

Using Art Therapy to support people living with Borderline Personality Disorder

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Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is one of the most misunderstood and stigmatised mental health issues worldwide (Grenyer, 2017), with the greatest discrimination occurring in mental health (Day et al., 2015) and medical systems (Ring & Lawn, 2019). Sadly, health practitioners report being taught biased and stigmatising attitudes that label people living with BPD (PLWBPD) as high risk, challenging and disruptive within groups (Richardson, Surmitis and Hyidahl, 2012). As a consequence, PLWBPD may be denied treatment or placed in environments where Art Therapists may not practice (Ferguson, 2015) despite international research demonstrating the value of Art Therapy for PLWBPD. Internationally, a review (Springham 2015) demonstrated how Art Therapists expressed a need for more specific tailoring of treatment, structure and understanding of the importance of their relationship with PLWBPD. Overall, international research on the use of Art Therapy with PLWBPD shows commonality in outcomes. These include a reduction in self harm or self-harming thoughts, higher tolerance for distress and regulating emotions, increased wellbeing and improved engagement in and sustained treatment outcomes (Haeyen, 2018; Haeyen, Van Hooren & Hutschemaekers, 2015).

Our experience has demonstrated how Art Therapy resonates strongly for those with lived experience of BPD. In an Australian context, during BPD Awareness Week 2020 (supported by the Australian BPD Foundation, Project Air Strategy, Spectrum Personality Disorder Service and Central Eastern Sydney Primary Health Network), art process was used to promote anti-stigma messages directed at health practitioners, policy makers and PLWBPD. Sadly, PLWBPD are prone to self-stigmatise, seeing themselves as blameworthy and responsible for their mental health challenges. We thus designed an art practice to address both external stigma (by others) and internal stigma (by themselves) during the awareness week (BPD Awareness Week, 2020). This work, conducted by a current Art Therapy Masters student and person living with BPD (first author), sought to provide a non-judgemental peer-led environment using art process to “flip the script” and

reframe negative words associated with BPD.

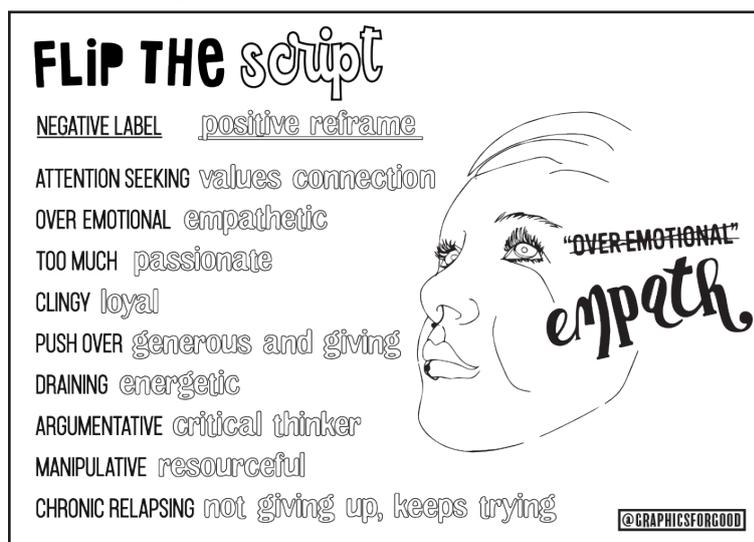


Figure 1 - “flip the script” Jewell, M. (2020), Eora Country.

Participants (PLWBPD and their families and carers) responded overwhelmingly positively to this, showing high engagement with art practice and capacity to grow, change and heal, challenging many of the myths surrounding the BPD narrative. You can view this work here: <https://www.bpdawareness.com.au/art-against-stigma-gallery/>

“My artwork has helped me block out all of the noise and focus on reframing the negative words used. Crossing out the words and sending them off in a balloon made me feel as though I myself had really let those words fly away into the sky while the sun in my art shines down exposing new positive language that I believe to be better suited to myself. I now look at this as a journey of self-discovery rather than there being something always wrong with me.”

– Lived Experience participant LE#01

Embedding art-practice alongside traditional psychotherapy

Working within traditional psychotherapies that are shown to be efficacious for PLWBPD, such as Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT), provide appropriate structure and guidance for Art Therapists (Haeyen, 2018). Through the skills-based framework of DBT, Art Therapists can use art-based activities to support people to label emotions, tolerate distress, understand interpersonal interactions and practice mindfulness.

“When there is art within a (DBT) skill, it makes it become something I want to try again. It makes me want to keep practicing the skill and keep practicing art and being creative.”

