

Article 4

What Works for Female Persons in Custody: Rehabilitation through Expressive Art



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The topic of differences between males and females has been extensively discussed throughout history, and it is widely acknowledged that men and women have distinct needs. Similarly, there are gender-specific risks and needs among persons in custody (PICs). To facilitate a more effective rehabilitation process, it is essential to address the specific needs of female PICs. Salisbury and Van Voorhis (2009) have identified five gender-specific risk factors for women in custody, including experiences of abuse and trauma, serious mental health issues, substance abuse problems, dysfunctional and abusive intimate relationships, and parenting stress.

From the data compiled by the Hong Kong Correctional Services, it is evident that the population of female PICs has been increasing from 1,556 in 2019 to 1,799 in 2023. In contrast, although the male penal population has also been on the increase, it went from 6,181 in 2019 to 6,698 in 2023 (HKCSD, 2023). The percentage changes in the penal populations of different genders showed a significant difference, with a 16% increase in female population compared to an 8% increase in male population. This highlights the need for designing and exploring new directions for more effective rehabilitation programmes tailored specifically for female PICs.

What We Did?

In our clinical sessions, we observed that women tended to be more expressive compared to men. Consequently, they are likely to benefit more from the participation in art-related therapies. Over the past few months, we have incorporated therapy and expressive arts into our programmes, particularly Psycho-art (「淺嘗 正向藝術」) and Psycho-dance (「心靈舞蹈」).

What Are Psycho-Art and Psycho-Dance?

Psycho-art

Art serves as a powerful medium for communication and self-expression, with extensive applications in psychotherapy, counselling and rehabilitation. By encouraging clients to express their emotions and thoughts non-verbally, art activities provide PICs with a valuable outlet to release pent-up emotions and acquire techniques to reduce aggressive thoughts and anger (Liebmann, 1994). Moreover, art facilitates self-reflection, offering individuals a safe and supportive space to delve into their inner world, and fostering personal growth and exploration (Gussak, 1997).

Psycho-dance

Dance has been revered as a healing ritual since the earliest days of human history, and in the 1950s, it gained recognition as a formal therapeutic approach (Chodorow, 1991). The American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) defines dance therapy as the “psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote the emotional, social, cognitive and physical integration of the individual, with the purpose of enhancing health and well-being” (ADTA, 2018). This therapeutic modality harnesses the power of movement to foster a comprehensive sense of well-being, encompassing emotional, social, cognitive and physical aspects.

How They Went?

Psycho-art 「淺嘗 正向藝術」

The “Psycho-Art” programme, implemented at Lo Wu Correctional Institution, combines art with positive psychology. The programme incorporates Zentangle, Pastel Nagomi Art and English Calligraphy as artistic mediums. Its primary aim is to encourage PICs to approach the art creation process mindfully, allowing them to relax and focus on their minds. PICs participating in the programme exhibited a high level of expressiveness when sharing the meaning behind their artwork with fellow PICs, demonstrating empathy and support while listening to each other’s stories. After the group sessions, the artwork becomes a catalyst for further exploration and discussion during individual sessions, enabling a deeper exploration of their concerns, worries and traumas through the art they have created.



Psycho-dance 「心靈舞蹈」

Under the guidance of an experienced dance instructor from the Hong Kong Christian Kun Sun Association, PICs participated in the programme with sessions centred around specific themes such as “Love,” “Forgiveness” and “Hope”. Throughout the programme, PICs were reassured that their ability to dance skillfully was not a requirement for self-expression. The dance instructor taught them simple body movements that enabled them to convey their thoughts and emotions effectively. Each session was conducted with the presence of a clinical psychologist, allowing participants to find personal meaning in the process while simultaneously learning how to navigate and regulate their thoughts and emotions through appropriate body movements.



