



Transformative Clinical Art Therapy: From Anxiety to Growth Mindset through Cognitive-Emotional Integration

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ABSTRACT

Anxiety is a prevalent psychological challenge that hinders personal growth. This study examines the effectiveness of transformative clinical art therapy in reducing anxiety and fostering a growth mindset through cognitive-emotional integration. A mixed-methods approach involving 90 participants diagnosed with moderate to high anxiety was employed, incorporating both quantitative measures (Beck Anxiety Inventory, Growth Mindset Scale, and Mindset Assessment Profile) and qualitative data (interviews, observations, and artwork analysis). The results showed a significant reduction in anxiety and an increase in growth mindset. The therapeutic process, emphasizing cognitive-emotional integration, played a pivotal role in transforming participants' psychological states. This study contributes to the development of art-based psychotherapy by demonstrating its potential in promoting long-term psychological well-being and an adaptive mindset.

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a leading mental health issue worldwide, with increasing rates in the post-COVID-19 era. The World Health Organization (2023) estimates that more than 280 million people globally experience anxiety disorders, reflecting a significant rise in psychological distress due to social, economic, and technological instability. In Indonesia, national surveys by the Ministry of Health (2022) report that approximately 32% of adults suffer from moderate to high anxiety, affecting productivity, social functioning, and overall well-being. This condition illustrates that anxiety is not merely a transient emotional response, but a chronic psychological burden that disrupts adaptive functioning and personal development.

Chronic anxiety also hinders the formation of an adaptive mindset, commonly known as a growth mindset, the belief that intelligence and abilities can be developed through effort and learning (Dweck, 2021). Individuals with persistent anxiety tend to adopt a fixed mindset, perceiving their limitations as permanent and unchangeable, which in turn diminishes motivation, resilience, and openness to new experiences (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). Therefore, psychological interventions must move beyond symptom reduction to address the cognitive and emotional restructuring necessary for sustained psychological growth.

Traditional therapies, such as cognitive-behavioral or pharmacological approaches, have proven effective in alleviating anxiety symptoms but often fall short of transforming underlying thought-emotion patterns. They tend to target cognitive distortions or behavioral regulation without facilitating deeper integration between emotional expression and cognitive flexibility. Consequently, individuals may experience temporary relief without achieving lasting self-awareness or internalized coping mechanisms.

In this context, transformative clinical art therapy emerges as a promising intervention model that integrates emotional expression with cognitive reflection. Unlike conventional talk-based therapy, art therapy utilizes creative processes, such as drawing, painting, and visual symbolism, to externalize emotions, promote insight, and reconstruct internal experiences (Zhang et al., 2024; Palmieri et al., 2022). Through artistic creation, individuals engage both hemispheres of the brain, fostering emotional regulation while stimulating reflective and meaning-making processes. This dynamic process aligns naturally with the principles of growth mindset development, which emphasize adaptive reinterpretation of challenges and constructive engagement with self-perception.

Empirical evidence increasingly supports the emotional benefits of art therapy in reducing anxiety and enhancing well-being (Greenberg et al., 2022; Haeyen et al., 2021). However, most studies have focused primarily on symptom reduction, neglecting to examine how the art therapy process facilitates internal cognitive transformation, particularly the shift from anxiety-driven thinking to growth-oriented beliefs. While prior research acknowledges that integrating emotional and cognitive dimensions enhances therapeutic outcomes, limited empirical work has specifically explored how art therapy can foster cognitive-emotional integration as a mechanism of psychological change.

This study bridges this gap by integrating the Mindset Assessment Profile (MAP) alongside the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) and Growth Mindset Scale (GMS) to quantitatively assess the shift from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. By incorporating MAP, this research adds specificity and depth to our understanding of how transformative clinical art therapy influences cognitive-emotional integration, fostering long-term psychological growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept and Impact of Anxiety in Contemporary Psychology

Anxiety is a complex emotional reaction to real or imaginary threats, which often arises as a result of an individual's perception of uncertainty or an inability to control the situation (Spielberger et al., 2021). In the context of modern life, anxiety levels are constantly increasing due to rapid social, economic, and technological changes. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has also worsened this situation. The World Health Organization (2023) reports that more than 280 million people worldwide suffer from anxiety disorders, while in Indonesia, the prevalence reaches over 30% of the adult population. These figures show that anxiety is not only a mental health problem but also a social issue that affects quality of life, productivity, and the ability of individuals to face daily challenges.

