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The Process of an Innovative Approach to Counseling: Appreciation of Beauty Group Therapy (ABGP)

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Abstract: This article describes a new and creative form of group therapy: Appreciation of Beauty Group Therapy (ABGT). The process of ABGT demonstrates its potential benefits through the application of aesthetic interventions in mental health treatment settings. Prior research indicates that aesthetic experiences can improve symptoms of mental health issues such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The article describes the lead author's experience of designing and delivering group therapy with a focus on appreciation of beauty, with mindfulness exercises, to assist individuals with a wide variety of mental health diagnoses.

Keywords: Appreciation of beauty; Mindfulness; Natural beauty; Artistic beauty; Moral beauty; Beautiful ideas

“The secret of happiness is very simply this: let your interests be as wide as possible, and let your reactions to the things and persons that interest you be as far as possible friendly rather than hostile.”—Bertrand Russell (1930, p. 140)

1. Why Beauty in Clinical Practice?

Sigmund Freud wrote, "But in the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we are unable to love" (1914, p. 85).

Here Freud is describing the relationship between the ability to love and one's mental health. Because the ability to love correlates with an individual's mental health condition (Fromm, 1956/2006), learning to love the beauty of the world could improve one's mental health.

In *Existential Psychotherapy*, Irvin Yalom (1980) stated that, in clinical practice, it is often productive to address the issue of the ability to love in his patients. Drawing ideas from philosopher Martin Buber, humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow, and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, Yalom emphasized the importance of developing the attitude of loving as a “mode of relating with the world” in order to cope with the difficulty of human existence from the existential perspective. Erich Fromm stated in the book *The Art of Loving*, “If I truly love one person I love all persons,



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I love the world, I love life.” (Fromm, 1956/2006, p.43). Empirical research has shown that there is a high correlation between a person’s level of the trait of appreciation of beauty and loving all humanity (Diessner et al., 2013). Philosophers of aesthetics have also argued that love and beauty are closely related. Notably, Socrates, in Plato’s *The Symposium*, stated that beauty is the object of all love (Diessner, 2019). What if engagement with beauty could lead to loving the world, and thus lead to better mental health in an individual?

Research on the psychology of beauty and neuroaesthetics has been growing in recent years. Experiencing sorrowful beauty engages the part of the brain related to reward: medial orbito-frontal cortex (mOFC). Sorrowful beauty also engages the brain region related to empathy, which are the middle cingulate cortex (MCC) and the supplementary motor area (SMA) (Ishizu & Zeki, 2017). Research has shown that when individuals with depression experience aesthetic chills, it promotes positive change in their negative self-beliefs (Schoeller et al., 2024). When veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were induced to experience a sense of awe by the beauty of nature, they experienced a 32% reduction in PTSD symptoms (Craig et al., 2018). One of the most common causes of awe is the *beauty* of nature (Yaden et al., 2018).

Well-being and Beauty Experiences

It is well known that the beauty of nature has a positive effect on our well-being and mental health. A recent meta-analytic review (Bettman et al., 2025) found substantial effects of being in nature on alleviating symptoms of mental illness.

A recent systematic review on the influence of the arts on well-being found that the arts had affective, social, cognitive, self-transformative, and resilience-building effects (Trupp et al., 2025). This study found the strongest evidence for improvements in eudemonic well-being—the sense of meaning, purpose, and personal growth in life. And, of course, one of the most important aspects of the arts is to provide experiences of beauty (Danto, 2003).

Moral beauty is the cause of the positive emotion *elevation* (Haidt, 2003; Pohling & Diessner, 2016). Elevation leads to well-being in at least two ways: a) when feeling elevation a person wants to become a better human being, and 2) it creates a desire to be

prosocial and help others. Elevation is a powerful self-transcendent emotion.

One of the most effective ways to increase well-being is through experiencing the self-transcendent emotions. These emotions lift us out of ourselves and help us build social capital, as demonstrated in the Broaden and Built theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001). Recent research has shown that even brief experiences of natural beauty or artistic beauty or moral beauty cause an increase in these self-transcendent emotions: love, compassion, elevation, gratitude, awe, wonder, curiosity, and forgiveness (Mattheiss et al., 2025). Although all these emotions are other-centered and not self-centered, one of the side effects of feeling such emotions is eudaimonic happiness.

Hypothesis/Goal

Our general hypothesis is that, by providing appreciation of beauty group therapy, clients will improve their mental health and well-being. However, for this specific paper the goal is to provide an explanation of the process of performing Appreciation of Beauty Group Therapy such that other counselors could adapt it to their own practice.