Psycho-art 「淺嘗 正向藝術」

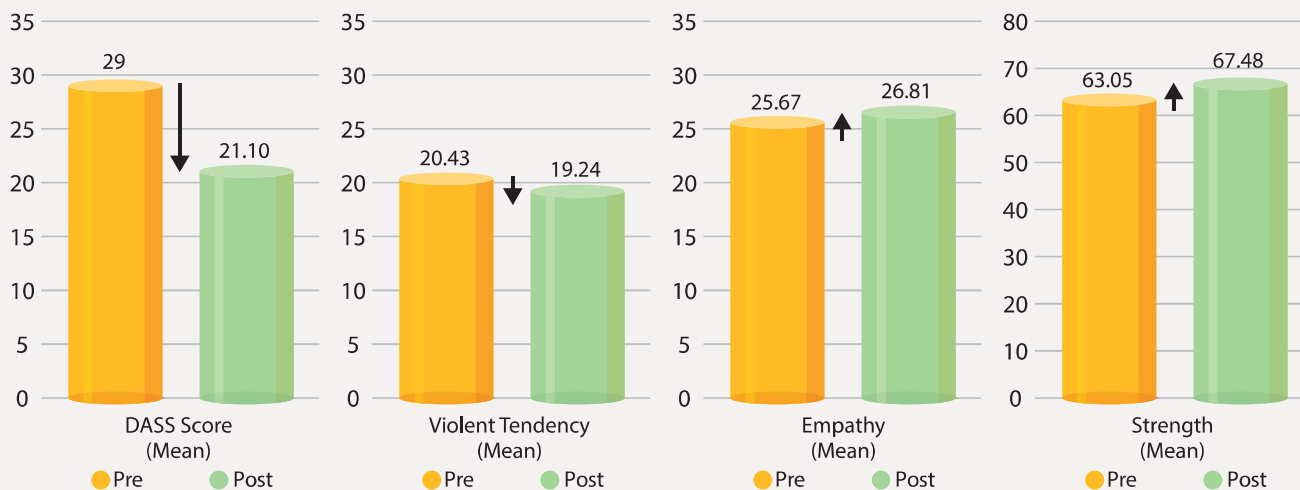


Figure 1. Scorings before and after the Psycho-Art

The results indicated a significant decrease in depression, anxiety, and stress scores comparing pre-intervention with post-intervention ($p < .001$). There was also a significant decrease in violent tendency scores across pre-intervention and post-intervention ($p < .05$). Besides, the results showed a significant increase in empathy scores across pre-intervention and post-intervention ($p < .01$). A significant increase in strength scores was also observed across pre-intervention and post-intervention ($p < .001$).

Psycho-dance 「心靈舞蹈」

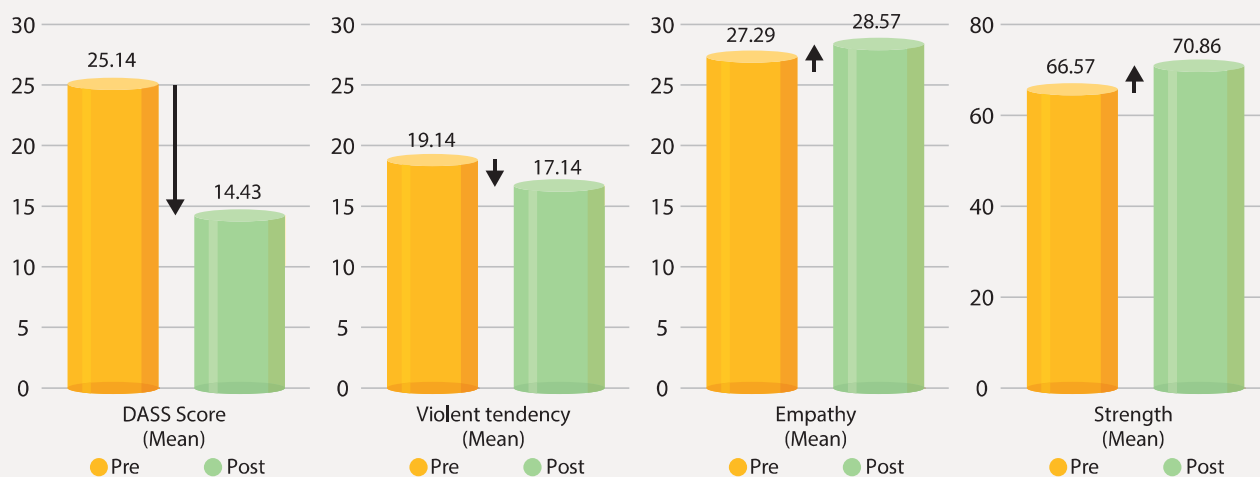


Figure 2. Scorings before and after the Psycho-Dance

As for Psycho-dance, the results indicated a significant decrease in depression, anxiety and stress scores comparing pre-intervention with post-intervention ($p = .01$). However, a decrease in violent tendency scores was not statistically significant across pre-intervention and post-intervention ($p = .11$). Meanwhile, the results showed a significant increase in empathy scores when comparing pre-intervention with post-intervention ($p = .03$). Nonetheless, an increase in strength scores was not statistically significant across pre-intervention and post-intervention ($p = .056$).

Results

Remarkable advancements were noted in the mental well-being of PICs participating in these programmes, evidenced by a reduction in violent tendencies and an enhancement of empathy and personal strengths. Additionally, their interpersonal relationships with other PICs exhibited noticeable improvement, as they became more open to share their life stories through their art creations. The success of incorporating art into rehabilitation programmes has motivated further exploration of diverse art forms as a means to enhance the rehabilitation process. As such, efforts are being made to identify a suitable art form that can effectively facilitate the rehabilitation programmes for male PICs. However, delving into that topic is best suited for another discussion.

Insights

1. Gender Specific

Female PICs have unique needs that differ from the needs of their male counterparts. It is essential to develop interventions specifically designed to address these needs, as this tailored approach is pivotal in achieving improved outcomes for female PICs.

2. Expressive Arts

Female PICs often exhibit a greater inclination towards expressing themselves. By incorporating expressive arts into their rehabilitation programmes, female PICs are provided with a platform to freely explore and process their emotions. This creative outlet not only fosters personal growth but also contributes to their overall rehabilitation journeys.

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