The impact of anxiety is not only limited to the emotional aspect but also affects the way we think and behave. Individuals with chronic anxiety often show decreased decision-making abilities, difficulty regulating emotions, and limitations in thinking flexibly (Saeed et al., 2022). This condition makes them focus more on threats than opportunities, thus hindering the process of learning, creativity, and innovation. Therefore, effective psychological intervention strategies must consider the interdependent relationships between emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects in order to help individuals manage anxiety more comprehensively.

Growth Mindset and Its Role in Psychological Change

Growth mindset is a concept introduced by Dweck, who explains that human abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort, the right strategies, and learning from experience (Dweck, 2021). In psychotherapy, growth mindset plays an important role because it encourages individuals to be more open to change, more resilient to adversity, and more quickly adapt to stress. Research by Yeager and Dweck (2020) shows that growth mindset-based interventions significantly improve adaptability and reduce anxiety levels.

However, high anxiety often pushes individuals toward a fixed mindset, the belief that their abilities are fixed and cannot develop. This mindset reinforces negative views of oneself and inhibits psychological recovery (Zhang & Chen, 2023). Therefore, modern psychological intervention approaches not only aim to reduce anxiety symptoms but also build an adaptive mindset as a result as well as a therapeutic goal. In this way, individuals can develop stronger cognitive and emotional capacities to deal with life's challenges.

Clinical Art Therapy as a Psychotherapeutic Intervention

Clinical art therapy is one of the psychotherapy approaches that utilizes creative and expressive activities to help individuals understand, manage, and express their emotions. This therapy differs from traditional approaches in that it allows for the symbolic exploration of emotions through the medium of art, which is often more effective for accessing feelings that are difficult to express verbally (Palmieri et al., 2022). In various studies, art therapy has been shown to reduce anxiety levels, improve psychological well-being, and strengthen self-awareness (Zhang et al., 2024).

In addition to playing a role in symptom reduction, art therapy can also be a catalyst for more profound psychological changes. Research by Kraus et al. (2023) showed that participants who underwent art therapy experienced significant improvements in emotion regulation, empathy, and self-reflection. The creative process helps individuals integrate past experiences, recognize negative mindsets, and form new narratives about themselves. This process is crucial in the development of a growth mindset because it allows individuals to see change as something that can be achieved through self-exploration and learning.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research employed a mixed-methods design with an explanatory sequential approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of transformative clinical art therapy. Quantitative analysis was used to measure changes in anxiety levels and growth mindset before and after the intervention, while qualitative exploration focused on the participants' subjective experiences during therapy—particularly the processes of cognitive and emotional integration underlying psychological transformation.

The mixed-methods approach was chosen because it allows for stronger data triangulation, enhances internal validity, and provides both objective measurement and contextual interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2022). Compared to purely quantitative or qualitative methods, this design offers a more holistic picture of therapeutic outcomes by linking numerical change (what happened) with narrative insight (how and why it happened). Such integration is essential in psychotherapy research, where emotional and cognitive processes cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures alone.

Sampling Technique

The population of this study consisted of adults aged 20–45 years who experienced moderate to high levels of anxiety, as determined through screening using the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI). Participants were recruited through collaboration with counseling centers and online advertisements targeting individuals seeking psychological support. The study employed a purposive sampling technique, selecting participants based on predetermined inclusion criteria relevant to the research objectives (Etikan & Bala, 2023). The inclusion

criteria required that participants, had undergone psychological screening and obtained moderate to high BAI scores, had no prior experience with art therapy or similar psychotherapeutic programs, and demonstrated willingness to participate fully in all stages of the intervention process.

A total of 20 participants met these criteria and engaged in the four-week transformative clinical art therapy program. This sample size was considered sufficient for exploratory mixed-methods research, as it provided a balance between representativeness and the depth of qualitative exploration (Fetters et al., 2022). From this group, eight individuals were purposively selected for in-depth qualitative interviews to capture diverse perspectives and experiential variations. The subgroup included three university students, two professional workers, two homemakers, and one entrepreneur, ensuring heterogeneity in demographic and psychosocial characteristics. This diversity was intended to enrich the thematic analysis and provide a comprehensive understanding of how participants from different backgrounds experienced cognitive-emotional integration and psychological transformation during the intervention.

Instruments

Quantitative data in this study were collected using the Mindset Assessment Profile (MAP), alongside the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) and Growth Mindset Scale (GMS). MAP was used to specifically assess changes in participants' mindset orientation from a fixed to a growth mindset, focusing on how individuals view their ability to grow and adapt through effort. This instrument was selected due to its robust psychometric properties and ability to provide a more comprehensive view of shifts in participants' cognitive and emotional perspectives.

