

UDK 616.98:578.834]:355.721
doi: 10.7251/SANUS2401209Z

Professional Paper

APPLICATION OF ART THERAPY IN THE CLUB FOR TREATED PSYCHOSES AT THE MILITARY MEDICAL ACADEMY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Tatjana Stojanović¹, Tanja Čolić²

¹Clinic for Psychiatry, Military Medical Academy, Crnotravska 17, Belgrade, Republic of Serbia;

²PI College of Health Sciences Prijedor, Nikole Pašića 4a, Prijedor, Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract: *Patients with psychotic disorders have the possibility of continuous engagement within the activities of the Club of Treated Psychoses of the Military Medical Academy. Educational psychological and art therapy workshops take place once a week, as well as occasional visits to museums and galleries outside of the institution. The suspension of the work of the Day Hospital due to intensified epidemiological measures at the beginning of the outbreak of the pandemic affected the expression of insecurity, tension and anxiety among patients, who during that time regularly contacted us expressing the hope that we would start working. Aware of the importance of health and psychological support, we organized the possibility of holding the Club even before the opening of the Day Hospital, with enhanced epidemiological measures. The way the Club was held was identical to the one before the outbreak of the epidemic with respect to the setting, at the same time and in the same place. Recognizing and responding to the needs of users in the form of maintaining the Club in the initial period of the pandemic influenced the more successful recognition of unpleasant feelings and reactions, as well as the more successful overcoming of the newly created stressful situation in periods under complete isolation measures. The aim of this paper is to present the activities of the Club during the pandemic in the form of art therapy workshops and psychological education in order to promote the process of overcoming crisis situations. The topics we worked on mostly touched on the issues of experiencing the epidemiological situation, fear of infection, attitudes towards the changes that followed in the form of mandatory wearing of masks, enhanced hygiene measures, processing of information received through the media, ways of dealing with stress. The experience of safety provided by the Club, along with art therapy techniques, psychoeducation, encouraging social involvement and taking a more proactive position contributed to preserving the mental stability of our patients.*

Key words: *art therapy, psychotic disorder, club*

Introduction

The application of various creative techniques in crisis situations has a long tradition in many cultures and is most often manifested through individual or group workshop activities. In recent decades, mainly under the influence of different therapeutic directions that affirm art with clients, art therapy is beginning to be

applied in working with patients with psychotic disorders. The American Art Therapy Association (AATA) recognizes and defines art therapy as a mental health profession [1]. The British Association of Art Therapists (BAAT) states that art therapy is a form of psychotherapy that is used to support people of all ages and abilities [2]. This has led to its widespread application during the COVID-19 pandemic with different groups of users both globally and in our culture. The application of art therapy has been recognized in healthcare institutions such as hospitals, rehabilitation centers and psychiatric clinics [3] and the COVID-19 pandemic was identified as a crisis situation that required the provision of support to patients who suddenly lost their sense of belonging to a group. Serbia had a high mortality rate [4] and daily information about it had a negative impact on this sensitive population category as well as on their family members and other support providers.

The situation of the declared epidemic and everything that followed, including uncertainty, lack of experience with similar situations, being overwhelmed by fear, isolation measures, wearing masks in public places, not being able to contact a doctor, stopping all previous activities, was something that most people had never dealt with before. All of a sudden, all previous rules ceased to apply, and a high level of uncertainty and insecurity appeared. The highly stressful situation we all found ourselves in was a challenge that had to be overcome. Faced with all of this ourselves, we received calls from our patients who looked to us as a point of support and asked when the activities of the Treated Psychosis Club at the Military Medical Academy (MMA) in Belgrade would begin. In the beginning, we didn't have any possibilities for that. In October 2020, the outpatient part of our institution began to open and we received approval for the Club for treated psychoses to start operating. It was greeted with relief by our patients. The effectiveness of art therapy and the need for clients to consult with therapists in 2020 is documented in literature and research [5]. AATA conducted a survey of 623 art therapy professionals, students and educators in the USA in mid-May 2020, where it was shown that art therapists were listed as "essential workers" and that during COVID-19, a significant number of them worked in psychiatric hospital settings or outpatient mental health clinics [6]. A case report describing a deaf client with a severe speech impediment and diagnosed schizophrenia shows how connecting with clients in stressful situations is a new challenge [7].

