



It's the journey, not the destination. Effectiveness of group arts therapies compared to group counselling for adults with mixed mental health diagnoses: results from the ERA trial

Catherine Carr on behalf of the ERA study team

Background: While there is evidence for the effectiveness of the arts in addressing a range of mental health problems, evidence for provision in community mental health settings is mixed. Limitations of previous trials have been a focus on one single arts therapy modality and inclusion of only one diagnosis. This is problematic as we know that people can hold strong preferences for/against a particular art-form and group heterogeneity is an important therapeutic factor.

Methods: We assessed the effectiveness of three types of group arts therapy (art, dance movement and music therapy) compared to group counselling in reducing psychological distress in a parallel randomised controlled trial with qualitative process evaluation.

Participants were adults diagnosed with schizophrenia, depression or anxiety disorders with psychological distress (>1.65 on the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) Global Severity Index (GSI)). We asked participants to choose their preferred form of arts therapy and randomised them to this or to group counselling control. Both arms were offered 40 sessions, twice per week, lasting 90 minutes. We assessed outcomes at the end of therapy, 6 and 12 months later alongside qualitative interviews. Our primary outcome was psychological distress on the BSI GSI at post-intervention analysed using linear mixed models and intention to treat.

Results: 425 participants were randomised to arts therapies (n=266) or active control (n=199). Symptoms reduced in both arms across all timepoints. We found no difference between groups in the BSI GSI at the end of intervention.

Discussion: Our study found that arts therapies groups were no more clinically effective than counselling groups for this population. Despite the non-significant findings of our 'destination', we learned much on our journey about the value of the arts, group therapy and



trial designs. I will share our learning in relation to treatment adherence, qualitative findings and common factors in group psychotherapy.

Biography

Catherine Carr, PhD, studied Music Technology at the University of York before training as a music therapist at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Her research focuses on group music therapy in different contexts including PTSD, intensive group music therapy for psychiatric inpatients and group songwriting for chronic depression. From 2018-2025 she led the ERA trial, a multi-centre randomised controlled trial of group arts therapies for community mental health patients. Catherine is strategic lead for allied health professional research and provides music therapy and supervision in mental health services for older adults at East London NHS Foundation Trust.

Recent Publications

Karkou, V., Sacco, P.L., Pelowski, M., Theofanopoulou, C., Carr, C., Huet, V., Bourne, J., Dowlen, R., Chatterjee, H. (2025). **Comment on ‘Can arts-based interventions improve health? A conceptual and methodological critique’ by Skov and Nadal – A critique of the critique: Towards a more nuanced evaluation of current research on the health outcomes of arts-based interventions.** *Physics of Life Reviews*, 54, 147-151.

Tjasink, M., Carr, C.E., Bassett, P., Soosaipillai, G., Ougrin, D., Priebe, S. (2025). **Art therapy to reduce burnout and mental distress in healthcare professionals in acute hospitals: a randomised controlled trial.** *BMJ Public Health*, 3:e002251.

Carr, C.E., Medicott, E., Hooper, R., Feng, Y., Mihaylova, B., Priebe, S. (2023). **Effectiveness of group arts therapies (art therapy, dance movement therapy and music therapy) compared to group counselling for diagnostically heterogeneous psychiatric community patients: study protocol for a randomized controlled trial in mental health services (the ERA study).** *Trials*, 24, 557.