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Therapeutic Art for Individuals with Multiple Sclerosis

Alexandra Kocsik

Thomas Jefferson University, alexandra.kocsik@jefferson.edu

Silva Markovic-Plese, MD, PhD

Thomas Jefferson University, silva.markovic-plese@jefferson.edu

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Therapeutic Art for Individuals with Multiple Sclerosis

Alexandra Kocsik, Silva Markovic-Plese, MD, PhD*

(*) Indicates primary advisor

Introduction: Depression is more prevalent in individuals with MS than in the average population, which presents complications of quality of life beyond simply the primary disease process. This project aims to explore the immediate emotional benefits of therapeutic art sessions for individuals with MS, in addition to exploring the feasibility of reducing concomitant depression in this population with therapeutic art alongside standard medical therapy.

Methods: Therapeutic art sessions were held with 3 support groups of 5 to 12 individuals with MS. Participants were initially prompted with a writing exercise regarding how they perceive themselves, and then prompted to paint a self-portrait using their writing as a guide. Each participant produced 1 painting per session, with many participants engaging in multiple sessions across time. Acrylic paint was used in order to allow participants of all levels of motor function, dexterity, and artistic skill to participate.

Results: The products ranged from literal portraits of participants' faces to interpretive pieces of what it feels like to live with MS. During the therapeutic sessions, participants reflected on their experience living with MS and expressed the resurfaced emotions in

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their paintings, as well as during debrief discussions. The pieces were presented at the Philadelphia MS Breakthroughs Conference, where not only the project was appreciated by members of the MS community but interest in the continuation of the project was expressed.

Discussion: The results from this project demonstrate the immediate benefits of therapeutic art sessions for participants of the study whose involvement produced meaningful, emotional experiences. Moving forward, the greater MS community expressed positivity towards the project and support for its future expansion which will explore not only the feasibility of therapeutic art sessions but additionally its measured clinical effects on depression, aiming to validate the use of therapeutic art for depression with MS.