

## Visual Arts Therapy Efficacy Towards Cognitive Emotion Regulation and Anxiety of Single Mothers

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of using visual art therapy in dealing with cognitive emotion regulation and anxiety of a single mother. Quasi-experimental methods involving pre-test and post-test were used to achieve the objectives. A total of 32 respondents from Kuala Terengganu and Marang involved in this study were selected using purposive sampling. They were divided into four groups consisting of eight people per group. Visual art therapy was implemented through structured group counseling for eight weeks. Two instruments were used for data collection, Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ) to assess the level of cognitive emotion regulation and Symptoms Checklist 90 (SCL-90) to measure the level of anxiety before and after the therapy process. The findings showed that there were significant differences between pre-test and post-test of cognitive emotion regulation and anxiety for single mothers. The study was found effective in helping single mothers to think and evaluate the situations experienced thus addressing their concerns. In addition, it also contributed to the development of science in counseling.

**Key words:** Visual art therapy, cognitive emotion regulation, concern, single mothers, symptoms checklist

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### INTRODUCTION

Single mothers are individuals who have been married but had lost the husband due to death or a split up because of a divorce (Ibrahim and Zainab, 2010). According to the Terengganu Family Development Foundation there are 6 categories of single mothers) women whose husbands died and resumed the task of raising children) women who were divorced and were given custody of the children) women who were denied maintenance by the husband to support herself and the children) women who were in the process of divorce) women whose husbands were ill and unable to provide maintenance and required intensive care and women raising children without the help of her husband.

Single mothers faced many challenges to adapt to the changing status when they were to take over the role as head of the family. The main problems faced by these single mothers are financial, emotional, psychological and physical problems, challenges in managing education to children and loving their children. In addition, single mothers were also confronted with the negative perceptions of their status by the public.

Changes in the status presented a challenge to single mothers to manage well without the presence of a husband. Various emotional disorders such as anxiety

experienced by single mothers when responsibility as head of the family turned to them. According to Hamdan *et al.* (2008) concerns is something that is felt and experienced by someone who is feeling worried, confused, scared and nervous conditions can trigger anxiety in a person. Problems experienced by a single mother raises various emotional reactions to them. Emotional stability is important for single mothers so that they can carry out their duties properly. This is because of the balance and emotional stability is very important, especially in raising children and are willing to face the changes that occur from time to time.

The problems faced by single mothers can be overcome if they can think of a better way to solve a problem. This situation often depends on cognitive emotion regulation single mother which is how they evaluate themselves and receive status. Cognitive emotion regulation refers to consciousness how to think and make judgments on events in a person's life (Garnefski and Kraaij, 2007). Therefore, their admission as single mothers facing such problems managing the children, find employment and stigma society depends on their cognitive regulation of emotion. This also coincided with the theory of rational emotive behavior founded by Ellis (1979) that humans are born with the potential to think rationally and irrationally (Sapora and Ruhaya,

2013). Moreover, this theory also explained that the reasons for their problems were due to themselves and not because of other external sources (Sapora and Ruhaya, 2013). Therefore, how they judged themselves, whether positively or negatively would determine their acceptance of their status as single mothers. Many sources of help and support services including counseling are available to ensure that the concerns and cognitive emotion regulation of a single mother can be well managed. According to Siti Rafiah and Sakinah counseling service can help single mothers for their future planning, managing finance and parenting education. Thus counselors play an important role in helping single mothers make positive changes on themselves. Visual Art Therapy approach is one of the creative approaches that can be employed by counselors in helping single mothers. As described by Paw Eng, counselors need to be creative and use a variety of approaches in order for counseling sessions to be implemented effectively. Apparently, the use of modality of art such as paintings and collages is one way for individuals to express what they want through the work of art depicted (Knights, 1995) by which Visual Art therapy helped individuals expressed their feelings through various mediums including paintings and collages (Evangelista, 2013). Hence, this study attempts to apply Visual Arts Therapy to single mothers in expressing their pent up emotions that cannot be described in words and simultaneously relating to single mother's cognitive emotion regulation.

The process of adjusting to the new situation when the loss of a spouse whether through death or divorce is a difficult situation for single mothers (Hamidah, 2008). Among the problems faced by them were emotional disorders, problems and socialization of their children and also problems with the community around them. In addition, other problems experienced by single parents were loneliness, losing source of income, hopelessness, low self-esteem and emptiness in life. The situation got worse with their ex-husbands fail in providing maintenance to help the children, the divorce process, matrimonial property, custodies of the children and other complicated procedures which took a long time (Hamidah, 2008).

