

Research In Practice

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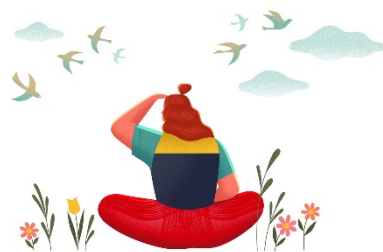
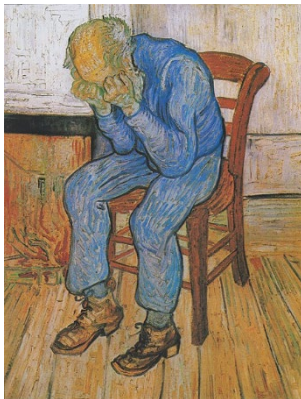
- ***Mental Health & Art***
- ***Modern Stoicism***
- ***Gestalt Therapy***

Key thinkers:

- ***Theodor Lipps, (b: 1851, d: 1914)***
- ***Fritz Perls, (b: 1893, d: 1970)***
- ***Massimo Pigliucci (b: 1964, 56 years old)***

Key artists:

- ***Van Gogh (b,D) -At Eternity's Gate, 1890***
- ***Gustave Courbet - Le Désespéré, 1843-1845***
- ***Cat Finnie - Don't Be a Sheep, 2019***



I am going to be exploring modern stoicism and the effects of art therapy, concentrating on Gestalt therapy on patient's mental health and wellbeing with the view to seek evidence of its positive contribution to patient recovery. I believe that art therapy is important to my practice, and something I intend to investigate as a possible future career. Can art be therapy, or is it just therapeutic to do? This is a subject area that I am very passionate about and believe that art and therapy is very important for our well-being. I seek to explore the evidence and thinking behind treating people through art and plan to do this by delving deeper into key theories from Theodore Lipps, Fritz Perls, and Massimo Pigliucci and then looking at the artists Van Gogh (At Eternity's Gate), Gustave Courbet (Le Désespéré), and Cat Finnie (Don't Be a Sheep) and examining how this could tie together with the idea of Modern Stoicism.

Mental-Health effects "1 in 4 people in the world" (World Health Organization, Geneva, 2001.). It is a very prominent subject and life altering problem in our society. WHO figures currently indicate that Mental Health conditions are escalating, more so now than ever due to the current Covid 19 pandemic we are living through. One of the primary concerns for therapists is that people with mental health often find it difficult to reach out as many still perceive it as weakness and something to be ashamed of.

Bruce Wampold, PhD, a professor of counselling psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison says.

Psychotherapy is remarkably effective, for almost all mental disorders, it's as effective as medication—and its longer lasting. People become resistant to medication, but they don't get resistant to psychotherapy (Hainer, 2008).

Some people doubt whether this works, often going as far as asking "Does therapy help?" (Devon, 2018). It has been scientifically proven to help patients who attend therapy sessions. (Hainer, 2008)

It is believed to be more effective treatment for conditions such as for trauma, depression and anxiety than medication:

Research generally shows that psychotherapy is more effective than medications, and that adding medications does not significantly improve outcomes from psychotherapy alone (How Do I Choose Between Medication and Therapy? 2017).

The act of talking to someone and sharing problems can have an instant relief effect, this method of therapy is called Gestalt therapy, discovered by Fritz Perls (b: 1893, d:1970), Perls believed that the act of speaking and taking a more relational approach helped work to “heighten awareness through dialogue and creative experimentation” (Mann, 2010). Art therapy is another well-known type of therapy, “This type of therapy has also been shown to lead to increases in self-esteem, confidence, and self-awareness” (Art Therapy, 2016). It is very beneficial, and something anyone can do- regardless of artistic ability. A person doing art therapy can express themselves and their feelings using shapes, colours and different types of media- there is no rule as to who can and cannot do or use art therapy. “Art therapists work with children, young people, adults and the elderly. Clients may have a wide range of difficulties, disabilities or diagnoses” (About Art Therapy, n.d.) .