2. Method

Participants

The lead author has conducted group therapy with 5 cohort groups. The first four cohort groups were based out of a community counseling clinic and were done in both in-person and telehealth settings. The latest cohort was recruited from a private practice counseling clinic. Each group consisted of 3 - 8 adult participants. Due to strict confidentiality, no demographic information will be reported here. No objective research data were collected, as this is a case study report purely focused on the process and procedure of the group therapy sessions.

Procedure

The lead author conducted group therapy based on evidence of the effect of beauty on mental health. Group therapy was conducted in a community mental health clinic setting where the majority of clients received Medicaid. Medicaid is a federal and state program in the United States to help cover medical costs for individuals with limited income (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). Individuals who receive Medicaid in the US tend to show a higher likelihood of suffering from severe mental health issues

compared to the general population (Cummings et al., 2013).

The group therapy was conducted weekly, for a total of 90 minutes each session, for a total of 10 sessions, both in-person and telehealth settings. The group therapy addressed four areas of beauty experience: moral behavior (inner beauty, human virtue), nature, art, and ideas. There was an introduction session, followed by two sessions that addressed moral beauty; then two sessions concerning beauty in nature; followed by two sessions about artistic beauty (painting, music, architecture, etc.); then two sessions about beautiful ideas; and the final session consisted of reflections on the therapeutic experience.

The initial group therapy session introduced the idea of the relevance of beauty in improving one's mental health, and participants completed the Engagement with the Beauty Scale (Diessner et al., 2008), as well as the WHO-5 Well-being Index (World Health Organization, 2024). The first session of the group focused on psychoeducation concerning the correlation between appreciation of beauty and one's sense of well-being, as well as introducing mindfulness, which has positive benefits for several mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia (Goldberg et al, 2018). The initial group session also introduced the idea that beauty and love are closely connected, as stated in the Plato's *The Symposium* (1989); and in which Socrates claims beauty is the object of all love (Diessner, 2019). The group ends with an experiential exercise to appreciate beauty, utilizing mindfulness, by participants watching a video clip that aimed to induce an experience of beauty.

The second and third sessions addressed moral beauty. The sessions focused on psychoeducation of the relevance of moral beauty in one's sense of well-being and personal growth. The sessions also introduced the idea of how experiences of feeling awe could benefit one's sense of well-being and induce prosocial behavior (Keltner, 2023). The sessions continued with experiential exercises of participants watching video clips that potentially induce a moral beauty experience, readings of poetry and quotations related to moral beauty, as well as practicing loving kindness meditation. Participants were encouraged to describe their own past and recent experiences of moral beauty.

Participants also watched a video about the

benefits of mindfulness and psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility is defined as an ability to perceive one's emotion nonjudgmentally and without avoidance, which allows an individual to participate in behaviors that align with their values. Psychological flexibility has been shown to positively correlate with a sense of well-being, as well as shown to have a negative correlation with depression and anxiety (Masuda & Tully, 2011).

The fourth and fifth sessions introduced the relevance of beauty in nature to mental health and well-being. Participants learned about scientific evidence of the relationship between appreciation of beauty in nature and one's sense of well-being. The benefits, and how-to, of forest bathing, *shinrin-yoku*, (Hansen et al., 2017) were discussed. The importance of mindfulness was again emphasized during attempts to appreciate beauty in nature. Meditation practice, such as mountain meditation, may be practiced (Palouse Mindfulness, n.d.). Ideas from philosophical thinkers, such as Iris Murdoch's un-selfing, were introduced and discussed to explore the connection between experiencing beauty in nature and a sense of transcendence (Diessner, 2019; Mattheiss et al., 2025). Participants were encouraged to describe their own past and recent experiences of nature's beauty.

The sixth and seventh sessions focused on artistic beauty. The counselor explained to the participants how art contributes to well-being. Participants engaged in a number of experiential exercises: listening to music, watching a clip of a movie, and reading poetry. Participants were encouraged to describe their own past and recent experiences of artistic beauty. The group was reintroduced to the importance of mindfulness/psychological flexibility, and discussed its potential connection with art through poetry by Rumi and Rainer Maria Rilke. The concepts in Japanese aesthetics of *kintsugi* and *wabi sabi* were introduced. *Wabi sabi* refers to the appreciation of beauty in imperfection and impermanence, whereas *kintsugi* describes the art of mending broken pottery with gold (Wilkinson, 2022). Participants also engaged with quotes from various artists about art, such as Oscar Wilde's:

"You came to me to learn the Pleasure of Life and the Pleasure of Art. Perhaps I was chosen to teach you something much more wonderful, the meaning of Sorrow, and its beauty" (cited in Ishizu & Zeki, 2017, p.

