

Biblio/poetry therapy with other expressive art therapies in overcoming existential crisis

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Abstract

The existential crisis has accompanied mankind since its beginnings, especially in the present day, in which the question of the meaning and quality of existence is becoming increasingly pressing, both on an individual and social level. Although the term crisis implies a state of dissatisfaction and distress along with associated emotions such as fear, uncertainty, sadness, hopelessness, etc., this state can also be a motivator for a change of perspective and taking a proactive role in one's own life. In this sense, bibliotherapy or poetry therapy can play an auxiliary role, as they indirectly encourage creativity, imagination, insight and consideration of possible goals and coping strategies for unfavourable life situations. To promote sensitivity, motivation, and an easier interpretation of personal experiences, especially for people with difficulties in verbal communication, the literary text can be used in combination with some other artistic media such as music, sound, movement, dance, drawing, painting, modelling, etc. In this case, it is a kind of a multimodal expressive arts therapy in which different art forms are integrated into a therapeutic relationship. As bibliotherapy and poetry therapy have a large number of contents and themes that can be processed, the other arts make it possible to support affective charging, personal analysis, and cognitive elaboration. In this sense, existing and evolving future multimodal approaches should be considered that incorporate literary texts in combination with some other artistic media in the context of coping with an existential crisis caused by various psychosocial, health and/or socio-global challenges.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, poetry therapy, expressive art therapies, existential crisis, integrative multimodal approach, creativity, well-being

Introduction

An existential crisis is often triggered by a significant event in a person's life, such as a psychological or physical trauma, separation, a loss, the death of a loved one, reaching a significant age, an illness, unrealistic expectations, poverty, etc., and it is usually connected with deep questioning and reflection about the fundamental nature of one's life, meaning and purpose (Andrews, 2016; Negoită, 2021). The existential crisis has accompanied mankind since its beginnings, especially in modern times, when the question of the meaning and quality of existence is becoming more and more pressing, both on an individual and societal level (Kissane, 2012). Unfavourable outcomes of such a state are personal dissatisfaction and despair, as well as related emotions such as fear, insecurity, sadness, shame, hopelessness, etc. In such a state, people explore and use various ways to help themselves and cope with the undesirable consequences of an existential crisis. Some of them are inappropriate such as substance abuse,

avoidance, self-harm, violence, isolation, negative self-talk and others (Butėnaitė et al., 2016; Senkevich, 2016).

In contrast to these maladaptive behaviours, people throughout history have also resorted to positive coping strategies found within religion, philosophy, spirituality, psychology, safe-care and self-help approaches and, of course, art (Kim et al., 2014; Sakai et al., 2019). Namely, the use of sounds, movements, colors, images, words, symbols and metaphors represent primary forms of communication and ways of exploring oneself and the world around us, both on a historical-cultural and ontological level. Experiences induced by art reveal that sensory perception is often accompanied by a strong emotional response that goes beyond everyday awareness and reality. This not only provides immediate pleasure, but also encourages emotional reorganization. In addition, a work of art can revive emotions from previous positive existential experiences and thus mitigate the intensity of current unfavourable situations. By interweaving various experiences, art contributes to emotional integrity and life satisfaction but also fosters transcendence, creativity and reflection, which can lead to appropriate existential choices and existential well-being (Asakavičiūtė, 2018; Funch, 2021). This highlights not only the aesthetic value but also the effective and therapeutic significance of artistic media, forming the foundation for the development and practice of expressive art therapies.

