A Study on the Application of Art Expression in Mental Health Interventions for Asian American Youth Based on Interviews with Multidisciplinary Experts

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Abstract

Through interviews with mental health professionals, an in-depth investigation is conducted into the current state of mental health among Asian American youth. This paper first examines the mental health challenges faced by Asian American youth and potential strategies for addressing them. Building on these findings, the paper proposes a practical framework, Youth Mental Health Art (YMHArt), designed to support improvements in Asian American youth' mental health. The framework has three central components: (1) creating artwork through artistic expression to transform personal inner experiences into shared experiences that can be communicated to others, thereby fostering social empathy, reducing stigma, and evoking emotional resonance among young people; (2) promoting artistic expression as a nonverbal, creative process through which individuals can release suppressed emotions, reconstruct internal perceptions, and engage in self-exploration and healing; and (3) expressing and processing deep-seated emotions through a non-verbal creative process, guided by an art therapist. The framework is further examined through more than two years of practical experience with the YMHArt project. In addition, this paper explores how artistic expression can help Asian American youth navigate mental health challenges through two distinct approaches: art healing and art therapy. Finally, the paper summarizes its findings and outlines directions for future work.

Keywords: Asian American youth; mental health; artistic expression; art healing; art therapy

1. Introduction

According to the latest updated data published by organizations including the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) [1], The Asian American Foundation (TAAF) [2], and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [3], Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) youth are facing unprecedented challenges to their mental health.

In December 2024, The Asian American Foundation published *Beyond the Surface* [4], a nationwide research report examining the mental health of AANHPI youth. Its statistical findings are alarming.

- The study found that suicide is the leading cause of death among Asian Americans aged 15–24 and the second-leading cause of death among Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in the same age group. Thirty percent of AANHPI youth reported having planned or attempted suicide at some point in their lives. The proportions were particularly high among Filipino youth (35%) and East Asian youth (34%).
- Using the widely recognized Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), the research team found that nearly 48% of AANHPI youth scored above the threshold for moderate depression, indicating a high prevalence of depressive symptoms.
- Furthermore, 93% of AANHPI youth experienced racial discrimination during the preceding year, ranging from microaggressions to explicit hate speech. Such discriminatory experiences can have lasting negative effects on youth' mental health.

- Despite these serious mental health challenges, 26% of individuals in high-risk groups had never spoken with a mental health professional.

The Asian American Foundation's youth mental health report reveals the psychological pressures experienced within the community and the barriers that prevent young people from seeking help. On the surface, these challenges may appear to be individual emotional crises. At a deeper level, however, they result from the complex interaction of social structures, cultural beliefs, and the availability of mental health services.

In addition, Surgo Health's *Youth Mental Health Tracker* (YMHT), one of the most comprehensive youth mental health data platforms and research reports in the United States [5], has revealed a concerning hidden phenomenon: the discrepancy between perceived well-being and underlying depressive symptoms.

- Nearly 69% of AANHPI youth rated their mental health as "good" or "excellent." However, when screened using the PHQ-9 depression questionnaire, 48% scored above the threshold for moderate to severe depression.
- Although the reported prevalence of diagnosed mental health conditions may appear relatively low, Asian American youth are 1.3 times as likely as youth from other racial and ethnic minority groups to report that psychological struggles interfere with their daily lives.

These findings underscore the urgent need to reconsider how mental health challenges among AANHPI youth are addressed. Asian Americans constitute a major component of the AANHPI population, yet suicide has become the leading cause of death among Asian American youth, while their mental health needs remain substantially obscured by cultural stigma and systemic

barriers.

During the summer of 2026, the Youth Mental Health Media Columns (YMHMC) project was launched to investigate the current state of mental health among Asian American youth through interviews with mental health professionals. More than ten professionals were interviewed, including medical bloggers, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, nonprofit founders, university professors, youth organization representatives, and community health workers. Their insights were compiled and published as a series of magazine features.

This paper first examines the mental health challenges faced by Asian American youth and potential strategies for addressing them. Building on these findings, it proposes a practical framework for supporting improvements in their mental health and examines the framework through more than two years of practical project experience. The paper then explores how artistic expression can help Asian American youth navigate mental health challenges through the complementary perspectives of art healing and art therapy. Finally, it summarizes the findings and discusses future directions.

