailand.

Acknowledgements

On behalf of the MAT group, the authors would like to extend a warm thank you to their creative art therapist associates from the University of Haifa who provided foundational models for this category of activities. We also like to acknowledge the great support from the Chulalongkorn University Alumni Association who immediately provided sponsorship within a few days of the beginning of the MAT group commencing its flood relief center sessions. Additionally, special thanks must be extended to all the volunteers of the MAT group who dedicated their time, creativity, and hearts in making all of these activities possible.

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Appendix

Image and video gallery: Art Therapy at a Thai Temple Flood Relief Center Nov 20, 2011 - Alan Kinear
<https://picasaweb.google.com/104177554472008433379/ArtTherapyAtAThaiTempleFloodReliefCenterNov202011?authuser=0&authkey=Gv1sRgCLCRjp3o75rGqgE&feat=directlink>.

Image and video gallery: Bangkok Floods - Oct - Dec 2011: - Alan Kinear
<https://picasaweb.google.com/100250583234463673125/BangkokFloodsOctDec2011?authuser=0&authkey=Gv1sRgCMO1vcjQjrr9DA&feat=directlink>.

“בלבש מיקחשמ.” <http://www.levgame.net>. Note: Nooshi Facial Emotions Cards by Tal Zaharin – website is in Hebrew, use Google translate (accessed June 5, 2012).

Notes

- 1 Photography and video permission was received at each of these public venues congruent to current Thai regulations.



Friends at the Wat Jan flood relief center.¹