Expressive art therapies

The therapeutic role of artistic media began to be observed early in the development of human civilization, especially in the context of magical rituals, ceremonies, and religious practices. Throughout history, various artists, philosophers, and physicians have explored the use of art in healing and have found that various artistic forms can serve as a means of emotional catharsis, encouragement, soothing of the soul, as well as an aid in the treatment of various illnesses. The development of scientific methodology and the collaboration of professionals from different disciplines have led to increased practical application and scientific research aimed at defining appropriate theoretical frameworks and intervention techniques, as well as assessment tools in this field (Hinz, 2020; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). In addition, numerous international associations were founded in the mid-20th century to provide a global forum for dialogue, professional development, the establishment of contemporary principles within psychotherapeutic practice, and the promotion of the use of artistic media to support mental, physical, and spiritual health. At its core, this approach integrates three fundamental concepts: symbol, imagination and creativity (Bridges, 2022). A symbol, whether mythic, artistic, religious or abstract, has the ability to unite unconscious and conscious contents as well as instinctual and spiritual forces. The experience of symbols is imbued with affectivity and dynamism, and the interpretation of their multi-layered dimensions is tied to the process of imagination. In therapeutic contexts, creative imagination facilitates the formation of new connections and relationships to the traces of experiences that begin to overwhelm and impede desirable life responses. In this context, emphasis is placed on the process of creativity, not only in the productive and operational sense, but also in the area of discovering new insights directed to problem solving (Rahman et al., 2024).

Engaging with artistic media and personal creative ideas fosters a sense of control over circumstances and situations. Similarly, participation in group activities helps to alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation, while also enhancing social interactions. Moreover,

tailoring therapeutic session techniques and structures to align with a client's preferences and needs can further enhance relaxation, satisfaction, and acceptance (Williams, 2022).

In light of these observations and the findings of previous research, expressive art-therapies emerge as a valuable diagnostic and therapeutic approach for addressing existential crises. Through the reception, creation, or interpretation of work of art, these therapies may help to evoke or elaborate various aspects of traumatic experiences especially in situations when verbal communication is limited or unfeasible.

According to the *National Coalition of Creative Arts Therapies Associations* (NCCATA), various therapeutic approaches can be explored within the following disciplines: art therapy, music therapy, dance movement therapy, drama therapy, and poetry/bibliotherapy (Miholić & Martinec, 2013). Each of these disciplines has its own set of professional standards and required qualifications.

Art therapy (AT) is a form of psychotherapy that uses the creative art process (drawing, painting, and modeling) as a means of expression and communication. *The American Art Therapy Association* (AATA) defines AT as the therapeutic use of artistic expression, visual media, and the creative process, where the client's response to the artwork created or perceived is viewed as a reflection of his or her personal development, abilities, personality, interests, concerns, and conflicted relationships (Miholić & Martinec, 2013). Jung created an appropriate theoretical framework for this therapeutic approach, seeing the goal of therapy as the release of creative forces that become catalysts for change (Borowsky Junge, 2016). Margaret Naumburg, one of the pioneers of AT, recognized that thoughts and feelings that emerge from the unconscious and preconscious can be expressed through images long before than by verbalization. In that case, better understanding of induced experience can be encouraged by adding a story, description or meaning to own or perceived artwork (Ivanović et al., 2014). In the frame of therapy process a wide range of themes can be used to address various emotional, cognitive and social dimensions of the individual. The choice of theme, technique, and materials for artistic expression depends on the dominant issues of the traumatic experience or the individual's desire to process specific areas that are unresolved or distressing.

Music therapy (MT) is also a valuable discipline which, according to the World Federation of Music Therapy (WFMT), is defined as a form of intervention that improves the physical, psychological, social, communicative, cognitive and spiritual dimensions of a person through the use of music and its elements (tone, rhythm, tempo, melody, harmony, etc.). MT includes a wide range of interventions, e.g. receptive music listening, imitation, musical improvisation, singing, rhythmic activities, combination of music and guided imagination, composing, etc. (Rolvjord & Stige, 2015). In the context of MT, listening or playing a musical structure affects the psychophysiological functions as well as processes of introspection and emotional expression. The use of music in therapeutic conditions can also provide a subtle possibilities for transformation of anger, aggression and sadness through imagination, aesthetic experience and self-expression in the process of experimentation and play (Montelo & Coons, 1998). Music has a direct effect on neurological system that leads to changes in bodily responses that are under the influence of the autonomic nervous system. In this sense, music can have a stimulating or relaxing effect. As music is a non-figurative form of artistic expression, it allows free associations and freedom of expression. Likewise, due to its meditative character, music is often used as an additional stimulating and supportive tool when using other artistic media.