2. Challenges and Strategies for Support

Building on the series of expert interviews and published reports, this section examines the mental health challenges faced by Asian American youth and explores potential strategies for addressing them.

2.1 Mental Health Challenges

Why do so many Asian American youth experience psychological distress? Drawing on expert interviews and a review of the literature, the team identified several major sources of stress among Asian American youth, as illustrated in Figure 1.

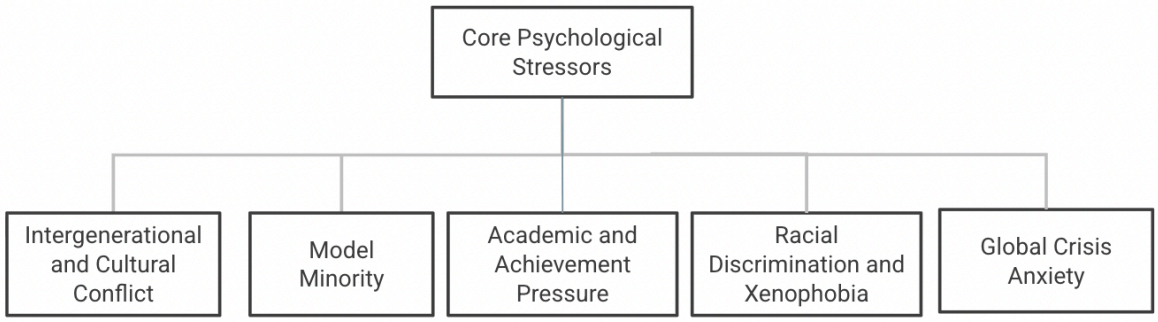

Figure 1. Major Sources of Psychological Stress Among Asian American Youth

(1) Intergenerational and cultural conflict

Research suggests that differences in cultural values between Asian American youth and their immigrant parents, combined with a lack of emotional understanding, are among the most direct contributors to deteriorating mental health.

Dual identities and cultural conflict [5, 6, 7, 8]

- Younger generations often find themselves caught between American individualistic values and traditional family expectations, such as filial piety, emotional restraint, and avoiding discussions of family problems outside the home. These competing expectations can create substantial intergenerational divides.
- Many Asian American youth experience depression and anxiety but struggle to communicate their inner distress to parents who hold more traditional beliefs. Family expectations and cultural pressures can lead them to remain silent. In some Asian American families, mental health challenges are regarded as signs of "shame" or "weakness," encouraging young people to suppress their emotions.

The lasting effects of a "survival mindset" [8]

- First-generation immigrant parents often face considerable challenges involving language barriers, financial pressures, and cultural adaptation. For many, ensuring that their families have adequate food, housing, and educational opportunities represents the fullest expression of love.
- Parents may therefore express affection primarily through material provision, while younger generations raised in American cultural environments may place greater importance on emotional understanding and psychological support.

(2) The "model minority" stereotype

This social stereotype pressures youth to conceal their suffering. Because Asian American youth are often assumed to be academically successful and free of significant problems, their mental health crises may be overlooked for extended periods [8, 9].

(3) Academic and achievement-related pressure

Asian American youth often face exceptionally high expectations from their families and themselves. The pursuit of perfection can result in severe anxiety, frustration, and a persistent sense of inadequacy.

(4) Racial discrimination and xenophobia [5, 6, 7, 8]

AANHPI youth are twice as likely as their peers from other backgrounds to experience discrimination or bullying related to their national origins, ethnic identities, or other aspects of their backgrounds.

(5) Anxiety about global crises [5, 6, 7]

Compared with youth from other racial and ethnic backgrounds, Asian American youth demonstrate heightened psychological distress and emotional responses to broader issues, including racial injustice, climate change, and geopolitical conflicts.

Beyond these sources of stress, another factor compounds the mental health challenges faced by Asian American youth and prevents them from receiving timely professional guidance and support.

A shortage of bilingual and culturally responsive resources [5, 6, 10, 11]

- AANHPI youth are more than 1.3 times as likely as other youth to worry that a mental health counselor will not understand their multiple identities or cultural backgrounds.
- There is also a substantial shortage of qualified counselors who can provide services in multiple languages and demonstrate an understanding of multiple cultural contexts.

