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APPROACHES TO RESTORING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THE WAR-AFFECTED POPULATION OF UKRAINE: ART THERAPY AS A METHOD OF REHABILITATION FOR VETERANS AND CIVILIANS

Abstract. The article demonstrates that the use of art therapy, specifically clay therapy, at the Polissya Hub for Recovery and Art Therapy within the Botanical Garden of Polissya National University of Heroes-Paratroopers, shows significant effectiveness in the recovery process of mental health for veterans and civilians who have experienced military conflicts. This approach not only facilitates psychological recovery but also provides participants with new tools for self-expression and self-awareness, critically important for their social adaptation and integration. Clay therapy is used as a method allowing participants to express their emotions through the creative process of manipulating clay, extending beyond traditional verbal expression. This method promotes deeper emotional release, reduces stress and anxiety levels, and improves overall psychological states. Working with clay also stimulates internal dialogue and aids in resolving personal conflicts, strengthening the personal connection with the surrounding world. Observations of program participants have confirmed that clay therapy has a powerful therapeutic effect, particularly its ability to induce deep reflective processes that help participants achieve profound self-awareness and emotional recovery. These psychological benefits of interacting with clay not only improve participants' psychological well-being but also open new avenues for personal growth and social integration. Based on these observations, it is concluded that clay therapy is not just a creative activity but also an effective means of psychological recovery that can be used to support veterans and civilians. The further implementation and development of such programs have the potential not only to restore individual mental health but also to strengthen the community as a whole, providing participants with important tools for achieving internal harmony and self-improvement.

Keywords: mental health, stress, war, art therapy, rehabilitation, clay, affected population, veterans

Formulation of the problem. In the context of war, the mental health of the affected individuals assumes critical importance for their recovery and integration
into everyday life. Veterans and civilians who have endured warfare often face challenges that may include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and other psychological difficulties. Traditional methods of psychological support can sometimes be insufficient or ineffective for certain individuals, especially when words fail to fully convey the depth of their emotional experiences.

In this context, art therapy emerges not only as an alternative but also as an extraordinarily effective approach to psychological recovery. Through art, the affected individuals have the opportunity to express their feelings and experiences in a form that transcends the boundaries of conventional talk therapy. Art therapy provides them with tools for visualizing their internal states and facilitates psychological unloading, which is key in the process of mental recovery [13; 15].

This article examines the application of art therapy as a rehabilitation method for veterans and civilians, analyzes its effectiveness in the context of military conflicts, and offers practical guidelines for its implementation in psychological and social work [8; 10; 12]. The article also discusses various forms and techniques of art therapy that can be applied to achieve the best results in the psychological recovery process.

One particularly effective form of art therapy that deserves special attention is clay therapy. This method uses clay as a therapeutic tool that allows participants to model and shape the material, which aids not only in creative expression but also in psychological relief. The process of working with clay can be cathartic, allowing the individual to focus on the sensory experience, which distracts from painful memories and promotes emotional stabilization [9; 12].

Clay therapy provides participants the opportunity to "work through" their emotions through direct physical manipulation of clay, which can facilitate deeper self-understanding and self-expression. It is known that such activity can reduce levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Thus, clay therapy becomes not only a means of creative expression but also a tool for psychological rehabilitation, helping to restore internal balance and harmony.

The use of clay therapy in conjunction with other art therapy methods can provide a deeper and more comprehensive recovery of mental health, offering the affected new ways of self-expression and self-realization, as well as a new perspective on their recovery process.

**Analysis of recent research and publications.** Research into approaches for restoring the mental health of the war-affected population in Ukraine, particularly through art therapy, has been actively developing in recent years. Natalia Kovalenko focused on using clay therapy to alleviate anxiety among younger schoolchildren during martial law, demonstrating the effectiveness of this method under stress conditions (Kovalenko N., 2023) [9]. These results suggest the possibility of broader application of clay therapy for different age groups in crisis situations.
Researcher Nadiia Tsumarieva studied the psychotherapeutic properties of clay as a means of finding inner balance (Tsumarieva N., 2019) [16]. Her research highlights the stabilizing impact of clay therapy, which can be especially beneficial for individuals who have experienced war trauma. According to her, clay as a material can assist in restoring inner peace and strengthening psychological states.