Dance movement therapy (DMT) involves the use and analysis of various aspects of bodily experience and body expression such as movement, facial expressions, gestures, touch, posture, etc. Similar to other body-oriented psychotherapies, DMT is based on the assumption that body movements reflect the emotional state of the individual and that changes in movement patterns lead to changes in psychosocial experience (Lauffenburger, 2020). Since the body is the dominant medium in this therapeutic approach, its application can influence the perception of physiological sensations, the bodily expression of emotional states, the expression of unconscious impulses, the creation of new behavioral strategies through the discovery of new movement patterns and qualities, and the integration of physical, cognitive and emotional aspects of functioning (Martinec, 2013). During therapy process various specific techniques such as imitation, mirroring, body symbolization, exploring through movement, authentic movement and others can be combined (Martinec, 2013; Tortora, 2019). DMT can also take into account different variables that are not in the focus in other therapies such as changes in movement quality, personal movement patterns, using of space, kinesphere, kinaesthetic empathy, etc., in relation with emotional, physical and symbolic experiences.

Drama therapy is the intentional use of dramatic and/or theatrical processes to achieve therapeutic goals. Under the safe conditions of the therapeutic milieu, creative dramatization and role-playing encourage experimentation and trying out different roles, rejecting, correcting and changing these roles without long-term commitments and consequences (Jennings et al., 2005). The most important process in the application of drama is creative dramatization, which aims to increase self-awareness, body-awareness, imagination, and understanding of social interaction. The use of DT is based on a prepared literary text (e.g. story, drama, game show, fairy tale, myth) in a way to be used: a) the original dramatic text, b) the adaptation of a prose text into a dramatic text, c) creating one's own text by an individual or a group, d) improvisation based on the theme of the dramatic template that was previously used. Various media can also be used in the therapeutic process, such as puppets, associations, pantomime, costuming, writing, voice variations, drawing, body movements, etc. (Behera et al., 2020).

Bibliotherapy is the intentional use of literary texts—such as prose, poetry, fairy tales, myths, and legends—and literary devices, including metaphor, simile, allegory, rhyme, and rhythm, in therapy, education, and rehabilitation. The goal is to evaluate and address various emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal issues across individuals of all ages (Kortner-Aiex, 1993). A literary text uniquely combines form (*lexis*) and content (*logos*)—structure and meaning, experience and expression—and serves as a reflection of the value system within a specific socio-cultural context. As such, literary texts act as integrated stimuli that evoke diverse psychological responses in individuals, including identification, projection, introjection, catharsis, and insight. Insight, in particular, is a cornerstone of the therapeutic process. Its value lies in enabling readers to observe and reflect on their own reactions to a text, thereby fostering awareness of their problems, which helps in resolving them and preparing for future life challenges. Insight represents a critical self-examination facilitated by the text, through which individuals deeply assess and evaluate their own attitudes and actions (Peterkin & Grewal, 2018; Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2019). In bibliotherapy, additional techniques such as journaling, creating memory books, life maps, time capsules, videography, and comics can also be used. It also can assist in deconstructing problems and constructing unique, personalized solutions for the client and others involved in the problem situation.

Finally, expressive art therapies can also be considered as an "integrative approach", i.e. a "multimodal approach" that combines two or more artistic media to promote the perception of

different life situations, emotional maturation and interpersonal relationships (Malchiodi & Ginns-Guenberg, 2012). The choice of therapeutic approach or their combination depends on the defined problem area, the client's preferences and motivation and the goal of the therapy program. Aesthetic criteria and the person's intrinsic sensory receptivity should also be taken into account when selecting the content and protocol of each individual therapy session. This means that a person's conscious and latent tendencies to receive and send messages through a particular artistic medium must be recognized. In addition, other related and complementary approaches and techniques may be used, such as progressive psychophysical relaxation, breathing exercises, guided imagination, touch, massage, aromatherapy, etc, to promote giving in therapy and support the body-mind unity.