Although Asian American youth face serious mental health challenges, the combined effects of social stigma, financial burdens, misconceptions, and limited resources contribute to low rates of help-seeking and treatment [5, 12].

According to NAMI, only 32.5% of Asian American adults in the United States use mental health services annually, compared with the national average of 52.1%. This is the lowest utilization rate among all racial and ethnic groups.

AANHPI youth are 33% less likely than their peers from other backgrounds to receive a mental health diagnosis. They are also particularly reluctant to share their psychological struggles with family members (76%) or friends (78%).

2.2 Strategies for Support and Coping

Asian American youth face distinctive cultural, familial, and social pressures, making attention to their mental health essential. Effective support requires coordinated efforts among youth themselves, their families, schools, and communities. The following strategies offer potential approaches.

(1) Individual coping strategies for youth

- **Self-acceptance:** Recognize personal strengths and limitations objectively.
  Self-acceptance is a foundation of youth mental health [13].
- **Stress relief:** Spend time with friends, enjoy music, and participate in outdoor activities.
- **Emotional awareness:** Recognizing emotions can reduce anxiety, improve interpersonal relationships, and facilitate early intervention when psychological difficulties arise.
- **Cultural integration:** Embrace both cultural backgrounds and integrate them into a

distinctive personal identity and set of strengths.

- **Seeking professional help:** When mental health difficulties arise, consult a school counselor or qualified mental health professional promptly.

(2) Family support and communication

- **Challenge stigma:** Move away from traditional beliefs that regard mental health difficulties as signs of weakness or disgrace. Encourage youth to seek help from counselors or treatment providers who understand Asian American cultural backgrounds.
- **Listen with understanding:** Set aside judgment and listen to youth' genuine experiences at school and in social settings with patience and acceptance.
- **Self-Empowerment:** Participate in programs such as Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) to learn culturally responsive communication strategies and establish trust across generations.

(3) School and community interventions

- **Cultural responsiveness:** Create safe, culturally responsive spaces, such as community centers, where peer networks can help reduce feelings of isolation.
- **Campus education:** Use workshops and lectures to raise awareness of the less visible harms caused by the "model minority" stereotype.
- **Connect with specialized organizations:** Work with nonprofit organizations that serve Asian American communities, such as the Mental Health Association for Chinese Communities (MHACC) [14] and UCA WAVES [15].

Youth mental health is a critical issue for the AANHPI community. Policymakers, educators,

parents, and mental health professionals all play essential roles in reshaping the mental health landscape for young people.

Addressing this systemic problem requires acknowledging cultural differences, recognizing the struggles AANHPI youth experience in response to the “model minority” stereotype and identity-related challenges, and creating safe spaces within families and communities where discussing anxiety and depression is no longer considered shameful.

3. The Youth Mental Health Art Practical Framework

This section explores how artistic expression can provide Asian American youth with a safe, nonverbal channel for emotional support and psychological exploration.

3.1 The Power of Artistic Expression

The power of artistic expression lies in its ability to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries and reach the depths of human emotion. Its significance can be understood through three key dimensions: communicating authentic emotions, facilitating emotional healing, and fostering social awareness.

Emotional resonance and connection

- **A language without words:** Music, painting, dance, and other art forms can communicate joy, sadness, anger, and other emotions without relying on written or spoken language.
- **Bridging time and space:** Works of art created centuries ago can still move contemporary audiences, creating connections across generations and bringing people closer together.

Emotional healing and liberation [16, 17]

- **Releasing suppressed emotions:** The creative process provides an outlet for inner pain and anxiety, potentially supporting emotional recovery and self-repair.
- **Restoring a sense of agency:** In a stressful and increasingly mechanized world, art can help individuals reconnect with their emotional and creative vitality.

Encouraging social reflection [18, 19]

- **A mirror of society:** Attentive artists often recognize social suffering and injustice early, amplifying voices that might otherwise remain unheard.
- **A catalyst for change:** Visual and performing arts can move audiences and inspire a collective pursuit of a more just and compassionate society.

3.2 Proposing the Practical Framework

Drawing on firsthand project experience, the Youth Mental Health Art practical framework is proposed to support improvements in Asian American youth' mental health, as illustrated in Figure 2.