Halyna Podolska researched the symbols of stabilizing the state of personality through clay therapy in dealing with traumatic stress (Podolska H., 2022) [14]. She found that creating objects from clay helps participants express their feelings and experiences, which is crucial for recovery after trauma. This approach confirms the importance of art therapy in the comprehensive treatment of mental disorders caused by military conflicts.

Larysa Panchenko examined art therapy within the context of teaching visual arts, particularly ceramics, focusing on its significance for psychological adaptation and recovery (Panchenko L., 2023) [12]. Her work emphasizes how art therapy sessions can contribute not only to psychological but also to social recovery, strengthening communities and providing a space for collective creativity and self-expression. Approaches using ceramics help participants distract from traumatic experiences, focusing on the creative process.

International researchers also make important contributions to understanding the role of art therapy in rehabilitation. For example, in 2020, E. Perez-Saes and colleagues conducted a pilot study showing the positive impact of pottery workshops on the well-being of people with dementia [13]. This indicates the universality of art therapy and its potential to improve the quality of life for various affected groups. Another study, published in 2023 by Nina Capeche and colleagues, explored the use of virtual reality and gesture recognition in clay therapy, opening new technological possibilities for art therapy [2].

Thus, art therapy, especially through the use of clay, plays a key role in restoring the mental health of the war-affected population. Due to its ability to provide expressiveness, emotional relief, and psychological stabilization, this method confirms its effectiveness and importance in therapeutic practices aimed at restoring individual and community resilience [10].

Many aspects of restoring mental health through art therapy, particularly in the context of military conflicts, remain under-researched and require further study. In particular, it is important to investigate the long-term impacts of different forms of art therapy on various age and social groups, as well as to identify the optimal conditions for their effectiveness [2]. There is a need for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which art therapy can contribute to psychological stabilization and emotional recovery, as well as determining factors that influence the success of therapeutic interventions. Also, critically important is the research on the impact of cultural and individual characteristics on the effectiveness of art therapy. Therefore, continued scientific research in this area is necessary for the
development of more targeted and adapted approaches that could consider the diversity of needs of the affected population.

The purpose of this article is to explore and evaluate the various approaches to restoring the mental health of populations affected by war in Ukraine, with a particular focus on art therapy as a rehabilitation method for both veterans and civilians. This study aims to synthesize existing research, identify effective practices in the field of art therapy, and assess its impact on alleviating psychological distress caused by wartime experiences [5; 10. 14]. Additionally, the article seeks to highlight the therapeutic potential of art therapy in fostering emotional resilience, promoting psychological healing, and facilitating social reintegration for those who have endured the traumas of conflict [3; 7; 13]. By examining the implementation and outcomes of art therapy programs, this paper intends to contribute to the broader discourse on post-conflict recovery and the development of tailored therapeutic interventions that address the unique needs of war-affected individuals.

Presenting main material. The restoration of mental health for the war-affected population of Ukraine is a critically important aspect of the country's overall national reconstruction. Military conflicts leave deep psychological scars on both combatants and the civilian population, who experience fears, losses, and constant uncertainty. Traumas caused by war can lead to conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, as well as various somatic disorders, complicating daily life and reducing its quality [1; 5; 11].

Mental health is foundational for an individual's functioning in society, playing a key role in a person's ability to adapt to changes, solve everyday tasks, and maintain strong relationships with others. In the context of the war-affected population, restoring mental health is not only a matter of personal well-being but also a crucial component of social stability and the country's economic recovery [3; 7; 14]. Restoring mental health helps reduce social isolation, improve work productivity, and promote the development of healthy communities capable of self-renewal and growth.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the importance of adequate methods for restoring mental health for veterans and the civilian population affected by the war becomes extremely topical. Among the various approaches to psychological rehabilitation, art therapy, especially through the use of clay therapy, proves to be an effective means of restoration [1; 9].