Interplay of biblio/poetry therapy and other expressive arts therapies in overcoming existential crisis

Although an existential crisis often involves feelings of dissatisfaction and despair, it can also serve as a catalyst for shifting perspectives and adopting a more proactive approach to our lives. In this context, bibliotherapy or poetry therapy can provide valuable support by indirectly fostering creativity, imagination, self-awareness, and reflection on potential goals and coping strategies for challenging life situations. To enhance sensitivity, motivation, and the interpretation of personal experiences, these approaches can be effectively combined with other artistic media (Dunn-Snow, 1997; De Vries et al., 2017).

For example, various scientific studies have investigated the effectiveness of using different types of literary texts in combination with art therapy. Some of them have shown that the combination of these two approaches is beneficial for grieving children with limited developmental capacity for expressing difficult emotions (Ridley & Frache, 2020, Robinson, 2022). In this context, the combined use of bibliotherapy and art therapy can be of great benefit as it utilises aesthetic distance to help clients identify and process the emotions they resonate with during the grieving process. This approach allows clients to externalise their feelings, whether through their own creative work or through a character in a story they have read (Hunt, 2006). Some other authors (Malchiodi & Ginns-Guenberg, 2008; Leggett, 2009) recommend a wide range of books, such as *The Way I Fell* (Cain, 2000), which illustrate children experience a variety of emotions. They can help the child learn about the common language and experiences that each emotion evokes, which can lead to a dialogue about feelings. During the therapy process, children can also be encouraged to draw different themes related to their experiences, helping them to understand their emotions and how certain situations affect them. Creating scrapbooks, puppets, collages, mobiles or images from photographs can also be used to process the main elements of the story. Interpretations and discussions about a work of art can be carried out by exploring meaning and metaphor of each line, point, colour, and image. Interpretations can be done in collaboration with the child by asking questions to help the children with self-awareness. The questions also help them to draw conclusions about what they have drawn and how it relates to their personal experiences.

In a study conducted in the paediatric oncology department, the use of fairy tales, storytelling and patients' own stories, together with art expression, has shown that drawing and painting contain concrete and projective elements that convey the interpretation of objects, feelings, experiences, actions and ideas (Miholić, 2012). Figure 1, for example, shows a painted mandala of a 14-year-old boy with dg. *osteosarcoma maxillae I. dex.* in which it can be seen that the

existential anxiety is sublimated by the creative act and replaced by a feeling of comfort, lightness and satisfaction.



"I feel like a light feather carried over miles by a light summer breeze. Perce is in the air, flying between the turquoise sea and the sunset. The sun is setting, and the colors of the sunset are beautiful."

"I feel like I'm walking on a long sandy beach, swimming in the sea and watching the beautiful sunset against the colorful sky"

Figure 1. Visual metaphor induced by a literary text

According to Hinz (2020), several important conceptual consensus points have emerged in research on the integrative use of art therapy and bibliotherapy. One of these is the reflective distance and mediators in art therapy, which give the client space for indirect processing, and without which the experience is likely to be too immediate and absorbing to allow contemplation. In bibliotherapy, the reading material is the intermediary object that can create the client a sense of a safe distance for the client because the issue is not yet being confronted with the subject. Another important point of conceptual consensus is the state of "flow" or increased focus of attention, the loss of a sense of time, the feeling of satisfaction and great joy when clients can master a situation that was previously a challenge.

