A realist review of art therapy for clients with depression
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CRD summary
This realist synthesis review concluded that art therapy can be performed successfully in various clinical situations but there was limited evidence for an effect on symptoms or functioning. These conclusions broadly reflect the evidence presented but the inability to identify the best circumstances for art therapy limits the usefulness of the review.

Authors' objectives
To explore and describe how art therapy works for people with depression.

Searching
AMED, CINAHL, PsycINFO and PubMed were searched to September 2010 with an update in February 2012. Search terms were reported. Reference lists were searched for additional studies. Only articles in English were included.

Study selection
Studies that evaluated art therapy exercises in adults (aged 18 to 64) with depression were eligible for the review. Art therapy was defined as creating a piece of art and verbalising the experience. Exercises had to be described in enough detail that they could be replicated. It appeared that studies could be of any design.

Included studies were performed in various in-patient and outpatient settings. Few participant details were reported but some studies involved women with cancer and depression. Interventions were delivered to individuals or groups over various time periods.

The authors did not state how many reviewers selected studies for inclusion.

Assessment of study quality
The authors did not state that they assessed study quality.

Data extraction
Data were extracted on query areas for realist review (therapeutic factors, clinical application and circumstances). It appeared that multiple reviewers were involved in this process.

Methods of synthesis
Therapeutic factors related to healing of depression were identified from the content of papers and reduced to eight broad factors (such as self-exploration, self-expression, communication) by an iterative process. Circumstances (where, with whom and how the therapeutic exercises were done) were analysed in relation to each therapeutic factor to determine which circumstances affected the various factors.

Results of the review
Sixteen studies (521 participants, range one to 135) were included. Four studies were randomised trials.

The most common therapeutic factors were self-expression (nine studies), communication and symbolic thinking (seven studies). Overall, the results indicated that art therapy could be effective in a wide range of circumstances but the limited range of studies restricted the ability to draw conclusions about which techniques and therapeutic situations produced the best outcomes.

Authors' conclusions
Art therapy for people with depression can be performed successfully in a wide variety of clinical situations but there is limited evidence for an effect on symptoms, functioning and activity performance.

CRD commentary
The review question was stated clearly and the review employed methodology designed to address this type of question.
The search was adequate. Inclusion criteria were clear but broad. Study characteristics and review methods were reported in reasonable detail. Study quality was not assessed but it appeared that most of the included studies were at high risk of bias and this should be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

The authors’ conclusions broadly reflect the evidence presented but the inability to identify the best circumstances for art therapy limits the usefulness of the review.

**Implications of the review for practice and research**
The authors did not state any implications for practice and further research.

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