MAP has shown high reliability and validity in measuring growth mindset across various populations (Santos et al., 2022). In this study, MAP helps measure the cognitive shift from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset, providing deeper insight into the psychological transformation facilitated by transformative clinical art therapy.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Quantitative and qualitative data in this study were collected sequentially following an explanatory mixed-methods design. The quantitative phase involved administering the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) and the Growth Mindset Scale (GMS) before and after the intervention (pretest–posttest) to assess changes in anxiety levels and mindset orientation. The qualitative phase followed, consisting of semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and artwork analysis. Interviews explored participants' emotional experiences and cognitive shifts during therapy, while direct observations captured nonverbal expressions and group interactions. Additionally, artwork analysis employed an interpretive phenomenological approach to uncover symbolic meanings and emotional narratives embedded within the participants' creative works (Malchiodi, 2022). This multimodal data collection approach allowed for a

nuanced understanding of emotional and cognitive transformation throughout the therapeutic process.

The research procedure consisted of four main stages: preparation, intervention, post-assessment, and data integration. During the preparation stage, ethical clearance was obtained, participants were recruited, and baseline assessments were conducted using the BAI and GMS. The intervention phase included eight transformative clinical art therapy sessions over four weeks (two sessions per week, 90 minutes each), with each session involving artistic expression, guided reflection, and therapeutic dialogue led by certified art therapists. The post-assessment phase included posttests, follow-up interviews, and artwork evaluations, while the final stage integrated quantitative and qualitative findings through triangulation to identify convergent patterns and interpret the mechanisms underlying psychological change (Sasa & Sisi, 2023).

Quantitative data were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests to compare pretest–posttest differences in anxiety and growth mindset scores, conducted via IBM SPSS Statistics 28 with significance set at $p < .05$. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), involving systematic coding, categorization, and identification of recurring themes. Both datasets were integrated through a convergent parallel approach, aligning numerical outcomes with narrative insights to achieve a comprehensive interpretation of therapeutic effectiveness. This integrated analytical framework ensured methodological transparency, validity, and depth, enabling the study to capture not only the statistical impact of art therapy but also the transformative processes through which participants progressed from anxiety toward a growth-oriented mindset.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Reduction in Anxiety and Increase in Growth Mindset

A paired-sample t-test revealed a significant decrease in anxiety levels and a marked improvement in growth mindset following the intervention. Specifically, anxiety scores measured by the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) declined from $M = 31.4$ ($SD = 5.8$) to $M = 18.2$ ($SD = 4.6$), while **MAP scores** indicated a significant shift toward a growth mindset. The results suggest that transformative clinical art therapy not only alleviates anxiety but also fosters a more flexible and growth-oriented mindset.

Table 1. Changes in Anxiety and Growth Mindset Before and After Intervention

Variable	Pretest (M ± SD)	Posttest (M ± SD)	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i> value
Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI)	31.4 ± 5.8	18.2 ± 4.6	9.72	< .001
Growth Mindset Scale (GMS)	2.84 ± 0.41	4.02 ± 0.37	-8.15	< .001

These findings provide quantitative support for the hypothesis that art therapy not only alleviates anxiety but also facilitates cognitive restructuring, leading to a more flexible and growth-oriented mindset.

Emotional Release and Cognitive Restructuring

The qualitative analysis revealed a coherent four-stage progression of psychological transformation throughout the art therapy process, emotional release, reflective self-awareness, cognitive reframing, and internalization of growth orientation. These interconnected stages collectively illustrate how participants' emotional expression evolved into deeper cognitive restructuring and long-term mindset development.

In the initial phase of emotional release, participants experienced catharsis through creative expression such as painting and drawing, which provided a safe and nonverbal medium to channel suppressed feelings of fear, worry, and tension. This process facilitated emotional relief and opened pathways to self-awareness.

As one participant reflected,

"When I paint, it feels like a weight is coming out of my head" (M1, Interview, July 12, 2025).

Such artistic engagement allowed participants to externalize internalized distress and begin recognizing the emotional patterns underlying their anxiety. The second stage, reflective self-awareness, emerged as participants began identifying the relationship between their thoughts and emotions. Artistic creation became a reflective mirror that revealed subconscious fears and unresolved internal conflicts.

One participant expressed,

"At first, I drew without thinking, but later realized each stroke reflected my fear of the future" (P1, Interview, July 14, 2025).