The profession of art therapist in Serbia is not represented at health institutions. The concept of work is organized so that other mental health professionals complete additional education in art therapy and apply them in group and individual activities with clients. Artists from the fields of painting, music and literature who have an interest in providing support to clients with mental health difficulties are also often present. The exchange of information among professionals of different profiles has proven to be extremely useful with the aim of creating adequate interventions. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors of this paper were in the final phase of a two-year education in Expressive Art Therapy under the mentorship and model of Avi Goren Bar [8]. The Art Brut Studio at the Military Medical Academy (MMA) has existed since 2015 [9, 10], and patients of the Day Hospital and the Club for Treated Psychosis were involved and attended workshops before the pandemic.

We can assume that they were well prepared for navigating new and unknown situations.

Activities of the Treated Psychosis Club during the Covid-19 pandemic

In group therapies, we applied art therapy techniques to facilitate the expression of emotions and encourage the processing of stressful experiences. One of the ways in which we implemented art therapy includes methods that we already applied within the Art Brut Studio at MMA. We started from the fact that the applied methods are useful, acceptable and meaningful [11, 12] and we are aware that they do not solve the permanent condition in which our participants find themselves.

One of the tasks consisted of the patients expressing themselves spontaneously by drawing lines on paper without the intention of consciously drawing anything. The task was to create a lot of intertwined lines with a graphite pencil on white paper. When they do that, they have in front of them an unstructured visual graphic expression that they produced themselves. Most people, when they encounter a completely unstructured expression, associate it with the chaos they feel inside. They get confused, they don't see the structure, they don't understand what it means. Anxiety occurs due to ambiguity, misunderstanding, lack of explanation. We feel the same way when we face the unknown in a life situation. The instruction goes on to tell them to take a good look at what they got, to do it from different angles, from different distances, to move closer and further away, and to see if any change in perception will happen. They are trying to see if there are any shapes that they could develop further. They follow lines that are interesting to them and slowly shape what they have seen. In this task, it is noticeable how much the projection mechanism plays a part in the perception and later structuring of the resulting scribble. The parallel with the world around us, the information we receive, the signals we notice in ourselves, feelings, thoughts, urges is quite clearly noticeable. Through the clear questions we ask them, we try to make that process more visible. It's as if externalizing what's inside, our experience through visual expression, helps us see it better. In a way, this technique supports the process of recognizing and manifesting inner contents and dealing with new unforeseen circumstances. No matter how hard we try, trying to control life, it is not possible. We only have the illusion of control. Somehow it was very visible at the time of the outbreak of the epidemic. We encountered something we did not foresee, we had no experience with that type of virus, fear of the unknown appeared on a planetary level. With the help of a highly technologically equipped civilization, the ways of transmitting information from various parts of the world have led to an overflow of fear, anxiety, insecurity, a sense of helplessness and hopelessness.

In Figure 1, we see the work of one of our patients, which is created from randomly generated lines, which she calls "Current". What she recognized and extracted from her own unstructured content is the image of a person with wide open

eyes and mouth who is overwhelmed by the feeling of horror due to external content of extremely strong intensity that she experiences as an electric shock.



Figure 1. Current

In Figure 2 called "Infectious disease" we see the experience of the epidemic on the subjective level of our patient. It was created when patients were given the task of writing the words that echo in their heads that they heard in the initial days of the declared epidemic. We used "top-down" direction [13]. We started with what is on the cognitive level and proceeded to the emotional level. We see that our patient's experience is dominated by a sense of danger, fear, and the need for protection through the application of health measures. The picture shows a person wearing the insignia of a health worker, using protective measures, surrounded by dangerous pointed beaks of birds.



Figure 2. An infectious disease

In Figure 3 "Wigwam", the patient symbolically represented the need for isolation associated with physical separation from others but still remaining in a group of people. This reflects how threatened we all felt at the time, aware of the need for

protection, which included isolation, because contact with others could be dangerous for transmitting the disease. In a stressful situation, most people experience fear, anxiety, often accompanied by an increased need for contact that reduces unpleasant feelings.