Forced to face such reality would impact the single mother's emotions negatively not to mention when they make negative judgments of their pasts. Thus, the ability of an individual to control the emotions depends on their cognitive regulation of emotion towards the situations experienced (Garnefski *et al.*, 2007), proving that single mothers need the ability to deal with the difficulties they faced in life. However, not all single mothers were able to

think and act properly when they were confronted with problems but might end up with more complications if they were not prepared to deal with the realities of life. This caused a single mother to suffer from anxiety, sadness and lack of focus and child neglect. Anxieties experienced by single mothers due to various issues could cause severe stress affecting their mental health like depression (Peden *et al.*, 2005). Naturally, previous researchers paid attention to the problems faced by single mothers such as financial problems, self-adjustment and children educations; even so they lacked focus on other aspects specifically on cognitive emotion regulation and anxiety experienced by these single mothers. Should single mothers fail to manage their emotional distress it would lead to negative impacts on their personal development as well as in educating their children. This study agrees with the findings obtained by Hong and Welch (2012) who found that divorced Asian women faced difficulties to speak of their hardships and their family problems. Therefore, Visual Arts Therapy can be used as an alternative to understand single mothers through the expressions of their feelings. Counselors can use visual art therapy as a creative approach to enhance the effectiveness of the counseling sessions. Based on the studies conducted by Evangelista (2013), Marzety *et al.* (2016) and Mercer *et al.* (2010) using visual arts as one of the techniques in helping problematic individual provided a space for creative exploration in which they expressed their pent-up feelings. In addition, the modality of expression using art as painting can help an individual to describe her life experiences (Hong *et al.*, 2014). Henceforth, this study aims to determine the effectiveness of Visual Arts Therapy towards cognitive regulation of emotion and anxieties of single mothers.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study used a quasi-experimental design involving only the treatment group but did not involve the controlled group. This method is known as a set of pre-test and post-test design (Cook and Campbell, 1979; Creswell, 2002, 2008, 2009, 2012). The subjects who were selected using purposive sampling method consisted of 32 single mothers who were divided into four groups of eight. Respondents were from Kuala Terengganu and Marang districts and they were selected based on these criteria single mothers aged 20-60 years only widowed and divorced single mothers. Visual Arts Therapy module is built based on the measures suggested by some researchers in the method of constructing the module whereby it was validated by three experts in psychology,

counseling and Visual Arts Therapy. A pilot study involving 8 respondents was conducted to test the feasibility of the module using 2 types of questionnaires Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ) built by Garnefski and Kraaij (2007) to measure cognitive emotion regulation variables and Symptom Check List-90 (SCL-90) designed by Derogatis (1977) to measure anxiety variables. Researchers acquired back-to-back translation by bilingual translators mastering in both Malay and English and validated by 3 other lecturers. Another pilot study to determine the reliability of the questionnaire was conducted involving 30 respondents. The researchers used SPSS Software to analyze the data using a descriptive and inferential statistics while paired t-test (paired-samples t-test) was used to test the effectiveness of Visual Arts Therapy towards cognitive emotion regulation and concern.

**RESULTS**

Visual Arts Therapy efficacy of cognitive emotion regulation and concern for single mothers was measured by assessing the differences in the mean value during the pre-test and post-test. Table 1 and 2 show the differences in the mean values for both pre-test and post-test as well as the paired t-test analysis of the pre and post-test of single mothers cognitive emotion regulation. The mean value obtained during pre-test was 3.8 while the mean value for the post-test was 3.3. The decline of 0.6 in the mean value indicated a change in the nature of respondent’s cognitive emotion regulation after following visual art therapy. Meanwhile, the paired t-test analysis showed a significant difference between pre-test and post-test of cognitive emotion regulation ( $t = 5.319$ ,

$p < 0.05$ ). Results showed that there were significant differences between cognitive emotion regulation for the pre and post-test.

In conclusion, Visual Arts Therapy encountered by the respondents during the eight weeks could help them in handling the cognitive emotion regulation and anxieties experienced. Through these therapies, respondents would understand the state of their cognitive emotion regulations and improve on making assessments on matters related to single mothers. Table 3 and 4 show the deviations of pre-test and post-test mean values and paired t-test results in testing the effectiveness of Visual Arts Therapy on single mother’s anxieties. Mean value obtained during pre-test was 2.3 whilst the mean value for post-exam was 1.9. The decline in values by 0.5 shows that single mothers experienced some changes in their concerns after following visual art therapy. The result of t-test analysis also revealed a distinct difference between pre-test and post-test on single mother’s anxieties ( $t = 4.746$ ,  $0.00 < 0.05$ ). In consequence, this study proved that there was a significant difference in the concerns of single mothers between pre-test and post-test.