Clay therapy is a form of art therapy that uses clay as the primary material for creativity. This method allows participants in rehabilitation programs to express their emotions and experiences through the process of forming and creating clay objects. Working with clay is not only a creative but also a deeply therapeutic process that helps reduce stress, anxiety, and depression levels. The physical interaction with clay can induce a sense of calm and focus in participants, offering an opportunity to delve into their inner world and distract from painful memories [6; 15].
Moreover, clay therapy helps veterans and civilians develop new skills and create a sense of accomplishment when they see the results of their work. This approach not only strengthens self-belief and personal power but also stimulates psychological growth and self-discovery, helping participants find new meaning in life and adapt to the social environment after experiencing trauma [1; 4; 16].

Rehabilitation centers that include clay therapy in their recovery programs already operate in various regions of Ukraine. Using this method has shown high effectiveness among veterans who often encounter difficulties in expressing their emotions and experiences through standard verbal methods of psychotherapy. Clay therapy provides them with a unique opportunity to transform internal conflict into physical and visual expression, which is a more accessible and less threatening way of processing experiences [9; 18].

The results demonstrated by clay therapy programs indicate significant improvements in the overall well-being of participants, including increased self-esteem, reduced PTSD symptoms, and overall better social adaptation. These successes confirm the importance of continuing and expanding such programs, which can serve as models for further initiatives in psychosocial rehabilitation in post-conflict recovery contexts [3; 12; 17].

The Polissya Hub for Recovery and Art Therapy, located within the Botanical Garden of Polissya National University of Heroes-Paratroopers, has become a significant support center for veterans and civilians affected by military conflicts. The project, facilitated by Polissya National University, the "BF Help Headquarters Zhytomyr" Charity Organization, and the "Ukrainian Center for Rehabilitation through Pottery," actively uses clay therapy as the primary method of restoring mental health.

Research conducted during 2023-2024 at the Polissya Hub for Recovery and Art Therapy involved 126 participants. Before and after art therapy sessions, surveys were conducted regarding their psychological and somatic well-being, showing positive dynamics in certain indicators.

Figure 1 illustrates the dynamics of somatic manifestations of stress and anxiety in the study participants, who attended therapeutic sessions using pottery. The data are shown in percentages and reflect changes in indicators before and after participation in the sessions.

According to the data, there was a significant decrease in difficulties with concentration: before the sessions, 78% of participants felt problems, while afterward, only 54% did. This indicates a positive impact of the sessions on the ability to focus. Physical discomfort also decreased, though slightly: from 56% to 49%. Trembling, which can be a sign of nervous tension, decreased from 32% to 27%.

Indicators of increased blood pressure (flushing) and heightened readiness to respond also indicate a decrease in stress reactions among participants, decreasing respectively from 34% to 28% and from 58% to 47%. These changes may indicate an overall reduction in anxiety levels among the studied.
Rapid breathing, also an indicator of stress, decreased from 62% to 53%. Regarding headaches, one of the most common symptoms of stress, a reduction from 82% to 68% was recorded. Muscle tension, often accompanied by high levels of stress, also showed positive dynamics, decreasing from 65% to 57%.

Overall, data analysis indicates significant improvement in the condition of participants after participating in therapeutic pottery sessions, which may be associated with the relaxing effect and focus on the creative process, helping to reduce symptoms of stress and anxiety.

Fig. 1. Dynamics of Somatic Manifestations of Stress and Anxiety in Study Participants Before and After Participation in Therapeutic Sessions Using Pottery Art

Source: Authors’ research.

This research illustrates the percentage indicators of various emotional states assessed before and after the sessions. Initial values show a high level of anxiety
(83%), which decreased to 77% after participation in the sessions. This indicates some relief of anxiety symptoms among participants. A similar trend is observed in the reduction of nervousness, which decreased from 85% to 72%.

Radar Chart of Psychosocial Indicators Before and After Classes

![Radar Chart]

Fig.2. Dynamics of Psycho-emotional Manifestations of Stress and Anxiety in Study Participants Before and After Participation in Therapeutic Sessions Using Pottery Art

Source: Authors' research.

The feeling of danger, which may reflect internal tension and increased suspicion, was significantly reduced—from 69% to 53%, highlighting the therapeutic impact of pottery sessions. Negative thoughts also experienced a substantial
reduction, decreasing from 87% to 70%, indicating the effectiveness of the method in combating negative emotional states.

