

## Fourth Age Support Group by Means of Arts during the Corona Pandemic

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"WE DON'T STOP PLAYING BECAUSE WE ARE OLD:  
WE GROW OLD BECAUSE WE STOP PLAYING"

Bernard Shaw

In this article and interview, we present a support group for the third and fourth age that integrates arts, which was established in response to the need that arose during the Corona Pandemic. Initially the group members met via ZOOM and once the lockdown was lifted, they began to meet in person. The group of 12 participants range in age from 70-90. To date 22 sessions have been held, and it is still in process. We received the consent of the participants to publish the photos and the examples taken from the therapy, which appear in this article.

The group works according to the model developed by the authors, which is based on multiple years of experience in group art therapy and implementation of the conclusions and insights of the doctoral dissertations of each of them.

Dr. Bassis' dissertation dealt with the question of whether theatrical improvisation experiences has any implication on cognitive flexibility of elderly in their third and fourth ages in a healthy population. Furthermore, the research also examined whether improvisation workshop would cause an increase in improvisation key elements such as spontaneity, playfulness-creativity and the flowing experience among the group members, furthermore, the research examined the connection between the key agents of improvisation, and cognitive flexibility. The statistical research findings showed that after the individual participated in the improvisation activity there was no significant change that indicates an influence of the improvisation on cognitive flexibility. Nonetheless, significant improvement was demonstrated in the participants' **spontaneous**, **playfulness** and **flow** abilities, as well a significant connection, between spontaneous and creativity and cognitive flexibility. (Bassis, 2019).

Dr. Megides' dissertation dealt with group art therapy among adult bereaved siblings. She investigated the contribution of the language of art in situations of grieving and loss and the contribution of the encounter between art therapy and group therapy on the intrapsychic and the interpersonal processes. Dr. Megides' work suggests guidelines for group art therapy, which in part are implemented in the group described in this article (Megides, 2019).

The support group meets once a week for 90 minutes. The sessions are based on a fixed setting prepared in advance, where each session begins with a short discussion – "how I am

today and what did I bring to the group". Later a short warm-up in one of the arts such as movement, theatrical improvisation, music or other form of art is carried out. After the warm-up the main activity takes place, which is based on an individual and group creative activity. At the end of the activity there is sharing, processing and summarizing with everyone. At each session the intervention is by means of arts such as, visual, movement, drama, improvisation, phototherapy, bibliotherapy, music, etc. The goal of movement and the integration between the different arts (multimodal integration) is to arouse the spontaneity and playing among the participants, which leads to an experiential process of different levels (Knill, Levine, & Levine, 2005).

The choice of art interventions is by observation and suiting them to the stage of the group process and the personal stage of each participant, where exposure to the art language is done gradually with the deep understanding and awareness of the unique quality of each type of intervention and its psychological implications. The invitation to do creative work is based on the belief that the connection to internal creative sources is a connection to healthy forces of life and healing (Shapiro, 2005).

In addition during times of great uncertainty and many changes, improvisation, defined as free play that takes place at a certain time, where spontaneity, creativity and playfulness drive a positive and flowing experience (Bassis, 2019), that runs like a second thread through all interventions. Moreover, it serves as a holistic tool for cognitive, physiological and mental training that allows the participants to walk on new paths, which may result in openness and perhaps in behavioral and mental change (Schacht, 2007). The practical meaning is that playfulness and spontaneity, which are inherent in improvisation trains the participants to look at situations from different angles and thus better cope with changes in the environment, alongside their enjoyment from playing (Moreno, 1944).

As apparent throughout the sessions the creativity in the group helps the participants break free from inhibitions and promotes intimacy and cohesion in the group (Riley, 2001). At times the creative language allows participants, who find it difficult to talk in the group, to express themselves and be expressive via the art product, and thus participate and alleviate their loneliness (McNiff, 2004). The creative activity recruits the group's productive forces and allows the participants to go from a sense of passivity to activity which leads to a sense of control (Hazut, 2000).