– Lived Experience participant LE#02

Supporting non-verbal communication of stories and needs

Many PLWBPD may struggle to express their emotions during conventional, verbal therapy. Art Therapy can become a “safe place” for stories and challenges to be externalised via colour, shape, drawing, painting and collage. Lived Experience authors Morgan, Knight, Bagwash & Thompson (2012), state that Art Therapy provides a “unique solution” for those “who struggle to verbalise emotion.” (pg. 94)

“Often it is difficult to find the words to adequately express my experience. Art making has allowed me to engage with all sides of myself in an open and curious way, rather than seeing parts as bad or evil. It has helped to foster a greater level of acceptance for all of my experience.”

– Lived Experience participant LE#03

Externalising pain, anger and violence

Art therapy can support PLWBPD to safely express distressing and intrusive thoughts or divert from engaging in self-harming behaviours. One participant referred to art making as facilitating an “evacuation of pain” (Eastwood, 2012). Morgan et al., (2012) state “rather than connecting with one’s inner demon, Art Therapy can be an opportunity to directly disconnect from difficult and painful thoughts and feelings.” This externalisation process allows people to distance themselves from their overwhelming feelings and making art can facilitate that process.

“It (art) has enabled me to express my negative emotions without physical outbursts of anger and helped me rethink and positively reframe internalised judgments on myself.”

– Lived Experience participant LE#04

Mechanism for “making sense”

People with BPD may experience an overwhelming negative narrative internally, and have difficulties seeing situations in balanced ways (Haeyen,

Silverman (1991) suggests that “graphic representation of their experiences can help them sort through the chaos” (pg. 107). Whereas verbal therapies might attempt to rationalise these thoughts, Art Therapists can allow their participants to process it and move towards rationalisation themselves (Silverman, 1991; Haeyen, 2018).

“(Using Art I) stop intellectualising my BPD and start exploring my emotions and recovery journey in colour. It also is a great tool to assist in emotional regulation and self-soothing, replacing old unhelpful coping mechanisms.”

– Lived Experience participant LE#05

Processing and healing internal and external complex sense of self

Haeyen (2018) speaks of art as a mirror for PLWBPD, important due to the difficulty with identity and self-stigma people with BPD often have. Art Therapists enable PLWBPD to visually express ‘self’ which elicits an internal narrative and can allow judgemental and negative self-reflection to be worked through compassionately. This visual representation can also externalise the pain of what is contained (or missing) from the person and provide insight for direction and approach to change when working with the person.

“Art allows me to embrace so much of myself and silences judgemental thoughts. It’s incredibly meaningful to express positives around having a BPD diagnosis.”

– Lived Experience participant LE#06



Figure 2 - “Chameleon” Lived Experience participant LE#06. (2020), Adelaide, SA.

Art making as an accepting space

The need for non-judgemental spaces to express emotion and intrusive thoughts is often discussed by people with BPD (Project Air Lived Experience Project, 2019). Unfortunately, PLWBPD often experience interpersonal environments that punish them for their survival behaviours and strategies. Art practice may function as an alternative to potentially life-threatening behaviours, providing internal respite for the person. Huckvale & Learmonth (2009) quote a participant who stated: “the painting group is the only space where the voice telling me to kill myself doesn’t intrude.”(pg. 57) Morgan, Knight, Bagwash & Thompson (2012) state how “when in the process of creating everything else does not exist” (pg. 95) meaning the process of art making can provide respite from negative self-talk and distressing events through the one minded absorption in the flow of the art making.

“Art has always been a way for me to express difficult emotions and I loved using it to challenge my own ideas of stigma and explore alternative perspectives, embrace a positive side to my diagnosis which I always felt shame about it..” – Lived Experience participant LE#07

Art Therapy with PLWBPD is an area that requires skilful knowledge, structured planning and deep empathy. Training for working with PLWBPD in Australia is highly accessible to Art Therapists.

The Australian BPD Foundation has partnered with expert organisations to develop a National Training and Professional Development Strategy. The aim is to upskill and engage clinicians working alongside PLWBPD and their families to improve mental health practitioner’s capacity to recognise, respond to and treat PLWBPD, and provide better support to their families and carers. One of these organisations is Project Air Strategy which has a free national e-learning one day training (<http://bit.ly/BPDlearning>) that issues a professional development certificate upon successful completion.

For expert information, access to free online training and resources for working with PLWBPD in Australia, please visit the services below:

Australian BPD Foundation

<https://www.bpdfoundation.org.au/>

BPD Awareness Week

<https://www.bpdawareness.com.au/>

Project Air Strategy (NSW)

<https://www.projectairstrategy.org>

Spectrum PD Service (VIC)

<https://www.spectrumbpd.com.au>

BPDco (SA)

<https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/>

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