On the whole there is a change in the nature of cognitive emotion regulation and concern for single mothers. After going through Visual Arts Therapy, the cognitive emotion regulation of single mothers was manageable as they could think and act better when faced with a problem. On that account, the way they think and tackle the challenges faced as a single mother could duly reduce their anxiety.

Table 1: t-paired pre and post-tests for cognitive emotion regulation

Cognitive emotion regulation	Mean	N	SD	SE mean
Pre-test	3.8	30	0.49	0.08981
Post-test	3.3	30	0.32	0.05878

Table 2: Emotion regulation test

Paired differences	Mean	SD	SE mean	95% confident interval of the difference		t-value	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Cognitive emotion regulation pre-test mean-cognitive emotion regulation post-test mean	0.6	0.64450	0.11767	0.38527	0.86658	5.319	29	0.000

Table 3: T-paired pre and post-test for anxiety

Cognitive test	Mean	N	SD	SE mean
Anxiety pre-test	2.3	30.00	0.82	0.15
Anxiety post-test	1.9	30.00	0.59	0.11

Table 4: Analysis of anxiety test

Paired differences	Mean	SD	SE mean	95% confident interval of the difference		t-value	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Anxiety pre-test; anxiety post-test	0.5	0.52698	0.09621	0.25989	0.65345	4.746	29	0.000

## DISCUSSION

Single mothers were presented with great opportunities to express themselves and share their experiences more comfortably during the therapies implemented in Visual Arts Therapy. The results show there was a change in the cognitive emotion regulation of single mothers. Prior to joining Visual Arts Therapy, single mother did not understand how to think positively when faced with certain situations. However, after experiencing visual art therapy resulted in the increase of the cognitive regulation emotion and reduction in the level of anxiety when they could think positively.

Single mothers expressed the feelings that they experienced, grief and anxiety through the drawings they produced. The used of colors chosen, symbols or pictures selected actually depicted their thoughts and emotions. This showed that paintings and making could provide the space for clients to explore themselves (White *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, paintings and collages could also be used as a medium for individuals to reveal their feelings that could not be expressed through words and as a treatment process (Stuckey and Nobel, 2010). In this study, collage making was one effective medium for single mothers especially when they could express things related to their concerns and cognitive emotion regulation. Group sharing also allowed them to share similar emotions with other single mothers. They felt that they are not alone in facing the difficulties of life as a single mother with the supports of other friends. This can be observed through the similarities in the drawings that they produced like the symbols, colors and even newspaper articles that were described. The results of this study were consistent with the opinion by Drake and Winner (2012) which explained that the drawings of the single mothers were one of the many ways for them to release their emotions and portray themselves.

The activities of drawing, coloring and pasting by single mothers came as opportunities to expose their emotions and through sharing them with other single mothers would reveal their feelings more clearly thus understood by the group members. Apart from being able to express their pent-up emotions and reduce the problems encountered, arts therapy could also help in treating an individual (Marzety and Zakaria, 2014). Emotional expressions through the use of symbols, colors and also newspaper clippings helped single mothers to understand their emotions. When they experienced negative thoughts and emotions they would directly address the problems. This substantiated that each individual has the opportunity to change her live and improve for the better. The results of this study showed

that single mothers were able to recognize their own abilities after going through visual art therapy. Expressions done through Visual Arts Therapy helped them to see a clear picture in planning for an improved and better future as single mothers. Clearly, the use of artistic materials enabled clients to raise their awareness of their concealed emotions as they expressed those feelings and move forward towards positive changes (Marzety *et al.*, 2016; Evangelista, 2013; Mercer *et al.*, 2010). Visual Art Therapy allowed single mothers to learn to assess the strengths and weaknesses that existed for a plan towards a better life. This coincides with the theory of rational emotive behavior therapy (Ellis, 1979) in helping people change the way of thinking and bring awareness to them for a meaningful life as desired where through restructuring cognitive activities with a counselor would help identify irrational beliefs and rectify them. In this case, single mother's confidence in their capability to change was the effect of psychological reactions experienced during Visual Arts Therapy. This concurred with opinions clarified by ida Hartina in which the involvements of the group members could actively assist each other by sharing their goals, experiences, feelings and thoughts. Moreover, it could also stimulate the growth of clients in terms of experience and a positive self-concept.