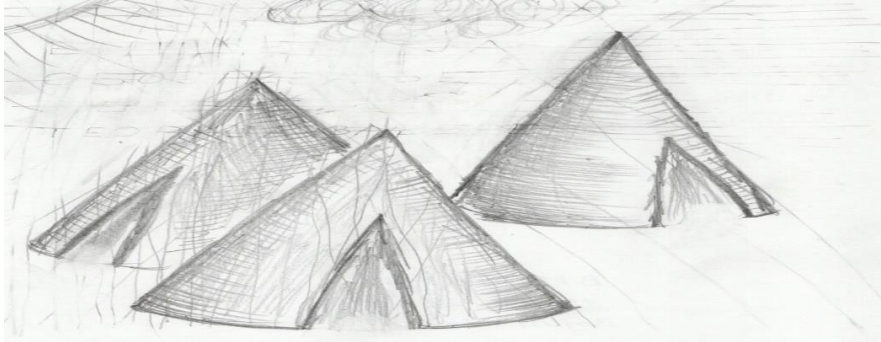


Figure 3. Wigwam

Paradoxically, during the epidemic, contact was forbidden, and the regulation of anxiety was thus impossible. In art therapy, we recognized all those internal conflicts, talked openly about feelings, expressed feelings through drawing and words and promoted the processing of stressful experiences. There was also open talk about conspiracy theories that were flourishing on social networks at the time. Exactly what could be heard on those media was also the subject of our conversations. It was surprising how rational our patients, some of whom were diagnosed with paranoid disorder, behaved in the face of these explanations. One patient with dg disorder with insanity remarked very minutely and wittily: "If we believed in those stories, then everyone would be paranoid." This example clearly shows how much insight the patient has into his diagnosis and how much he is able to differentiate himself from crazy content, as well as to think about what such a way of thinking would mean for all of humanity. It is about a long-term member of the Club of Treated Psychoses who is highly intelligent with a chronic disorder with insanity. On several occasions in the past, he had outbursts of behavior that resulted in punitive measures. He is very attached to this club, as well as the staff who run it. When on several occasions during the COVID-19 epidemic he stayed with his sister who lives in another country on another continent, he was involved in the work of the Club through the Viber application. It meant a lot to him that he had contact with the Club and that he could see us because it gave him a sense of security. Being attached to the Club, monitoring the situation and being able to be involved even when he is thousands of kilometers away played a significant role in preserving mental stability.

The influence of the media is visible in an unintentionally humorous way through the drawing of our patient in Figure 4: "A man with a lot of vitamins, in a word, healthy."



Figure 4. A man with a lot of vitamins, in a word, healthy

We remember how many appeals there were through the media to use various supplements and how many unverified stories there were about their usefulness in the fight against a previously unknown virus. Through the visualization of his mental experience, our patient showed how he understood all those messages. We remember how much resistance there was to the measures against the epidemic, how much people were afraid of vaccination, what stories were circulating about it. It clearly depicts how an unknown situation activates primal fears, irrational, magical thoughts, regardless of the level of education and training. We were quite surprised by the constructive and common-sense approach of people diagnosed with thought disorders.

We further worked on the fear of the unknown by defining the task as: Draw the corona virus. It is known that what we cannot see causes the deepest fears. It can probably be explained by the projection of our fears into the unknown. As a result, already with the outbreak of the corona, animated images of the virus appeared. We got something similar in the drawings of our patients.



