EMBODIED BODY MAPPING FOR ADULTS LIVING WITH EATING ISSUES: AN ART PSYCHOTHERAPY GROUP

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WHAT ARE EATING ISSUES?

Eating issues (disorders), are a serious form of mental illness, “characterized by a persistent disturbance of eating, or eating related behaviour, that results in the altered consumption or absorption of food and that significantly impairs physical health or psychosocial functioning” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 329). Eating issues have devastating consequences: compromising mental and physical health, engendering self-esteem, jeopardizing education, employment and financial security, and overexposing women (men, LGBT women) to comorbid mental issues and life-threatening medical complications (e.g. Arcelus et al., 2011; Fichter & Grzaiffi, 2016; LeBellac, 2014).

WHAT IS THE FEMINIST EMBODIMENT THEORY OF EATING ISSUES?

Embodiment captures the complexity of the inner-outer relationships we have with our lived experience, including the cultural, social, political, and spiritual environments that shape us (e.g. McBride & Kwee, 2019; Piran & Teall, 2012). From the embodiment perspective, eating issues reflect the distortion of our appearance-based society, expressing our society’s disembodiment; the mind-body split. Western cultures foster “internalized objectification, body shame, low self-esteem, and internalized and disordered eating” (McBride & Kwee, 2019, p. 19).

Eating issues on the individual level are “a set of embodied, physical acts that function to negotiate what is perceived as overwhelming and internal emotional and moral ‘weight’” (Cook-Cottone, 2016, p. 98). Embodiment research confirms that the onset of eating issues start in early childhood, infancy (qu’noncer), childhood, and adolescence. Eating issues were instilled in infancy and fostered with further trauma, abuse, pain, or disconnection with body image. In my early 20s I embarked on a new healing journey through art making, and with the support of friends and counselors, was able to change my eating behaviors and worked through my early childhood traumas and insecure attachment issues, reconnecting to my sense of embodiment.

The rationale for my project was instilled during my art psychotherapy internship at an eating disorder hospital unit. Storytelling of the patient’s tales were based on “no hope for recovery,” which propelled me to start asking the fundamental question for one research; is there hope for recovery from eating issues? Is it possible to be made well in our current perspective and treatment? How can art psychotherapy support recovery from eating issues? How can we create a platform to support eating issues? How can we facilitate defense mechanisms and sociality for therapeutic processing? Is it possible for individuals to be fed, healed, and transformed? Is there a living body engaged in this process? Existing research and data collection methods will be used to collect data and share resources with clients. Knowing from direct experience how eating issues can be misunderstood, mistreated and stigmatized, I felt called to develop a program based on embodiment theory with the use of arts powerful healing capacities. I believe the solution is to shift perspectives to reclaim internal power and roles of affected individuals, but also to actively raise awareness of the forms of social oppression that they experience.

PERSONAL INTEREST & RATIONALE

Seeded in a traumatic birth, with a mother suffering from postpartum depression, I lacked the essential emotional intelligence as an infant. The repeated conflicting family dynamics played out during family meals connected eating with vulnerability. It is evident that developing an eating issue as a way to cope with emotional and sexual abuse or neglect experiences. Both eating issues were instilled in infancy and fostered with further trauma, abuse, pain, or disconnection with body image. In my early 20s I embarked on a new healing journey through art making, and with the support of friends and counselors, was able to change my eating behaviors and worked through my early childhood traumas and insecure attachment issues, reconnecting to my sense of embodiment.

 explain the role of engagement in bodily mapping and embodiment in the healing process.

WHY

Art psychotherapy can be both healing and empowering. Embodied body mapping for adults living with eating issues is an innovative approach to healing. It aims to provide individuals with a platform to voice their lived experiences, support social engagement and advocacy for change in social and political perspectives. The project is informed by emergent research, group therapy, and an individual’s lived experience to support a deeper understanding of the complex nature of eating issues. The use of embodied mapping sessions is a powerful tool for individuals to explore their experiences and share their stories. The project seeks to empower individuals by providing a safe and supportive environment for them to express themselves and connect with others who have similar experiences. By working together, individuals can build resilience, gain strength, and find hope for recovery from eating issues. This project is a collaborative effort that brings together individuals from different backgrounds and perspectives to work towards a common goal of healing and advocacy.

WHAT

This art psychotherapy group is a structure based workshop where the participants are directed through a series of guided exercises facilitated by the therapist. The workshop consists of 8 sessions, 2 hours each, or a 3 day, 8 hours a day intensive.

WHAT IS EMBODIED BODY MAPPING?

Full body size maps are an art psychotherapy intervention explorating intersections with colours, paint, images, symbols, and words. It is the roots in making visible marginalized, oppressed, and silenced experiences (Solomon, 2002) serving to: “communicate non-verbal material which transcends space and time; builds self-esteem, and describes dissociative states” (Brooke, 2008, p. 86); facilitating differentiation from the internal experience (Scherer, 1995); offering a safe container to regulate intense emotional expressions, and body exploration and expression (e.g. Heiderscheit, 2016; Levens, 1995; Makin, 1994, 2000). The full size body maps of the participants are exhibited to the public to advocate for new perspectives and treatment approaches that are embodied and participatory, in which the personal narratives of people living with eating issues are included and valued (Matussek & Kruusdonk, 2009; Holmes, 2016; Laneuville & Kwee, 2019).

REFLECTIONS

The reality is painful: eating issues are exceedingly prevalent and there is a general disagreement about prevention, care and treatment. Current treatment approaches have limited substantial recovery results. This Capstone project is intended to provide a different perspective on an individual issue to a collective disorder of modern society, focused on an embodied recovery and the lived experience of self - socially, sexually, spiritually and politically. To advocate for this marginalized population. I hope to show how the integration of art making and embodiment psychotherapy can accomplish not only successful therapy, but also be part of social change.

NEXT STEPS

- Facilitating embodied body mapping workshops and exhibitions.
- Making use of social media (i.e. website/blog, video’s) for further advocacy.
- Developing a research model to collect data from participants in ongoing workshops to provide more insight into how embodiment can play a role in treatment, prevention and recovery.
- Developing an embodiment art psychotherapy training program for professionals working with people living with eating issues, using body mapping as the main intervention tool.

“The people just don’t get it. They think it is all about food and they know much you weigh. And they think it is about what you see on the outside. And it is about everything else.”

(Shan, 2011, loc 635)