

Sound Healing and Expressive Arts for Stress Reduction in Nature-Based Therapeutic Practices

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Abstract

This project explores the integration of sound healing and expressive arts into nature-based therapeutic work to support emotional regulation and stress reduction, particularly within a social work and mental health context. Conducted at Lone Oak Animal-Assisted Therapeutic & Educational Services, this study considers how these holistic modalities can support clients who benefit from non-verbal approaches to therapy. Drawing on group work, somatic practice, and clinical observation, this project illustrates how creative, sensory-based interventions can strengthen therapeutic relationships, foster mindfulness, and increase accessibility in mental health care.

Why This Work Matters in Clinical Practice

As a student social worker, I've witnessed how traditional talk therapy doesn't always reach all clients, especially those experiencing chronic stress, trauma, or communication challenges. This work explores how alternative modalities like sound healing and expressive arts can complement more conventional methods, offering clients a deeper sense of safety, regulation, and connection in therapeutic settings. The project responds to a central question: How can integrating sensory, creative, and nature-based practices enhance therapeutic outcomes for diverse clients?

Clinical Foundations and Therapeutic Roots

Sound healing, expressive arts, and nature-based therapy have long-standing cultural and clinical relevance. Sound healing uses instruments like singing bowls and chimes to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, calming the body and mind, an essential tool in trauma-informed care. Neuroscientific research shows that these vibrations support shifts in brainwave activity, helping clients move from high-alert states to calmer, more receptive ones.

Expressive arts therapy provides a path for clients who may not have words for what they're feeling. Whether through painting, music, or movement, it opens space for emotional processing and self-expression. This aligns with strengths-based, client-centered approaches

used in social work, particularly for children, neurodivergent individuals, and those impacted by trauma.

Nature-based therapy (or ecotherapy) also has a growing evidence base in mental health. Time in natural environments is shown to reduce cortisol levels, improve mood, and support regulation. This is especially important for clients navigating anxiety, PTSD, or burnout. When paired with animal-assisted therapy, these interventions can enhance the client's sense of trust, empathy, and belonging—all core elements of effective therapeutic work.

A Therapeutic Group Structure

At Lone Oak, I've led group sound meditations designed to mirror the structure of a clinical intervention. Each session begins with introductions and psychoeducation around sound as a therapeutic tool. Participants then engage in a 60-minute guided sound meditation, using breathwork and a range of instruments to support nervous system regulation. Afterward, clients are invited to reflect on their experiences through verbal processing or expressive arts.

To evaluate outcomes, I used both qualitative reflections and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), a standardized clinical tool for measuring stress and anxiety. Many participants showed reductions in self-reported anxiety levels after the session and described increased feelings of groundedness, safety, and emotional release.

Working With Non-Verbal Clients

A major insight from this work has come from supporting clients who struggle with verbal expression. One non-verbal client previously disengaged from therapy, but responded deeply to sound-based interventions like tuning forks, drumming, and singing bowls. Paired with

animal-assisted strategies, these tools allowed for non-verbal release and connection. Over time, the client exhibited clearer emotional responses, improved regulation, and increased trust in the therapeutic space. This case reinforced for me how important it is to offer accessible, multi-sensory entry points in therapeutic work.

What This Means for Social Work

The preliminary outcomes of this project suggest that integrating sound healing and expressive arts into social work practice, particularly within group work or nature-based settings, can improve emotional regulation, self-awareness, and therapeutic alliance. These practices align with trauma-informed care, somatic social work, and strengths-based models that prioritize the whole person.

Importantly, these interventions expand access to care by creating space for clients who may not feel safe or supported in traditional therapeutic environments. They offer clinicians alternative tools to meet clients' needs, especially those who have experienced disconnection, sensory dysregulation, or difficulty expressing themselves through words.

Looking Ahead

This work contributes to the growing body of clinical practices that integrate creativity, embodiment, and nature into the therapeutic process. It invites social workers, counselors, and mental health professionals to consider how holistic, sensory-based modalities can complement their work and support healing in new ways. I want to encourage others in the social work field to explore how sound and expressive arts can deepen therapeutic presence and open new pathways to connection.

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