Figure 5. A microbe

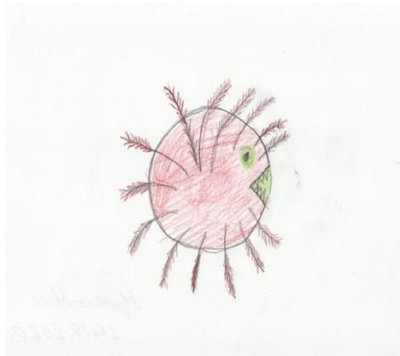


Figure 6. Corona

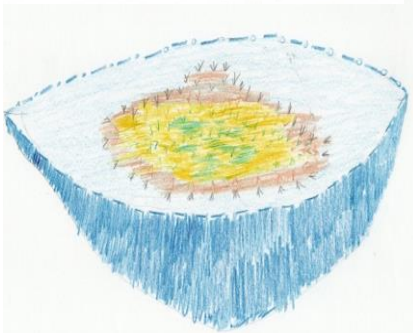


Figure 7. New sample

In Figures 5. "Microbe", 6. "Corona", 7. "New sample" we see how patients visualized a dangerous virus. The conversation about how we imagine the virus, structuring and externalization contributed to reducing the feeling of anxiety, strengthening faith in the possibility of controlling and overcoming the situation.

Wearing masks was a completely new situation for most people. In the beginning, it was so difficult to get a mask, and we were told that we are in mortal danger due to an unknown virus and that only a mask can provide protection. When it was finally possible to get them, they became an integral part of everyday life outside one's own home. Our patients followed all measures with discipline when coming to the Club. They all wore masks without any visible resistance throughout the duration of the epidemic. On the other hand, it was noticeable how scared they felt due to the covering of a good part of their face. In fact, wearing a mask deprives us of a large amount of otherwise present data related to the people we communicate with. You can't see the lips, you can't tell if the person is smiling or serious. For some people, the mask actually completely changes their personal description, almost to the point of being unrecognizable. Considering how important social interaction is to us, it is natural that we are all more anxious in such a situation. All of this was also noticeable in our patients. For this reason, some art therapy techniques involved working through the anxiety surrounding the integration of the mask into the body schema.

In Figure 8. "Nowhere without a mask" we see a picture of the patient in which he shows himself with a mask.



Figure 8. Nowhere without a mask. Figure 9. With a mask and without a mask

In Figure 9 "With a mask and without a mask", the patient is trying to better understand and accept that she is the same, wearing a mask or not.

A special group therapy was devoted to an increased understanding of how the mask affects the perception of self and others. The patients were given the task of drawing each other, so that everyone took part in drawing each other, and at the end everyone got their own portrait drawn by the group. All are represented with the face masks they wore. Picture 10 shows mutual portraits.

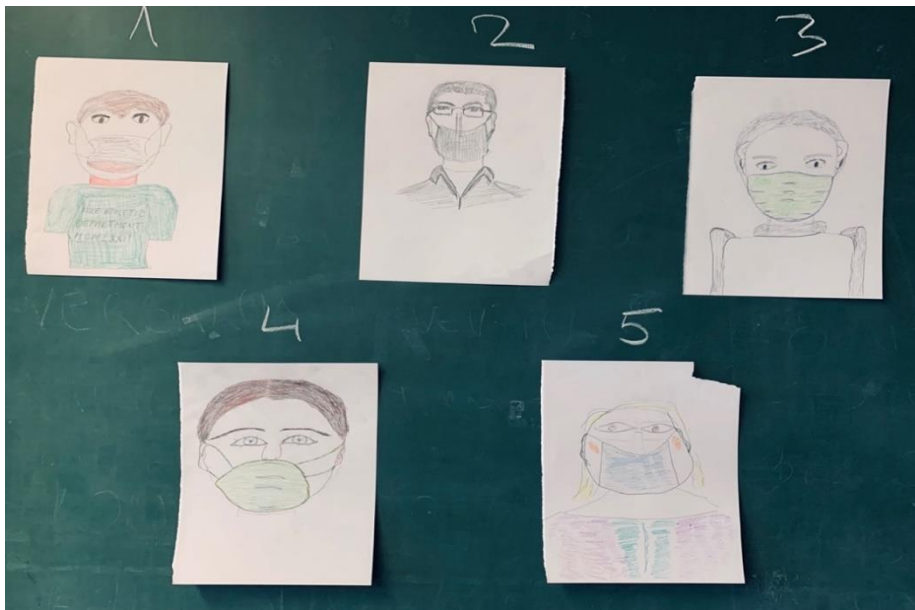


Figure 10. Mutual portraits of members of the Treated Psychosis Club

To those of us who know them, it is surprising how much of a match there is with the physical appearance of each of them. What is repeated in every picture is the experience of fear, eyes wide open. Some of them show parts of the face that could not be seen because of the mask. This applies primarily to the lips. In one picture they can be seen, in the other they can be glimpsed through the mask. We talked about the experiences they had regarding wearing masks, the unnaturalness they felt, the impossibility of recognizing people wearing masks sometimes. All this encouraged a better understanding and made it possible to work on the epidemic situation.