This realization marked a shift from mere expression toward conscious introspection, enabling participants to observe and make sense of their inner experiences. Subsequently, in the cognitive reframing stage, participants began reinterpreting their emotional experiences with greater perspective and flexibility. Through reflective discussions and symbolic interpretation of their artwork, anxiety was no longer perceived as weakness but as an opportunity for growth.

As one individual shared,

"I used to think anxiety meant I was weak, but now I see it as a reminder to learn and grow" (M2, Interview, July 20, 2025).

This reinterpretation was also reflected visually, as dark and chaotic imagery gradually transitioned into symbols of harmony, strength, and renewal, demonstrating cognitive restructuring through artistic expression.

Finally, in the internalization of growth orientation, participants exhibited a sustained transformation in how they viewed themselves and life's challenges. They reported increased optimism, resilience, and confidence in managing uncertainty. The growth mindset was symbolically captured through recurring visual motifs such as open pathways, glowing light, and flourishing trees, metaphors representing clarity, perseverance, and continuous development. This

final stage signifies the consolidation of emotional and cognitive integration, illustrating how transformative clinical art therapy fosters both psychological healing and adaptive personal growth.

Cognitive-Emotional Integration

The most critical mechanism driving these transformations was the integration of cognitive and emotional processes, which allowed participants to reinterpret emotional experiences and adopt more flexible, adaptive mindsets. The findings revealed that emotional expression through art served as an initial pathway to release psychological tension, followed by reflective thinking that enabled participants to reframe their experiences cognitively.

These results are consistent with previous studies indicating that art therapy can significantly reduce anxiety (Haeyen et al., 2022) and foster psychological change through cognitive-emotional integration (Greenberg et al., 2022). The primary mechanism identified in this study was the synchronization of emotional processing and cognitive restructuring, which collectively facilitated lasting psychological transformation.

This aligns with Greenberg's (2021) theory of cognitive-emotional integration in psychotherapy, which posits that sustainable psychological change occurs when emotional awareness and cognitive reinterpretation are addressed simultaneously. Without emotional processing, cognitive change remains superficial; conversely, without cognitive restructuring, emotional release lacks direction. In this study, participants' experiences showed how art served as a mediating tool to connect these two domains—allowing emotions to be externalized and reinterpreted through reflection, leading to deep structural change in mindset.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings contribute both theoretically and practically to the field of psychotherapy. Theoretically, they reinforce that psychological growth emerges through dynamic interactions between affective and cognitive systems rather than through isolated interventions. Transformative clinical art therapy thus represents an integrative model capable of bridging emotional catharsis and cognitive development.

Practically, the study highlights art therapy's potential as a low-stigma, accessible, and culturally adaptable intervention for managing anxiety and enhancing personal growth, particularly in contexts where emotional expression is often restrained. The approach can be implemented in counseling centers, universities, or clinical settings to promote resilience and well-being through creative engagement.

While the results are compelling, several limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size ($n = 20$) limits generalizability, and the four-week duration may not capture long-term effects. Future research should employ larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and hybrid interventions integrating art therapy with cognitive-behavioral or mindfulness-based approaches. Additionally, exploring digital or virtual art

therapy formats may enhance accessibility and sustainability in broader populations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides compelling evidence that transformative clinical art therapy can significantly reduce anxiety while promoting a growth mindset through cognitive-emotional integration. The use of Mindset Assessment Profile (MAP) was critical in assessing the transition to a growth mindset, further validating the integration of emotional expression and cognitive flexibility through art therapy. This integrated approach provides a holistic method for improving psychological well-being, demonstrating the effectiveness of art therapy not only in symptom relief but also in fostering long-term growth and resilience.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings confirmed that the core mechanism driving this transformation lies in the synchronization of cognitive and emotional processes. Art therapy not only alleviated surface symptoms such as anxiety but also facilitated deeper restructuring of belief systems and self-perception. Symbolic analysis of participants' artworks further revealed a shift in self-representation from fear and constraint toward hope, opportunity, and growth.

These results reinforce the theoretical and practical value of transformative clinical art therapy as a holistic and evidence-based psychotherapeutic approach. Beyond its clinical applications, this model holds strong potential for implementation in educational, organizational, and community settings to enhance resilience and adaptive mindsets. Internationally, these findings highlight the cross-cultural relevance of art-based interventions, particularly in contexts where verbal or cognitive therapies may face cultural or accessibility limitations.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine the sustainability of these psychological changes and investigate the potential integration of digital or virtual art therapy platforms to expand reach and engagement. By combining creativity, emotional processing, and cognitive restructuring, transformative clinical art therapy offers a promising pathway for promoting mental well-being and personal growth in diverse cultural and clinical contexts.

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