There are many well-known artists that have suffered with mental health difficulties. One of the more notable ones that often-used art to cope with their mental health was Vincent Van Gogh (b: 30 March 1853, d: 29 July 1890). He was a Dutch painter who was a part of the post-impressionism movement.

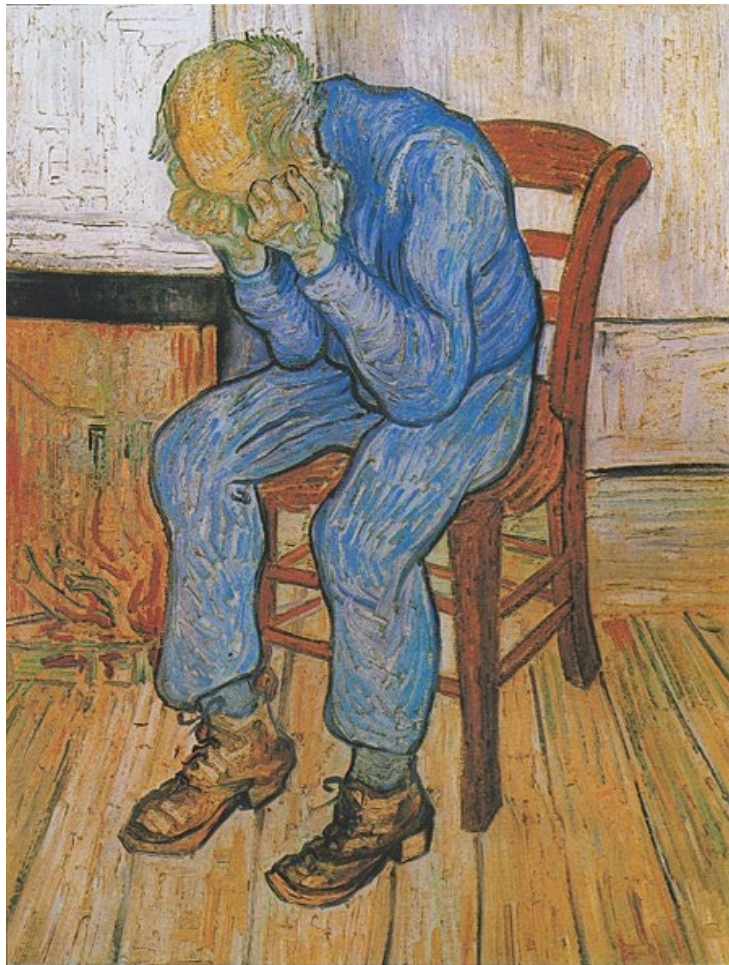


Fig.1 At Eternity's Gate, 1890, Van Gogh

Van Gogh's striking, emotive oil painting "At Eternity's Gate" (fig.1) was created two months before his death. This image captures a sense of sorrow and desperation and has overall depressive atmosphere. The painting was inspired by a drawing he had previously sketched in 1882, the subject was a war veteran and a pensioner. The most striking colour in this piece is the vibrant blue, usually in colour theory and the English language the colour blue signifies sadness. Although- some believe that "blue works best in bringing about a calmer physical and mental state" (F Barber, 1999). Perhaps it brings both of those emotions at once? Perhaps it creates such an intense feeling due to the mixture of both emotions from each colour explanation. Everyone feels differently.

Many of Van Gogh's psychiatrists are in Van Gogh's work. In one piece a psychiatrist is holding flowers, not sunflowers as one would think due to Van Gogh's frequent use of them, but foxgloves. Foxgloves formed part of the medication that Van Gogh would take for his epilepsy.

Whatever van Gogh's exact diagnosis may have been, it is highly likely that after admission to the asylum at Saint-Rémy in 1889, his physician, Dr Paul-Ferdinand Gachet, prescribed digitalis, which is why medical historiography strongly supports the hypothesis of Van Gogh having suffered from digitalis-induced xanthopsia. In *Portrait of Dr Gachet*, 1890, the foxglove plant is presented in front of Dr Gachet; digitalis is extracted from foxglove plants (Gruener, 2013).

