Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality Research Projects - 2026

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We extend our sincere appreciation to the diverse group of highly competent professionals and academics who contributed selflessly their time, talents and wisdom towards the success of our graduates as Supervisors and Examiners.

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Abstracts

Capstone Projects

Transforming Place into Safe Space: Integrating Arts-Based Psychoeducational programming in Learning and Community Places
Kelsey Beier (MPS-AT)

Arts-based practices are effective in transforming physical environments into emotionally safe spaces that foster learning and exploration for students and clients. This capstone project explores the integration of arts-based psychoeducational approaches and programming within public or institutional learning and community settings. The purpose of this capstone project involves looking at the intersections of education and art therapy while offering proposed professional development opportunities for staff and accessible arts-based psychoeducational programming for students and clients. This would allow staff, students, and clients to express themselves and their experiences in ways beyond the confines of a traditional pedagogical or therapeutic approach. The proposed arts-based psychoeducational programming includes an integration of Alberta curricular objectives in the subject areas of Art and Physical Education and Wellness with expressive arts therapy approaches including bibliotherapy. Studies support the conclusion that arts-based approaches within a learning environment are beneficial for all students and clients, including those with learning disabilities, experiences of trauma, emotional challenges such as anxiety, depression, or regulation, and low self-esteem. Integrating arts-based psychoeducational practices and approaches within public learning and community settings allows for programming opportunities that are universal and inclusive to all learner and client needs.

The Forgotten Middle: Honouring Identity, Belonging, and Meaning in Early Adolescence

Natasha Boone (MPS)

This capstone project focuses on early adolescence, particularly within the middle school years, ages 11–13. Drawing on research from developmental psychology, education, and youth mental health, the literature highlights early adolescence as a key developmental period that is often under-supported in both research and practice. During this time, young people are navigating rapid cognitive, emotional, social, and relational changes, alongside an increasing capacity for reflection and self-awareness. These shifts make questions of identity, belonging, and purpose especially salient.

The literature suggests that while social-emotional learning (SEL) and resilience-based approaches offer important tools for supporting young people, they often focus more on skill-building and behaviour than on how adolescents make sense of their experiences and develop a coherent sense of self. Narrative identity and meaning-making frameworks help address this gap by emphasizing how young people construct identity through relationships, experience, and the stories that they tell about themselves. Research also highlights the growing influence of digital environments in shaping connection, comparison, and self-understanding.

Despite this, there remains a gap in approaches that intentionally bring together identity development, belonging, and meaning-making in a relational and developmentally responsive way. You, Me, and Community responds to this gap through an arts-based, reflective program designed to support early adolescents as they explore questions of identity, purpose, and connection.

Personal reflections on my developing professional identity, spiritual approach, and evolving understanding of adolescent development are also explored within the integrative paper.

Natural Recovery Processes in Psychotherapy: A Multimodal Literature Review and Practice-Oriented Guidebook

Sevgi Cin (MPS)

Trauma recovery is increasingly understood as a multidimensional process that extends beyond symptom reduction to include regulation, relational repair, embodied safety, and meaning making. This capstone project examined psychotherapy as an integrative pathway for supporting trauma recovery by facilitating these processes within therapeutic work. Particular attention was given to contexts where therapy served as the primary avenue of care, including cases in which clients declined or did not engage in pharmacological treatment. Grounded in interdisciplinary trauma literature, the project explored how therapists could ethically and responsibly accompany traumatized individuals by attending to pacing, stabilization, client autonomy, and the therapeutic relationship. A narrative literature review synthesized peer-reviewed trauma scholarship published primarily between 2000 and 2025, alongside select foundational texts. The review drew on cognitive and behavioural approaches, somatic and body-based interventions (including EMDR), expressive and creative arts practices, spiritual and meaning-oriented perspectives, and relationally focused models of care. Thematic analysis identified shared mechanisms supporting recovery across modalities, including safety and stabilization, nervous system regulation, psychological flexibility, symbolic expression, co-regulation, and meaning making. Across approaches, relational safety and psychoeducation emerged as foundational conditions enabling other therapeutic interventions. Despite growing recognition of these processes, the literature has offered limited guidance on how early-career therapists can operationalize them in accessible, structured ways.