In Figure 11 "Everything is sad except nature" the patient symbolically shows his experience of meaninglessness due to sometimes rather pointless and chaotic actions that probably occurred due to being overwhelmed by feelings of fear, helplessness, horror and contrast with beautiful nature. In reality, the epidemic measures that involved slowing down, stopping many of nature's polluters such as traffic, factories, technologies, caused nature to begin to recover. Let's just remember the clear water in the canals of Venice and the dolphins that appeared there after many years.



Figure 11. Everything is sad except nature

At one of the therapy groups, we checked how they perceive the Club for Treated Psychoses and the support they give and receive in it. In Figure 12 "Conversation between doctor and patient" we see a comic strip where the answer to the above question is given. Doctor: "Nenad, how are you feeling?" Patient: "Thank you for the question. Better than in any other place".



Figure 12. Conversation between doctor and patient

In Figure 13 "Medicine" we see a symbolic representation of the treatment in the form of a red cross sign and a tablet. The patient verbally explains how much this way of working benefits him. He states that in addition to pharmacotherapy, he experiences the support, help, and understanding he receives in the group.

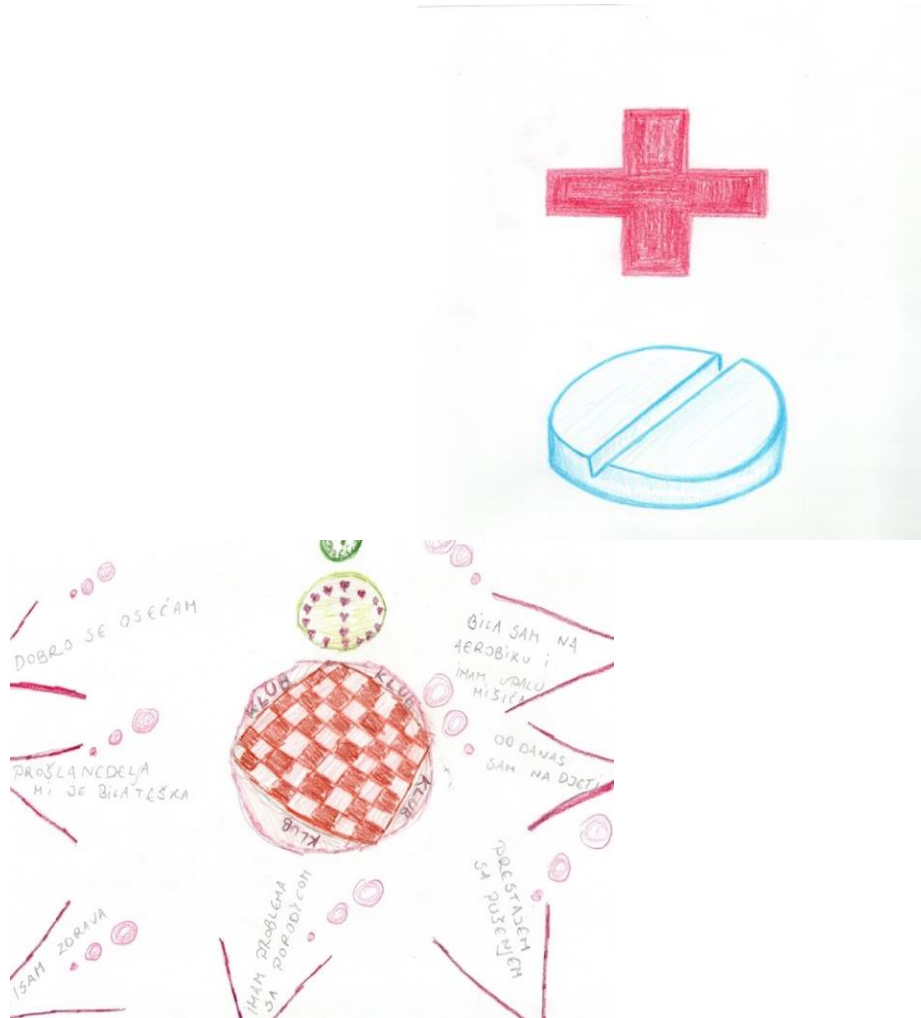


Figure 13. A medicine

Figure 14. My group

In Figure 14, "My group", the patient integrates experiences from her own life and shows how they are processed in group therapy at the Club. By using the color red and the heart symbol in a small circle, she emphasizes the feeling of attachment to the members of the group.

Discussion

In the paper, we showed drawings that were created as part of group activities at the Club for Treated Psychoses at MMA during the COVID-19 pandemic after the first easing of measures that happened in October 2020. The arrival of our patients to the workshop in the area where the activities take place, check-in, compliance with the

new rules and keeping a distance had an impact on better organization of time during the pandemic, as well as the acquisition of new experiences in this specific situation.