4185).

The eighth and ninth sessions addressed beauty in ideas. During these sessions, the counselor explained to participants how ideas could be perceived as beautiful. The idea of *unity in diversity*, as the most common definition of beauty among many philosophers of aesthetics, was discussed (Diessner, 2019). Participants were encouraged to describe their own past and recent experiences of beautiful ideas.

The group also touched on how beauty was influential in American theoretical physicist and Nobel laureate Frank Wilczek's work (2015). Participants engaged in discussions of what it means to have good mental health in the context of appreciating beauty.

The 10th session summarized, and the participants reflected on, the content and the participants' experiences of the beauty group. The participants reflected on what experiences, concepts, or ideas from the group had been impactful in their lives. Lastly, the participants were encouraged to provide feedback about the group process, both positives and the negatives, to help improve the beauty group therapy for the next cohort.

The pre- post measures used (the Engagement with Beauty Scale and the WHO-5), along with the pptx materials used by the counselor during ABGT can be accessed at <https://osf.io/5vg9a/overview>).

3. Results

In general, our results are a *proof-of-concept*, in which we demonstrate that group therapy based on appreciation of beauty can be, and has now been, done. Due to confidentiality and authenticity in a clinical counseling environment, we cannot report the results of the measures given to the clients; as we did not seek IRB permission to collect data. However, the subjective impression by the lead author, the counselor that created and executed these group therapy sessions, was that appreciation of beauty group therapy was quite effective in lessening symptoms of mental illness and increasing clients' well-being. And it was not purely subjective; the lead author used pre- and post-measures to gauge the objective effectiveness of the therapy so as to guide his own practice. However, as this was not initially planning to be an experiment, it is not ethical for us to report data from the participants in the ABGT sessions.

4. Discussion

Reported here is a novel form of counseling and psychotherapy which has not been previously described in the counseling literature. There appear to be no published studies regarding appreciation of beauty group therapy. In particular, there are no studies, nor counseling theoreis, that report a therapeutic approach that focused on four different kinds of beauty: natural, artistic, moral/inner, and ideas. Unfortunately, we cannot report empirical evidence in this paper, other than the subjective experience of the lead author, whose impression was that appreciation of beauty group therapy was effective for clients with depression, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, and PTSD. This is a very important goal for future studies: to collect publishable data concerning the effectiveness of ABGT.

Although there are many published studies of music therapy and art therapy, those studies are based on clients participating in the arts (e.g., Nitzan & Orkibi, 2021). We applaud that kind of therapy. However, our approach here is not about actually creating art in a therapeutic context, but rather, of appreciating beauty in all its forms. This is a unique form of counseling and psychotherapy which has not been reported in the counseling literature.

Another important consideration in regard to clinicians adopting appreciation of beauty group therapy is in regard to counselor burn-out. As is obvious, counseling is a very difficult job, with high rates of depression among psychotherapists. One study found that 80% of clinical and counseling psychologists have suffered mental illness symptoms over the course of their career (Victor et al., 2022).

The lead author of our paper found that leading beauty group therapy was a fulfilling experience rather than draining of one's energy. The beauty group provided a sense of community to share beautiful experiences in members' lives despite the difficulty of their mental health challenges, which induced a subjective sense of hope and optimism to his work. The beauty group provided a positive change and a sense of relief in the lead author's weekly therapy schedule while still providing a positive impact on the group's participants.

5. Limitations

The methodology subtext of writing this paper was a

variation on structured impressionistic ethnography (Van Maanen, 1988). Essentially it was telling a story of a process of a new and unique approach to group psychotherapy that could be potentially very helpful to both clients and counselors. However, as we did not initially plan to publish about these group therapy sessions, we did not ask for IRB permission to collect data. Therefore all we can offer is the subjective impressions of effectiveness from the counselor that led the groups: it worked well for all involved.

6. Future Directions

Initially the counselor conducting the group therapy described here was not focused on publication of results; rather he was focused on providing clients with the best therapy possible in a creative new way. However, the next step in this research is to secure IRB permission, client permissions, and to perform an experimental study with a wait-list control group.

7. Conclusion

Appreciation of Beauty Group Therapy (ABGT) has the potential to uplift both clients' and counselors' lives. Feel free to contact us for further information and/or let us know how your own ABGT goes when you try it out.

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