In most of the Van Gogh's paintings, he uses a lot of yellow paint. Yellow is seen to signify happiness. Some of the first things that come to mind when thinking about the colour yellow is sunshine and the sun, and in Van Gogh's case mainly sunflowers. In fact, he is largely associated with the colour due to his heavy use of the pigment.

Oh yes, he loved yellow, this good Vincent, this painter from Holland — those glimmers of sunlight rekindled his soul, that abhorred the fog, that needed the warmth (Paul Gauguin b: 1848, d: 1903).

Perhaps the colours he chose were an attempt to feel happier? Especially since, due to his medication made with foxgloves which intensifies the colour yellow, the colour would be heavily amplified. In a letter to his brother Theo, he wrote: "It is true that I am often in the greatest misery, but still there is within me a calm, pure harmony and music" (Stone and Stone, 1995). He sounds sad yet optimistic, even stoic all at the same time, it sounds very strong and even brave as a statement. He saw the light and happiness even while he was dealing with his mental health which was the cause of his unfortunate early death.

Modern Stoicism is a popular movement which aims to reintroduce and revive the c.300 B.C.

practice of stoicism. “ Most of our knowledge of it comes from three Roman Stoics: Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius” (Beginners Guide to Stoicism, 2016). This ancient philosophy has become up to date as Modern Stoicism and more accessible in today's society. A contemporary modern stoic theorist is Liberian philosopher Massimo Pigliucci (b: 1964), he is a professor at CUNY-City College, New York. In his book, *How to be Stoic* (2017) he writes: “One of the main principles of stoicism is the ability to distinguish between things we can and cannot control” (Pigliucci,2017). This quote in particular is very important to keep in mind as an everyday practice. It is something that could help people rationalise things when they are stressed or panicked, especially during times of adversity it is important and perhaps also helpful to people when dealing with everyday life. Often things can feel like they are overwhelming or blowing out of proportion, as there are so many things happening at once, especially with the overload of information from social media. Logging onto sites such as Facebook and Twitter, for instance, people are greeted with global news- which can often be negative news- and the pictures and posts from friends and family often only showing the positive aspects of their lives. People often want to only display the perfect aspects, though it is not very honest. This can affect a person's mental health as they compare their lives to others, regardless of the vastly different circumstances everyone is in. It is hard not to wish to have a life like others, or to be at the same pace and success as others tend to portray. However, focusing on what you can personally control and what is happening in your life, or how to improve smaller aspects of your life gradually, can be much more beneficial to your mental health. There is no point worrying about things beyond your control as it causes stress.



Fig.2" Don't Be a Sheep", May 14th 2019, Cat Finnie

This digital art piece is calm, and somewhat neutral. There are no overbearing emotions hinted at, just a calm atmosphere.

In reality, stoicism is not suppression or concealment of emotions, but their awareness, reflection on their causes and the ability to direct them to their advantage. This is an understanding of what is under our control and what is not: we should focus our efforts on the first, instead of wasting them on the second (Pigluicci, 2017).

The figure in this piece is sitting down outside, there are flowers next to them and floating clouds that they are looking through towards the distance, birds are flying amongst them, and they are letting the world pass them by. Taking a step back from life, as they do not need to control every aspect of life to feel content. This piece encapsulates the feeling of freedom, as the birds above are flying freely. It also shows the subject looking up and around being grateful and content with their

surroundings. The colours in this piece are very serene, however; the vibrant red in the middle is very eye catching. Having the red in the middle of the calm surroundings is somewhat grounding- this emphasises that the focal point of the piece is there, rather than the surroundings which is where the viewer would look after the primary focus of the piece.

Gestalt Therapy is a method of therapy developed in the 1940's primarily by Fritz Perls (b: 1893, d: 1970) a German psychiatrist and psychotherapist. Perls developed this method of therapy alongside his wife Laura Perls (b: 1905, d: 1990) who was also a German psychologist and a psychotherapist. The main aim and main goal of Gestalt therapist is to encourage patients to notice and reflect on their own self-awareness.