We identified that the patients presented the activities of daily life in a very constructive and common sense approach considering their diagnosis. Healthy food, a drawing of a human figure with a mask, the appearance of the corona virus, nature, medicines, doctors and all current topics and symbols from the pandemic period were presented in the works. The focus on art work, designing and creating an art product along with the analysis and processing of unpleasant feelings related to the pandemic contributed to the processing of the stressful situation. Being able to visualize what is invisible and terrifying has helped to reduce tension and anxiety. Special emphasis was placed on working on the changed experience of oneself, others and the environment due to the epidemic measures, which contributed to structuring, clarity of feelings and a more complete processing of the stressful situation. The dialogue between the patient and the therapist and the presence of the group gave an opportunity to meet social needs that were frustrated due to isolation measures, as well as sharing, which is a very useful experience in these situations.

Conclusions

By analyzing the contents of the group art therapy during the epidemic in the Club of Treated Psychoses within the Clinic for Psychiatry of the Academy of Medical Sciences, we can conclude that art therapy activities enhanced the process of working through a stressful experience that neither patients nor staff had previously encountered. Expressing psychological content in a joyful way along with verbal processing and integration proved to be a useful tool, especially when it is taken into account that due to the specificity of the diagnosis, patients have difficulties with processing emotions. We conclude that taking into account the frequency of visits, insistence on work despite interfering factors, richness of artistic expressions, absence of deterioration and hospitalization. Art therapy techniques in combination with psychological analysis can be a useful therapeutic tool for other groups in educational institutions and business environments in working through stressful experiences and adapting to new circumstances. This article and the experience we have given show the necessity of introducing art therapy on a wider scale at our health institutions with clients for whom this form of expression would be additional support.

References

- [1] American Art Therapy Association (AATA). [cited 2024 Jun 14] Available from: <https://arttherapy.org>
- [2] The British Association of Art Therapists Hassan (BAAT). [cited 2024 Jun 14] Available from: <https://baat.org/>
- [3] Škrbina D. Art terapija i kreativnost. Zagreb: Veble commerce 2013, p. 52-53.
- [4] Worldometer COVID-19 Coronavirus Statistic. [Last updated, 2024 April 13; cited 2024 Jun 16] Available from: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