A combination of bibliotherapy and music is also being examined. One of the possibilities is the intersections between bibliotherapy and *Social and Emotional Learning* (SEL). As Watts and Piña (2023) point out, many music educators already incorporate children's literature into their lessons, and bibliotherapy offers the opportunity to enrich these activities with greater depth and intentionality. Practical strategies should follow some recommendations for specific books aligned with the five components of the SEL framework: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Having in mind well-being in college students' population, Yücesan and Şendurur (2017) provided an integrative program with music therapy, poetry therapy and creative drama. They found that the program had a positive impact on general self-esteem, social self-esteem, academic self-esteem and parental self-esteem compared to a control group of students. Also, Glassman (1991) described very complex changes in a girl with a brain injury who had very powerful reaction to different song lyrics while participating in a music therapy group. Identification with various song lyrics stimulated discussion and enabled her to express her feelings of anger and frustration and the problems she was struggling with. Another important change was that she became less self-centered, demanding and manipulative, more aware of the external environment, more cooperative and accepting of problems beyond her control. She also managed to find out a new willingness to deal with other circumstances and a strong desire to find direction and meaning in her life. Similarly, Gladding and Mazza (1983) described that the use of poetry and/or popular music, as helpful adjunctive techniques in group counseling, can facilitate the group process by

providing a non-threatening means for expression. The lyrical expressions of songs can evoke feelings in clients in relation to current conflicts. In a frame of group setting, this can provide validation or universalization of feelings as well as a springboard for group discussion.

Storytelling refers to the skill of telling stories, drawing attention to different senses, imagination and emotional responses (Gupta and Jha, 2022). It also stimulates neurological activation. Namely, Stephens, Silbert and Hasson (2010) found that listening to stories activates mirror neurons, with the listener mirroring the brain activity of the storyteller and the kinaesthetic activity of the characters, which can also help stimulate empathy. In addition, storytelling activates cortical, parietal, subcortical and frontal parts of the brain, leading to more successful interpretation, retention and recall of complex concepts and abstract ideas (Gupta and Jha, 2022). However, storytelling is not only about listening to stories, but also about the creation and telling of stories by the participants of the therapy program, which can be stimulated in various ways. In this sense, an interesting method can be *kamishibai* (jap. kah-mee-shee-bye), a traditional Japanese method of storytelling that uses illustrated cards placed in a small framed wooden box called *butai* (Marciniak and Dobińska, 2023). It has almost the same elements as traditional theatre as it contains characters and narratives; however, unlike traditional theatre, the performance is presented with images, voice and sound effects produced by the narrator or musical instruments (Aerila et al., 2022). Vojnović (2024), for example, attempted to assess the value of using this technique in working with children with developmental disabilities on a group of 6 children aged 9 to 11 years with autism spectrum disorders or ADHD. The study participants were encouraged to tell their own stories by sequencing sentences, using the story "*Dinki*" based on the story of the "*Ugly duckling*", inserting pictures into the *kamishibai* frame, using musical instruments, and adding facial expressions and gestures. The results showed that the combination of the above techniques had a positive effect on promoting assertiveness, self-expression, group cohesion and cooperation in the children who participated in this therapeutic program.

Drama therapy uses scripts, stories, and myths to evoke and explore themes or archetypal material. In this context, the literary text serves as a stimulus for performing improvised or scripted roles, embodying characters, or portraying oneself within a fictional reality. This interplay creates a strong foundation for bridging drama therapy and bibliotherapy in therapeutic practices. Research in this area supports the thesis that the collaboration of these two approaches can contribute to a better understanding of oneself and social relationships in different life situations. For example, Jacobs (2005) conducted a study to evaluate the impact of dramatic arts combined with bibliotherapy as part of the Drama Discovery curriculum in a middle school class of eleven students with emotional/behavioural disabilities and one student with delinquent behaviours. She noticed that students with emotional/behavioural disabilities often have low self-efficacy when it comes to explaining their own disabilities, coping with the label of having a disability, and managing the general issues that come with having a disability. The most important factor explored in the qualitative study was whether students' self-efficacy in relation to their own emotional disability can be influenced by reading and acting out characters with similar problems. The data collection method for this qualitative study included observations, field notes, tape recordings, student journals, and interviews. The author wrote a pre-conceptual map to initiate the study. The results confirmed the author's hypothesis and showed a positive effect of the implemented curriculum on students' self-efficacy in understanding and coping with their emotional disabilities as well as their own exceptionality. Regarding the educational environment, Başarı and Ayhan (2021), based on a synthesis of various research, conclude that certain studies have shown the significant impact of integrating

creative drama and bibliotherapy techniques in education. These studies highlight the importance of these methods in helping individuals to discover themselves, gain insights and explore previously unrecognized aspects of their identity. In particular, creative drama and bibliotherapy have been observed to enhance individuals' decision-making and problem-solving abilities throughout their educational journey. In addition, these techniques play a crucial role in developing students' social-emotional skills and promote effective communication. Creative drama and bibliotherapy have proven to be particularly effective in cultivating empathy among students, further enhancing their value in educational contexts.

