Creative Expression as a Self-Care Strategy for Nurses Working with Women Who Have Experienced Emotional or Physical Trauma

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Purpose
Describe how creative expression can buffer the effects of vicarious trauma while working with women who have experienced emotional or physical violence.

Background
Holistic nursing practice requires the professional nurse to integrate self-care and personal development activities into all aspects of life. Nurses who work closely with trauma survivors must consistently tend to their own well-being.

A growing body of evidence suggests that there are connections between creativity, art, and health. Significant psychological benefits have been associated with artistic endeavors and are attributed to increases in production of neurotransmitters and release of endorphins thought to occur as byproducts of the creative process. When used as a therapeutic self-care strategy, creative activities have been shown to positively influence psychological and emotional health indicators.

Context
In the context of this project, creative expression is synonymous with crafting. Crafting can be therapeutic in that it produces a phenomenon known as “flow.” Flow is that moment in time when you are so completely absorbed in an activity that nothing else seems to matter.

Crafting triggers the flow response. Repetitive hand movements associated with crafting activities produce physiological changes commonly referred to as the relaxation response.

Creation of the Art
- Over a 2-year period, crafting was used as a self-care strategy while facilitating a weekly group activity for women who had experienced violence.
- Purposeful and consistent engagement in creative endeavors outside of the group experience were used on a weekly basis.

Creative Expression Examples
- Crochet, Mosaic, & Bottle Art
- Acrylic Paint
- Stained Glass

Results
- Crafting activities in a variety of art forms were found to induce “flow” or a relaxation response that buffered the potential harmful effects of vicarious trauma.
- Many of the creative expressions generated during this time have been gifted to other women, including nurses who also work with traumatized women.
- Several items were donated to community agencies that provide shelter and support services to abused women and children for use in their annual fundraising activities.

Conclusion
- Crafting activities can bring about physical relaxation and energizing thoughts.
- Crafting as a therapeutic endeavor is a useful self-care tool. Most crafting projects are relatively inexpensive and require little or no specialized training.
- Nurses who regularly engage in creative activities in the form of crafting can use this strategy as a self-care measure to protect and nurture their well-being in professional nursing practice.

Primary References