Active involvement and responses provided by counselors and group members were seen to help single mothers get the information related to themselves and the issues faced. Active participation among members of the group gave these single mothers strength and a source of support in their lives. Cakir (2010) stressed that supports from family members, friends, ex-husbands, relatives were most important in providing assistance in terms of financial, social and emotional. Therefore, various forms of support offered to them could build up their strength to continue living.

Using paintings or collages as a tool in exploring the group members to express their pent-up feelings was in accordance with Hong and Welch (2012) whereby they mentioned the use of artistic material as one of the best ways to describe the experiences of their lives. This shows that sharing and exposing among group members by drawing, coloring and pasting would help them see clearly the problems that they faced. Therefore, the group would immediately realized what they needed to do and directly addressed the issues. Each individual has the rights to make his/her choice whether to change for the better or worse. According to Corey, among the techniques in the theory of rational emotive behavior therapy (Ellis, 1979) was to help clients identify thoughts that affected their emotions and behaviors and change

those thoughts to gain positive effects on the emotions and behaviors. Similarly for the single mothers, they could identify their own potentials after following visual art therapy.

Single mothers felt that they were able to change for the better. Through this Visual Arts Therapy, single mothers learned their strengths and weaknesses and refined them. This study found that single mother's confidence in the ability to change was the effect of cognitive emotion regulation experienced during the Visual Arts Therapy. Levy (2014) stated that painting is one of projective techniques that allowed individuals to unconsciously describe their feelings in visual form. Such exposure helped them to release the pent-up feelings that were not able to be expressed by words hence finding a solution. Through these expression of emotions they found a relief and an awareness of what they were experiencing.

The freedom given to single mothers to express themselves through the activities held provided a space for them to express themselves without hesitation. As explained by Stuckey and Nobel (2010), creative expression could be used as a medium contributing to the process of treating it effectively. Similarly, group members shared a mutual trust in helping other single mothers expressed their feelings which with that trust had enabled them to do so. Active involvement of group members helped each other in sharing information, feelings and thoughts that could stimulate clients to grow in terms of experience and a positive self-concept. In fact, through this partnership, single mothers learned to appreciate themselves and be grateful for what they have. On top of that, single mothers also gained strength from their friends.

Discovering the problems of single mothers through painting and collage making activities offered a positive impact on single mothers. Sharing emotions through paintings, drawings, symbols and patching activities also provided an opportunity for group members to express feelings they felt that not only focusing on expressions through words such as in conventional counseling session. They pointed out further that drawing could help in the diagnosis process and treatment interventions in counseling. More importantly, utilizing artistic modality made it easier for counselors to explore their clients. Continuous involvement of single mothers until the end of Visual Arts Therapy was also a factor in the effectiveness of Visual Arts Therapy. Single mothers found that Visual Arts Therapy helped them deal with their thoughts and emotions. Through each activity they followed in every session enabled them to observe the

continuation of activities and counseling process to provide them with some insights, reduce and solve the problems at hand. In the last session, single mothers could shape the goals they wanted to achieve. In addition to the continuous involvement in visual art therapy sessions, the effectiveness of this therapy was also due to the single mothers who were driven by the desire to change themselves towards a better life. This coincided with the theory of rational emotive behavior therapy (Ellis, 1979) that raising awareness to the individual's thoughts to transform into a more positive individuals (Sapora and Ruhaya, 2013).

Theory of rational emotive behavior therapy (Ellis, 1979) argued that a client was an individual who was reliable, able to understand themselves, lead themselves and had a productive life. Therefore, when single mothers were able to understand the situation themselves, they could immediately addressed the problem. Overall, the use of Visual Arts Therapy followed by these single mothers had demonstrated effectiveness in helping them in cognitive emotion regulation and concern. This further suggested that the use of painting, drawing and pasting were a tool to facilitate the exploration of single mothers to ease them in expressing their thoughts and emotions without hesitation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The use of Visual Arts Therapy was indeed effective in handling the issue of cognitive emotion regulation and concern among single mothers. The efficacy has been demonstrated through paired t-test for cognitive emotion regulation pre-test and post-test and paired t-test for concern pre-test and post. Both of these tests indicated that there were positive changes taking place in the cognitive regulation of emotion and concerns of a single mother after undergoing Visual Arts Therapy. The implications of this study marked that the Visual Arts Therapy could be used as a treatment option to those involved in the rescue.

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