Another key indicator is the sensation of emotional tension, which decreased from 86% to 68%. This may indicate a reduction in overall emotional burden and an increase in emotional resilience. Expectations of negative outcomes also decreased from 53% to 47%, reinforcing the hypothesis of a decrease in pessimistic views of the future among participants.

Self-criticism, often a result of internal stress and dissatisfaction with oneself, decreased from 88% to 67%, demonstrating an improvement in self-acceptance and a reduction in internal conflict. Finally, the reduction of emotional suppression, which reflects the ability to suppress one's feelings, dropped from 53% to 39%, possibly indicating greater emotional openness and authenticity after the sessions.

These data indicate a significant positive impact of pottery art on the psycho-emotional state of individuals experiencing stress and anxiety, confirming the effectiveness of art therapy in minimizing psycho-emotional discomfort.

One positive case that reflects the effectiveness of this approach is related to the experience of a former military personnel who struggled with symptoms of PTSD and depression for a long time. After several months of regular participation in clay therapy sessions, this veteran noted a significant improvement in his emotional state, a decrease in anxiety, and an increase in motivation for daily activities. The process of manipulating clay allowed him to express his inner experiences and conflicts, which were difficult to articulate in words.

This method not only facilitated the reduction of psychological tension but also stimulated personal development through the creation of personal art objects, which became symbols of his internal changes and achievements. The feeling of engagement in the creative process and the ability to see and hold the results of his work significantly enhanced his self-esteem and belief in his capabilities.

Specialists at the Hub, involved in conducting clay therapy sessions, confirm that such changes are typical for many participants. They note that working with clay stimulates emotional recovery, helps resolve internal conflicts, and assists project participants in living in the "here and now," improving the quality of their lives.

Thus, the Polissya Hub for Recovery and Art Therapy has already become an example of the successful implementation of art-therapeutic methods in psychological rehabilitation and demonstrates the potential for further development and expansion of such programs in Ukraine and beyond.

Conclusions. The application of art therapy, particularly clay therapy, at the Polissya Hub for Recovery and Art Therapy located within the Botanical Garden of the Polissya National University of Heroes-Paratroopers, demonstrates high effectiveness in restoring the mental health of veterans and civilians who have experienced military conflicts. This approach not only facilitates psychological
recovery but also provides participants with new tools for self-expression and self-
discovery, which are critically important for their social adaptation and integration.

Clay therapy, as a method of art therapy, is used at the Hub to help participants
express their emotions through the creative process of manipulating clay, often
going beyond the limits of conventional verbal expression and promoting deeper
emotional release. This not only reduces stress and anxiety levels but also improves
the overall psychological state of the person. Simultaneously, working with clay
stimulates internal dialogue and aids in resolving personal conflicts, strengthening
the personal connection with the surrounding world.

Observations of program participants show that clay therapy has a powerful
therapeutic effect, including the ability to induce deep reflective processes that help
participants achieve self-awareness and emotional recovery. These psychological
benefits of interacting with clay not only improve participants' mental states but also
open new pathways for personal growth and social integration.

Based on these observations, it can be concluded that clay therapy is not just
a creative activity but an effective means of psychological rehabilitation that can be
used to support veterans and civilians in the post-conflict period. The further
implementation and development of such programs have the potential not only to
restore individual mental health but also to strengthen the community as a whole,
providing participants with important tools for achieving internal harmony and self-
improvement.

The Polissya Hub for Recovery and Art Therapy of the Polissya National
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population affected by military conflicts. The project was implemented with the
support of the Polissya National University, the "BF Help Headquarters Zhytomyr"
Charity Organization, and the "Ukrainian Center for Rehabilitation through Pottery,"
where clay therapy was actively used as the primary method of restoring mental
health.

The research was conducted during 2023-2024 at the Polissya Hub for
Recovery and Art Therapy. A total of 126 participants were involved in the study.
Before and after the art therapy sessions, surveys were conducted regarding their
psychological and somatic well-being, revealing positive dynamics in certain
indicators. The study obtained data on the dynamics of somatic manifestations of
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