In response, this project developed a practical, clinician-friendly guidebook to support integrative, trauma-informed practice and to flexible, clinically grounded tools, this capstone bridged research and practice and contributed to humane, culturally responsive pathways to trauma recovery.

Seeds of Resilience: Integrating Spirituality into Children's Summer Camp Experiences

Semhar (Mary) Dawit (MPS)

This project explores how a spiritually focused summer program can support the resilience of children aged nine to twelve who lived through some difficult times or are currently managing some challenges however, it is also open to everyone of that age. The aim is to create Seeds of Resilience through a set of flexible camp modules that bring together spirituality, culture and psychoeducation to help children find strength and hope. The project used an analytical and literature based approach drawing on research and practice with children, spirituality, trauma and decolonizing perspectives and then turning these insights into tangible and fun activities as well as leader guidelines. The tools of the project are a literature review through a developmental and resilience lens, and the step by step design of six low cost and adaptable modules that could be used in community agencies, actual camps, churches or even in schools. It is recognized that resilience is a relational and spiritual process rather than a fixed personality trait that spirituality is broader than formal religion and that children are active meaning-makers who live in families and communities. With this frame the study showed that spirituality appears again and again in global research as a key resource for coping, making sense of hardship while managing emotions and feeling a sense of belonging, especially for children who experienced war and migration and still face poverty and discrimination. The final project includes five modules on belonging, wonder, gratitude, meaning-making and empathy, while the sixth module prepares leaders in spiritual sensitivity, cultural humility, trauma-informed care and clear ethical boundaries to keep this project alive. In contrast to many resilience or trauma-informed programs that avoid or minimize spirituality, Seeds of Resilience offers a more integrated and culturally aware model that honours everyone including Indigenous, African, migrant and people with different abilities. The project concludes that when spiritual support is offered carefully with strong ethics and a decolonizing awareness, it can be a powerful part of the wider network of therapy and community support for vulnerable children. It recommends piloting Seeds of Resilience in real community settings with elders and local partners and then refining it based on feedback, so that children's spiritual lives are seen as central to their healing and growth.

The Power of Ritual in Psychotherapy: A Meaningful Altar Creation Guidebook for Psychotherapists

Ravinder Johal (MPS-AT)

Ritual and altars have been used across cultures throughout human history as ways to honour ancestors and make offerings. Ritual was introduced into Western psychotherapy as a treatment modality within the last fifty years.

There are models for ritual use in psychotherapy but none of them use the altar as a container for the ritual process. The guidebook highlights key components of effective ritual design and offers guidance for therapists on integrating altars and ritual into psychotherapy. While the primary focus

is on supporting clients in processing grief, trauma and life transitions, the framework can be adapted and applied to a wide range of therapeutic concerns. The ritual altar model presented in the guidebook can be beneficial to help a person process thoughts and feelings when they cannot find the words as well as provide actionable steps and a stable place to process and contain emotions and thoughts. This can result in the feeling of safety, agency and regulation of the nervous system.

We live in a multicultural society so there is a likelihood that a therapist will have clients who are familiar with ritual and altars therefore may request using them in a session or as a part of their therapeutic intervention. A therapist may also use ritual and altars in their personal life but are not sure how to integrate the use of them in a therapeutic framework. The guidebook can be of benefit for all these reasons.