In the frame of drama therapy and bibliotherapy body, puppets, mask, costuming and (panto)mime also can be used. In that context some picture books are recommended such as *"Dear Pritni, come to me sometime"* as an example of combining drama, literary art and bibliotherapy in early childhood education focused on emotional expressions and emotion regulation skills in day care. Emotion-related actions in various learning situations are explored using a pony hand puppet named Pritney. Eight distinct themes serve as entry points for examining how a pedagogical hand puppet and a bibliotherapeutic approach can support a child's growth and development in various daycare scenarios. Focus is also on fostering socioemotional skills such as: 1) self-knowledge and self-awareness, 2) self-regulation, 3) social awareness, 4) relationship skills and 5) responsible decision-making. In addition, this book offers some ideas how children's literature can facilitate discussions on challenging topics, such as grief and death (Suvilehto, 2020).

On the same assumption one more study was carried out regarding coping with malignant diseases in children (Miholić, 2012). For research purpose a therapy program was carried out with the using of storytelling, role-playing, drawings and puppets made by children on childhood oncology unit. Figure 2 shows some artworks by an 8-year-old boy who with dg. osteosarcoma femoris lat., which deals with the theme of friendship. After reading a story about two friends, he made a puppet and described it as funny, cheerful and with a hobby of table tennis, which it would play when he leaves the hospital. By naming the puppet after himself, he identified with her and placed her in an imaginary world of sport, victory, friendship and fun, anticipating a positive future after hospitalization.

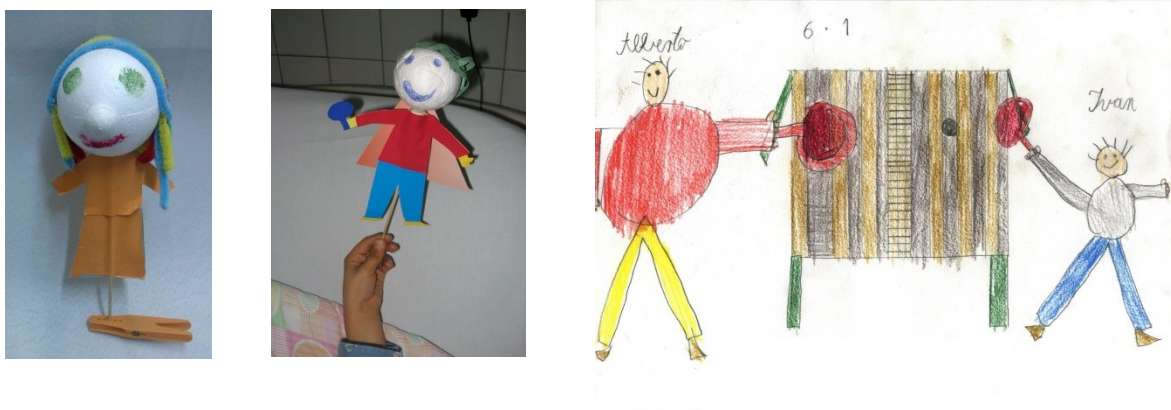


Figure 2. Child's artwork induced by integrative expressive art-therapies program

The body, movement and dance can also be used as part of different multimodal approaches. For example, we can cite the picture book *"Telling stories – creating stories"* (Velički, 2013) in which the literary text and the pictorial representation encourage identification, the imagination

of a drawn figure and the physical imitation or mirroring of a perceived animal (Figure 3). This can only be the beginning for the further processing of the personal state and feelings, as a trigger for the development of further personal stories in which the child moves away from the depicted figure and embarks on its own journey in which it explores its bodily experiences, the emotions located in the body, the causes of its feelings and ways of better adapting to the situations surrounding it.

