



The Sisyphean Task of Recovery: Clay Art Therapy as a Harm-Reduction Voyage for Adult Male Substance Users

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Background: Substance use disorders are frequently accompanied by emotional dysregulation, trauma, and a high risk of relapse. To address these psychosocial challenges, and within a harm-reduction framework, arts-based therapies provide an inclusive, embodied means of fostering emotional regulation, meaning-making, and self-renewal. Clay Art Therapy (CAT) offers tactile, repetitive, and reflective processes that can restore emotional balance, cognitive flexibility, and enhance resilience. This study examines how a harm-reduction-oriented CAT program may support psychosocial rehabilitation for men with substance-use experiences.

Methods: A 40-hour CAT program was implemented between 2023 and 2025 with 30 adult male participants in a therapeutic-farm-based rehabilitation setting in Taiwan. Led by the principal researcher, a trained art therapist specializing in ceramics, weekly 2.5-hour sessions combined structured pottery making with guided reflective writing. Session processes were documented through written reflections and digital images of participants' ceramic works, and progress was monitored collaboratively with rehabilitation staff. Following program completion, ten participants joined two focus-group discussions reflecting on their CAT experiences. Data was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), enabling exploration of both explicit narratives and implicit, nonverbal



expressions. The analysis was triangulated with participants' reflective writings and verified through member checking to ensure trustworthiness.

Results: Three interrelated themes emerged: (1) Emotional regulation and stress management – participants described CAT as grounding and soothing, reducing cravings and impulsive reactions; (2) Symbolic reframing of trauma – creative processes enabled externalization and transformation of painful experiences, promoting post-traumatic growth; (3) Resilience and cognitive flexibility – repeated CAT cycles fostered adaptive thinking, a positive self-concept, and resilience against relapse.

Conclusion: Harm-reduction-oriented CAT offers a compassionate and pragmatic recovery voyage for substance use. By emphasizing creative engagement, emotional regulation, and meaning-making rather than abstinence alone, CAT supports enduring resilience and a renewed sense of self—reflecting the ethos of repetition and returning central to the arts therapies.

Biography

Joshua Kin-man Nan, PhD, is Associate Professor at Saint Francis University of Hong Kong. His training and practice integrate social work, art therapy, divinity, and spirituality. He previously held faculty positions at The University of Hong Kong as Deputy Program Director of Expressive Arts Therapy, and at Hong Kong Baptist University as PhD Program Leader. He contributes to the Hong Kong Association of Art Therapists as their foundation course consultant and serves on the Review Board of *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*. He won the AATA Best Paper Award (2023) and HKBU Teaching Excellence Nomination (2022).

Y.X. Lin is a Licensed Social Worker, Chao-Lu Farm Therapeutic Community. As a social worker accompanying individuals with substance use disorders, she has witnessed how the participants have transformed through pain during relapse as well as through a lengthy process of self-reflection. She believes the role of a social worker is to provide steady support and help the participants embark upon their own unique recovery journeys.



S.Y. Yilu is Director of the Chao-Lu Farm Therapeutic Community. At present, he focuses on examining the impact of ‘chemsex’ on individuals. He believes that the core of addiction recovery lies in understanding the underlying causes of addiction rather than mere prohibition of substance use. Through accompanying friends through a process of self-exploration, he has assisted them in learning risk-benefit assessment and methods of harm reduction that enable them to transform through pain and suffering.

X.R. Lin is Research and Development Specialist, Taiwan Lourdes Association. Through accompanying individuals with substance use disorders, she has witnessed how they have transformed and have chances to narrate their life stories. As a researcher, she believes that practice and research inform each other.

J.B. Ku is Deputy Secretary-General, Taiwan Lourdes Association. Having served at the Taiwan Lourdes Association for many years, Ku firmly believes that the essence of her work lies not in aiding but accompanying those who need care. Through encounters with friends living with HIV, she has witnessed the life force they demonstrate when facing adversity, which has reaffirmed her mission.

S.C. Hsu is Secretary-General, Taiwan Lourdes Association and one of the founding members of the association. As a social work educator, family therapist, and psychodrama director, he has long been committed to serving marginalized communities. Drawing upon the expertise in harm reduction, systemic family therapy, and trauma-informed care, he believes in mutually empowering one another through human rights-based approaches to maintain dignity, embrace hope, and enable fulfilling lives.

Recent Publications/Presentations

Nan, J.K.M. (2025). **Regulation of emotion: The theories, techniques, and practice of clay therapy.** Whole-day advanced practice workshop. *American Art Therapy Association Annual Conference*. Portland. October 2025.

Nan, J.K.M., Huang, X.S., & Kang, M.Y. (2023). **Effects of clay art therapy on emotion regulation and hair cortisol concentration for youth with emotional problems.** *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 40, 117-125. DOI: 10.1080/07421656.2023.2202289.



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Nan, J.K.M., Hinz, L.D., Riccardi, M., & Gotshall, K. (Ed.) (2026; accepted for publication).

Expressive Therapies Continuum across creative arts practice: Integrating theory and application. Routledge.