CAMP: An Experiential Somatic Modality Trauma Workshop for Early Career and Student Therapists Try Before you Train

Sedef Koc (MPS)

In recent years, the field of trauma therapy has seen growing interest in somatic modalities that promote healing through body-based interventions. These include both empirically supported and experientially informed approaches, many of which share foundations related to regulation, nervous system activation, and embodied awareness. Despite this growing interest, access to structured learning and affordable training pathways remains uneven, especially for graduate students and early career mental health professionals. For that reason, this capstone project is guided by two questions: First, what does the literature say about how embodied modalities facilitate trauma recovery, and what are their mechanisms of change? Second, how can we create opportunities for graduate students and early career mental health professionals to both learn about these modalities and personally experience their impact in ways that are more accessible and financially affordable? Existing literature demonstrates strong empirical support for certain somatic modalities, especially EMDR, with emerging evidence for Somatic Experiencing and Sensorimotor Psychotherapy, yet formal training remains costly and difficult to access. In contrast, experientially informed modalities such as Recall Healing and NeuroFormat have very limited or no clinical outcome research yet are increasingly available through informal channels and affordable. Additionally, no existing models or programs appear to mirror the structure or intent of this project, pointing to a gap in integrative, experiential learning opportunities that introduce and demonstrate several embodied approaches within a single setting. Therefore, this applied project is designed as a two-day, non-residential workshop that bridges academic learning and experiential practice by offering a structured, ethically grounded opportunity to “try before you train,” supporting emerging professionals to make confident and informed decisions about future specialization.

Finding Shakti Through Group Art Therapy: Healing from Gender-Based Oppression and Intergenerational Trauma in Hindu Immigrant Women and Daughters

Dhruvi Patel (MPS-AT)

The capstone project "Finding Shakti Through Art Therapy: Healing from Gender-Based Oppression and Intergenerational Trauma in Hindu Immigrant Women and Daughters," introduces a group art therapy program for Hindu immigrant women and daughters in Canada, navigating gender-based oppression and intergenerational trauma. The background research focuses on how historical trauma and systemic patriarchal structures create a legacy of silence and domestic burdens. The central problem is the lack of culturally sensitive mental health support, as standard Western models often overlook the unique spiritual and cultural identity of Hindu women. While South Asian mental health is occasionally explored, a significant gap remains in using Hindu theology within clinical art therapy. This project fills that gap by using the concept of Shakti, the divine feminine power, as a psychotherapeutic framework for healing. The rationale is to move away from the underrepresentation of this population in research and provide a pathway for women to reconstruct their identities as empowered beings. The program utilizes a methodology combining feminist, social action, and psychodynamic theories through non-verbal art interventions. Participants use storytelling, ancestral genograms, mask-making, and chakra-based mandala art to explore internal conflicts and regulate emotions. This project argues that by connecting with divine inner strength, women can break cycles of inherited pain and transform the mother-daughter relationship into a source of collective healing. By shifting from private suffering to shared empowerment, this project offers a practical model for therapists to foster resilience within the Hindu community.

Imprint: A Culturally Responsive Toolkit for Non-Indigenous Psychotherapists Supporting Indigenous Community Members Through Addiction Recovery

Nicole Ray (MPS)

Indigenous communities experience a disproportional level of addiction comparatively to non-Indigenous communities (Lavalley et al., 2020). This reality is rooted in historical and intergenerational trauma, ongoing structural oppression, and the loss of traditional coping skills. Conventional Western approaches to addiction treatment and recovery include cognitive behaviour theory and disease-model programming that most often prioritize behaviour change and symptom reduction. These models and programs can overlook the embodied, relational, and trauma-related dimensions of addiction. This capstone project introduces a psychoeducational toolkit for ally psychotherapists that adopts a two-eyed seeing approach to understanding addiction through a somatic lens. Grounded in both Indigenous and Western ways of knowing, this toolkit sees addiction as a protective, embodied response to trauma rather than a disease. This toolkit provides visuals and language to describe Attachment Theory, The Window of Tolerance and Polyvagal Theory, along with metaphors and practical applications that can be adapted by Indigenous Nations and other racialized groups. Its aim is to reduce the shame of addiction, increase self-understanding, and promote agency amongst individuals with trauma adapted strategies. This project addresses a gap in professional psychotherapy practice by offering ally professionals an alternative to standard recovery and treatment models that is culturally responsive and holistic.