Frequently, the childish and playful atmosphere created in the room as a result of the contact with the art material, enables an internal connection to creativity and spontaneity and constitutes a platform for creating powerful symbolic images. For example, powerful images containing complex life stories were created during the session in which we worked with colored plasticine. The simplicity of working with this material was in contrast to the depth of the process and the significance stemming from it, as well as the pain contained in the symbolic image. The playful and "childish" material facilitated an experience of different aspects of reality, where

alongside death is also life, and together with the deep pain is also creativity and the joy of life, and seemingly the image that was created allowed the participants to observe and gain a new perspective (Megides, 2019).

Another example of combining art in the session is the encounter with masks. As a result of the difficult feelings the participants raised in the dialogue, feelings of frustration and helplessness due to the isolation that was forced upon their age group, we suggested to take the medical masks and create anything they would like from them. The creativity with the medical masks which represents the spirit of the period and its implications allowed the participants to express their frustration and anger in a creative and subliminal way and perhaps even to "pay back". At the end of the work we held a mask party with music, dancing and lots of humor and laughter. Employing humor during times like this, constitutes another source for coping, where in times of threats the ability to laugh allows one to achieve a certain sense of control. That is, when it is impossible to change reality humor changes its reflection in our psyche. The combination of thought and imagination assists in reformulation of the problem, in emotional distancing from the situation and in neutralizing the sting of a painful reality (Lahad & Ayalon, 1995). The photo below was taken at the end of the session. The session was very intense, meaningful and though not everyone was present it continued to resonate in the group for a very long time.



During the sharing stage, when each of the participants presents the work and shares its meaning, a dialog and verbal processing is made possible. This stage is significant, when the creations and figures resonate in each one, creating identifications. By means of reverberation

the group becomes a meeting place of the personal worlds of the participants, their similarities and differences, commonalities as well as the uniqueness of each one. This reverberation provides them with a sense of belonging that allows them to feel the pain, the frustration, their hopes for themselves and their peers in the group and provides them a sense of visibility, which slightly eases the sense of isolation (Berman, 2015).

At some time when the situation of the Corona pandemic worsened in Israel and restrictions were placed on the possible number of participants, we suggested to return to ZOOM meetings and each one asked to continue with the sessions in person stating that "the loneliness is more dangerous than the Corona!"

Sometimes the artistic image created in the art product contains unconscious aspects and observing it after the creation with the developing discourse enables the creator to raise contents to the conscious and thereby broaden self-understanding as expressed by one of the participants: *"each session I understand more about myself..."* The group discourse allows additional processing and leads to revealing different perspectives and alternatives of adaptation while inspiring the other participants (Hazut, 2000).

The dominant themes that emerge throughout the sessions are immense loneliness, uncertainty and a sense of helplessness, concern for the political and health situation in the country, life-stories, memories of the past and more. These feelings, which are characteristics of this age group, have become even more intense in light of having to cope with the Corona pandemic. It seems that the more the group becomes a safe place, intimate contents emerge such as: childhood memories, traumatic stories from the past, losses experienced throughout life, immigration to Israel, etc. These contents are given a place in the group and enjoy additional processing.

Throughout the sessions much meaning is given to the group process and the group cohesion where there is movement between the group and the individual and the individual and the group. After the individual creative activity the participants are invited to share in small groups and then in the whole group or alternatively work on a common substrate for the entire group and more. We see great importance in the contribution of the group and its sources to the participants in the fourth age. It seems that the safe framework that was created in the group (setting, careful and enveloping maintenance) constitutes a container in which the group grows and creates by means of the different arts which constitute a second container. The appropriate and dynamic combination of the two containers (the group and the arts) and the needs of the group participants (contents) allows them to put meaning into their experience in the "here and now" (Symington & Symington, 1996).

As the sessions developed, the group began to take a more meaningful place in the lives of the participants and constituted an anchor for them during the week, as stated by one of the participants: "I wait for this day of the week and I am so lonely and this day is my anchor". Likewise, they share with their family members and even create with their grandchildren

inspired by the interventions done in the group and apparently the group enables them to expand their support group and leads to an intergenerational experience.

Conclusion – The corona crisis has facilitated the possibility of meaningfully giving and has provided the opportunity of a fascinating encounter with the female force in their fourth age. As the group facilitators in the surroundings of the third age, we are impressed by the creativity, playfulness, humor and the desire to live that emerge from these participants and we, the group facilitators, have come out of these meetings empowered and filled with hope.

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