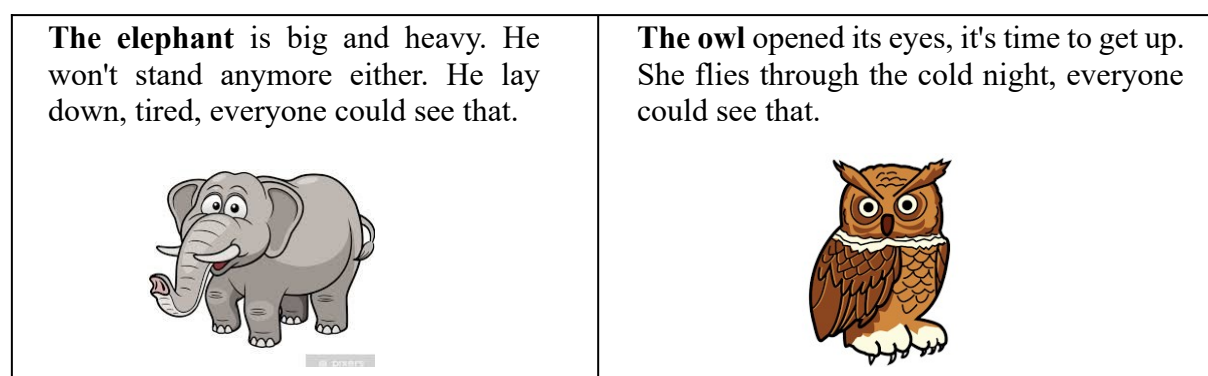


Figure 3. Excerpt from the picture book "Telling stories - creating stories"

The results of the various research confirm that various pieces of art can be combined, which promotes their synergetic effect. The similarity or difference of artistic media strengthens the flow of new associations, ideas and memories. Their regulating effect is supported by the collaboration of therapist and client in a therapeutic alliance in which the therapist is given the unique privilege of being with his client in one of the most meaningful experiences that person will ever have (Bugental, 1965). The therapist who approaches his role in this work with genuine humility and respect for the individuality of his client will ensure that he does nothing to contaminate or interfere with his patient's experience and processing of the existential crisis. When the power and richness of artistic media are additionally utilized in the therapeutic process, an adaptive response to each challenge can promote equanimity, peace, and fulfilment, while a sustained engagement with life, creativity, and joy can be additionally encouraged (Kissane, 2012). To enhance the combination of bibliotherapy and poetry therapy with other areas of expressive art-therapies in overcoming existential crisis, some guidelines can be suggested, such as that the therapeutic process should be tailored to the client's age, abilities, and personal preferences. For example, when working with children, the use of puppets, drawing, storytelling, and body expression can support emotional understanding and regulation. Also, clients should be encouraged to interpret both read and created content through guided reflection (e.g., by asking questions about the meaning of characters, content, or actions) to connect artistic expression with personal experiences. Finally, therapy should enable clients to create, write and/or verbally express their own stories to promote coherence, control and meaning, especially in the face of life crises.

Conclusion

Bibliotherapy and poetry therapy encompass a wide range of content and themes, offering opportunities for profound exploration. Complementary art forms enhance these approaches by

supporting emotional expression, personal reflection, and cognitive processing. The use of various artistic media creates a safe space for expressing and processing inner experiences, while their integration stimulates creativity, a sense of belonging, and the development of a positive self-image. The therapeutic potential lies in the symbolic and multilayered nature of art, which enables the creation of meaning and the reshaping of personal perspectives and life stories. In this context, existing and emerging multimodal approaches should be considered, integrating literary texts with other artistic media to address existential crises stemming from various psychosocial, health-related, and global socio-economic challenges.

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