Art Therapy for Recovery from Cultic Abuse: Re/Constitution of Self

Bronwyn Snefjella (MPS-AT)

This capstone, prepared for a Masters in Psychotherapy and Spirituality, with a specialization in Art Therapy, focuses on the possibility applicability of art therapy to support survivors in recovery from negative experiences in cultic groups. Cult survivors may experience a range of negative psychological impacts which influence mental health and well-being. While there is a small body of literature related to providing therapy to cult survivors, there are few sources pertaining to art therapy with this client group. This exploration provides some initial considerations on the application of art therapy, broadly, as an approach.

Theses

Understanding Art Therapy Through the Art of Therapists: How Creativity and Therapeutic Awareness Support Change

Kathleen Arnold (MPS-AT)

Art therapy research needs to produce stronger evidence of efficacy, which requires a solid theoretical framework (Betts & Deaver, 2019; de Witte et al., 2021; Kapitan, 2018). Art therapists have knowledge and experience of their own creative process and artmaking which could be used to generate a unifying theoretical framework. This constructivist grounded theory study drew from interviews with six art therapists to construct a substantive theory that addresses the question: How do art therapists' creative processes in their own artmaking contribute to therapeutic changes in their wellbeing? Two interviews were conducted with each art therapist, and each completed an independent artmaking session between the interviews. My analysis identified that creativity becomes therapeutic when it is focused (consciously or unconsciously) on improving wellbeing. Creativity and awareness are the mechanisms that drive therapeutic changes in the creative therapeutic process. This process has three phases: awakening, making, and integrating through interacting with the artwork. Through the physical, embodied, and creative act of transforming internal experience into an external artwork, what was invisible becomes visible and what was unconscious becomes conscious, resulting in deeper understanding and enhanced wellbeing. The methodology used in this study could be developed by a team of art therapist researchers to generate a broad theoretical framework of how artmaking and creativity support therapeutic change in art therapy. A broader theory could support improved study designs for art therapy research.

My Growing Relationship with the Natural World: A Heuristic Self-Search Inquiry

Patricia Desnoyers (MPS)

The discovery and integration of our affective relationship with the natural world can address an important ethical gap for psychotherapists in that we are supporting others to grow in affective intrinsic relationships while negating our fundamental relationship with the natural world. As a therapist in training, I have delved into my own experience of growing in conscious awareness of my affective reciprocal relationship with the natural world and implications for the formation of

psychotherapists. In heuristic self-search inquiry, the researcher stays with the I-who-feels accessing dynamic knowledge that is only known by staying in feelings. This process aligned with my natural approach to research where insights and knowledge are revealed though surrendering to my felt sense and embodied knowing. Creative expression was used as a non-cognitive means of self-dialogue in order to allow my unconscious, tacit knowledge to surface. Through the narrative of storytelling, findings from the research were presented including encountering: my own nature; my limited perception; the importance of breath as an invisible connecting force; no separation between life and death; that everything is part of a rhythmic cycle of energy and connection; and the healing of a deep spiritual wound through experiencing the power of belonging. Implications for the formation of psychotherapists, including myself, are highlighted including the crucial need for opportunities that impact our perception, experiencing affect through encounters with the natural world and repetitive experiences of affective resonance.