- [5] Hilton D. Art Therapy and the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic - Public Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being. Mathews J Psychiatry Ment Health. 2021; (6)1:30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30654/MJPMH.10030>
- [6] Choudhry R. & Keane C. *Art Therapy During a Mental Health Crisis: Coronavirus Pandemic Impact Report*. American Art Therapy Association. 2020; p 2-7. Available from: <https://arttherapy.org/upload/Art-Therapy-Coronavirus-Impact-Report.pdf>
- [7] Shalev O. Art Therapy during COVID-19 with a Deaf Client Diagnosed with Schizophrenia: A Case Report. *OBM Integrative and Complementary Medicine* **2023**; 8(3): 028; DOI:10.21926/obm.icm.2303028
- [8] Goren-Bar A. The Creation Axis in Intermodal Expressive Therapies. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*. 1997; 24(5). p 411- 418. USA: Elsevier Science, Ltd
- [9] Čolić T., Stojanović T. Iskustva primjene tehnika art terapije u radu sa klijentima obrazovnim i zdravstvenim institucijama. Zbornik radova Naučna konferencija SANUS; Prijedor: Visoka medicinska škola. 2022; p. 226-234.
- [10] Stojanović T. Art brut studio – likovni projekat u radu sa pacijentima Dnevne bolnice VMA. Tematski zbornik radova: Perspektive umetničkog obrazovanja – refleksije i ishodi. Beograd: Fakultet likovnih umetnosti; 2022; p. 144-157.
- [11] Attard A. & Larkin M. Art therapy for people with psychosis: A narrative review of the literature. *Lancet Psychiatry*. 2016; 1067–1078. DOI: 10.1016/S2215-0366(16)30146-8.
- [12] Liu Z., Yang Z., Xiao C., Zhang K., & Osmani M. An investigation into art therapy aided health and well-being research: a 75-year bibliometric analysis. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2021; 19(1), 232. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390%2Fijerph19010232>
- [13] Lusebrink V. B. Assessment and therapeutic application of the Expressive Therapies Continuum: Implications for brain structures and functions. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 27, 2010; p. 108–77.

PRIMENA ART TERAPIJE U KLUBU LEČENIH PSIHOZA NA VOJNOMEDICINSKOJ AKADEMIJI TOKOM PANDEMIJE COVID-19

Tatjana Stojanović¹, Tanja Čolić²

¹ Klinika za psihijatriju, Vojnomedicinska akademija, Crnotravska 17, Beograd,
Republika Srbija;

² JU Visoka medicinska škola Prijedor, Republika Srpska, Bosna i Hercegovina

Sažetak: *Pacijenti sa psihotičnim poremećajem imaju mogućnost kontinuiranog angažovanja u okviru aktivnosti pri Klubu lečenih psihoza Vojnomedicinske akademije. Edukativno psihološke i art terapijske radionice se odvijaju jednom nedeljno, kao i povremene posete muzejima i galerijama van okvira ustanove. Obustavljanje rada Dnevne bolnice usled pojačanih epidemioloških mera na početku izbijanja pandemije uticalo je na javljanje nesigurnosti, napetosti i anksioznosti kod pacijenata, koji su za to vreme nas redovno kontaktirali ispoljavajući nadu da ćemo početi da radimo. Svesni važnosti zdravstvene i psihološke podrške organizovali smo mogućnost održavanja Kluba i pre otvaranja Dnevne bolnice, uz pojačane epidemiološke mere. Način održavanja Kluba bio je identičan onom pre izbijanja epidemije uz poštovanje setinga, u isto vreme i na istom mestu. Prepoznavanje i odgovaranje na potrebe korisnika u vidu održavanja Kluba u početnom periodu pandemije uticalo je na uspešnije prepoznavanje neprijatnih osećanja i reakcija, kao i uspešnije prevladavanje novonastalne stresne situacije u periodima pod merama potpune izolacije. Cilj ovog rada je prikaz aktivnosti Kluba tokom pandemije u formi art terapijskih radionica i psihološke edukacije kako bi pospešili proces prevazilaženja kriznih situacija. Teme na kojima smo radili doticali su se najviše pitanja doživljaja epidemiološke situacije, straha od infekcije, odnosa prema promenama koje su usledile u vidu obaveznog nošenja maski, pojačanih higijenskih mera, obrade informacija koje primaju preko medija, načinima suočavanja sa stresom. Doživljaj sigurnosti koju Klub pruža, uz art terapijske tehnike, psihoedukaciju, podsticanje socijalnog angažovanja i preuzimanje proaktivnije pozicije doprineli su očuvanju mentalne stabilnosti naših pacijenata.*

Ključne reči: *art terapija, psihotični poremećaj, klub*