Gestalt Therapists do not aim to change their clients. The therapist's role is to assist clients in developing their own self-**awareness** of how they are in the present moment. This will therefore allow them to rectify issues affecting his or her life. (Gestalt Therapy: Overview and Key Concepts - Counselling Connection, 2007).

Art therapy and Gestalt therapy can be combined. "Gestalt art therapy, and on what is perceived as its main goal: consciousness expansion through the use of creative and artistic resources" (Gussak, 2015). Gestalt therapy is commonly practiced with many members of society, such as families, groups, individuals and couples. This method and type of therapy is generally seen to be one of the most effective and common forms of therapy in the treatment of some disorders (How Gestalt Therapy Works, 2020). There are six key concepts that essentially make up this therapy. These concepts are "figure and ground, balance and polarities, awareness, present-centeredness, unfinished business, and personal responsibility" (O'Leary, 2013). Processing things and focusing on things that need help or development happens when people self-reflect or turn inwards and self-analyse instead of trying to ignore one's issues. People are aware that there is help available, where they can talk about their emotions and receive support, yet they still repress their emotions, as many have been brought up being told to "stop crying" or "man up" for instance during times of

emotional distress.



Fig.3 Gustave Courbet (*Le Désespéré*), 1843-1845

The Desperate Man (1843-1845) by Gustave Courbet (b: 1819, d: 1877) a French Realist painter, is an oil painting that depicts a very stressed and overwhelmed man, pulling a shocked face. This piece uses some very dark colours and heavy tonal contrast- this depicts the weight of the feelings; stress, shock, anger, tense, and desperation as the title suggests. The base texture of the skin is very smooth, porcelain-like. The brush strokes are heavier, and the tones are very dark on the contours of the face, specifically around the eyes. The darkness of the shadows makes the white of the wide eyes jump out to the viewer. The general lighting and tone of this piece suggest that the bright light is coming from above to the right, hence why the tones are so much darker beneath it. The tendons

of the neck and the arms and hands are very taught and incredibly tense. The grip in the left hand is very strong as he pulls at his hair, seemingly to rip it out. His face is flushed with a bright luminescent apricot colour- suggesting that the blood has rushed to his face due to his stress. The vibrant white on the sleeves and the arm highlights are very eye catching, it frames the distressed face- especially with the juxtaposition on the tones, drawing the eye of the viewer to the expression and gaze of the subject face. It is hard not to notice or to look into the bewildered eyes of the Desperate Man, it is truly captivating, due to the intensity of the staring expression at the viewer looks like a cry for help due to how intense the expression and the stare is. His hands are very defined, seemingly tense as he grabs at his hair with anger, stress and frustration. It is said that this incredibly anxious looking piece should "be taken as a literal expression of his lived experience" "he was a young man without a manifesto, still labouring to build his reputation" (Fiore, n.d.).

The three keywords I have investigated; Mental Health & Art, Modern Stoicism, and Gestalt Therapy, alongside the research I have done for my independent inquiry proposal have all led me to my chosen question:

"Can art be used as therapy, or is it just therapeutic to do?"

As stated in my introduction, the subject of mental health and therapy, specifically art therapy are subjects I am very interested in, as I am incredibly keen to investigate and pursue art therapy as a future career. I have been interested in this from a young age, as it fascinates me how doing art can heal, or express enough emotions that inner, deeper feelings can resurface to be understood. I believe that art can be both therapeutic and a component of therapy and certainly effective as art therapy. Though not everyone deems themselves as artistically gifted, art therapy does not require years of art practice, or the need to be "good" at art. The art produced in art therapy does not need to be conventionally "pretty" either- it is merely a vessel to release and attempt to understand ones

emotions, traumas, mental health and general mindset.

I wish to delve deeper into the subject to better inform myself even further as this would aid me in the pursuit of the possibility of a career in art therapy in the future.

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