Embodied Psychotherapy and the New Materialist Turn: A Heuristic Inquiry

Logan Hanzen (MPS)

Our bodies are the basis of our existence in the world, yet the role of the body in healing has been marginalized within the history of talk therapy. In contrast, embodied psychotherapy emerges from a paradigm that holds the body in balance with the mind. Several paradigmatic tensions emerge between somatic and traditional talk therapy, particularly in the relationship between mind/body and self/other. This thesis explores the nature of these tensions by investigating the following questions: *What is the experience of embodied psychotherapists practicing within an individualistic paradigm?* and, *What might the implications of this phenomenon be for the practice of psychotherapy?* Informed by Barad's (2007) agential realism and utilizing heuristic inquiry, individual interviews with four embodied psychotherapists, alongside the researcher's own living experiences, provided the data that was analyzed through the various processes of heuristic inquiry and are presented as individual depictions, a composite depiction, and a creative synthesis that emerged from the author's own creative writing. Themes included experiencing the body's wisdom; the living nature of the tension experienced between embodiment and Western individualism; and spirituality in relation to embodiment. Implications are then shared in relation to the broader practice of psychotherapy, including a discussion towards considering a balance between the body, mind, and spirit within psychotherapy. This thesis aims to contribute to novel inquiry and new ways of thinking, being, and becoming within the field.

A Crisis of Being and Meaning: The Lived Experience of Spiritual Emergency

aAron Munson (MPS)

Spiritual emergency refers to a crisis that arises in which one's experience becomes too intense or overwhelming, making integration and functioning difficult, if not impossible, within one's society's cultural norms. A spiritual emergency can be a time of psychological upheaval and instability, in which a person's meaning-making system or worldview may be challenged, if not shattered, leading to feelings such as intense fear, confusion, disorientation, dissolution, disintegration, or ego breakdown. Psychological crises, such as spiritual emergencies, are often pathologized within a

Western mental health framework, leaving people feeling unseen and experiencing care that is felt as lacking empathy and curiosity toward the contents of their inner world and lived experience.

A lack of qualitative research in the existing literature on spiritual emergency leaves a gap in the voices of those who have experienced it. This research, which employs hermeneutic phenomenology as its methodology, seeks to fill that gap by exploring the lived experience of spiritual emergency and the healing and hope found within that process. Through a reflexive analysis of the researcher's own experience and that of eight co-researchers who have identified as having experienced a spiritual emergency, themes of disintegration, disorientation, and rupture are explored to describe the lived experience of crisis.

This research contributes to the existing literature on spiritual emergency by offering a non-pathologizing, curious perspective that encourages a deeper understanding of the experience of spiritual emergency and argues that alternative frameworks for relating to a crisis provide opportunities for integration and a sense of agency in re-storying oneself.

The findings suggest that spiritual emergency is experienced as a rupture in one's meaning-making, which can challenge one's sense of self, relationships with others, and connection to a spiritual framework that provides meaning and purpose in one's life. The stories shared describe both the inherent dangers of a crisis and the potential for personal growth that may occur with appropriate support and integration.

Descent through the Menstrual Cycle: A Depth Psychological Self-Study

Jenna (Inge) Remesz (MPS)

This thesis examines the intersection of hysteria and the archetypal constellation of the *puella aeterna* as a specific brand of disconnection from Self and from the feminine, characterized by disembodiment, animus-identification, afflicted mediality, and flight into inflation followed by collapse into shame. The central image of this work is that of the Great Mother goddess, and the research itself becomes a crucible through which the researcher, who in many ways identifies with the hysteric and the *puella*, attempts to come down to earth – connect to herself and to the Great Mother – through connecting to her menstrual cycle, dreams, and imagination. Drawing on Jungian and psychoanalytic theory, the researcher utilizes personal reflection, dream analysis, and attention to synchronicity and emotion across the menstrual cycle to arrive at the embodied discovery that cyclical attunement offers a form of grounded descent. By grounding oneself in the menstrual rhythm and its accompanying dream life, the ego strengthens to the point of being able to cooperate with a once disparaging animus, and mediality becomes less hysterical and performative and more integrated and self-containing. The study offers an intimate, raw, and honest look into the complexes and inner world of the researcher and hopes that its subjectivity can be extrapolated upon as an offering towards the broader psychological understanding of these particular feminine afflictions.