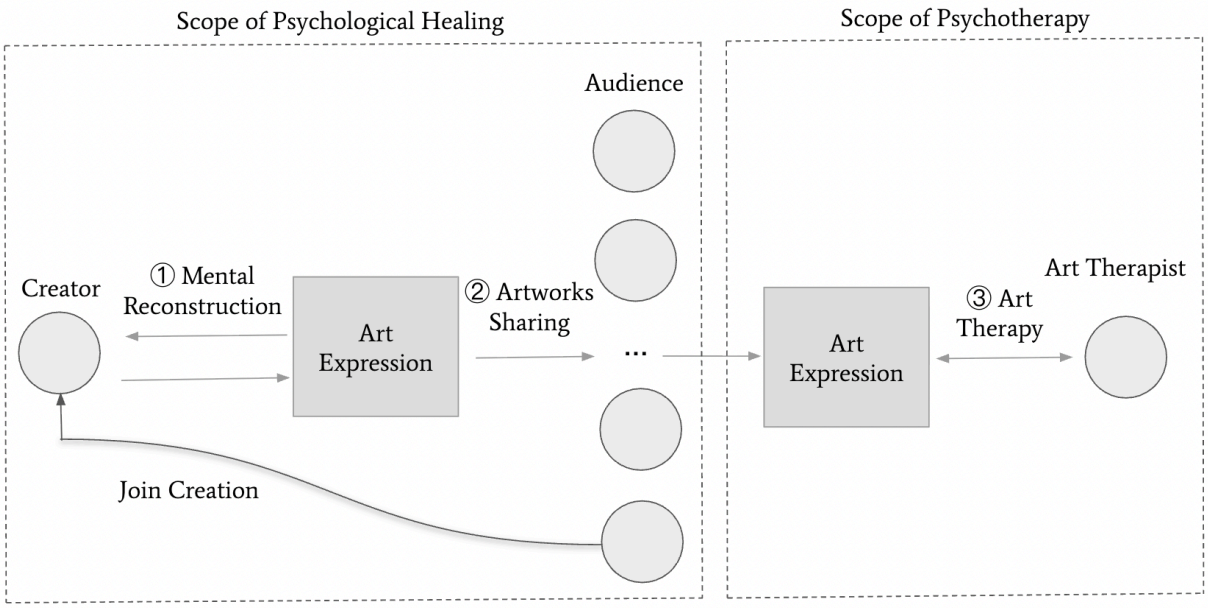

Figure 2. Schematic Representation of the Youth Mental Health Art Practical Framework

The framework encompasses two complementary dimensions: psychological healing and psychological treatment. Although both art healing and art therapy use artistic forms—including

painting, music, and dance—to support individuals, they differ in their target populations, professional requirements, and depth of intervention. These distinctions are discussed in Section 4.

The framework presented in Figure 2 has two central components.

First, artistic expression can facilitate the release of suppressed emotions, challenge existing perceptions, and reconstruct an individual's inner world, supporting self-exploration and healing. This corresponds to Processes ① and ③ in Figure 2. Notably, Process ③ represents an interaction between a client and an art therapist, in which artistic expression takes place under the therapist's guidance.

Second, artistic creation can transform personal inner experiences into shared experiences that can be communicated to others. Sharing these works can foster social empathy, reduce stigma, and evoke emotional resonance among young people. This corresponds to Process ② in Figure 2.

The first component promotes self-exploration, cognitive stimulation, and psychological healing through artistic expression, using both art healing and art therapy. Art therapy is not merely a tool for treating mental health conditions; it can also provide a powerful pathway to self-exploration, cognitive stimulation, and psychological healing.

The second component uses the sharing of artwork to foster social empathy and evoke emotional resonance among young people.

3.3 Project-Based Validation

In early 2024, I founded Youth Mental Health Art (YMHArt) [20], a project dedicated to supporting young people in improving their emotional well-being and overall quality of life.

Operating as a global digital art gallery accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week, YMHArt provides youth from diverse backgrounds with a platform for emotional expression and interpersonal connection. By connecting creators with audiences, the project seeks to cultivate social empathy, encourage open dialogue, support emotional well-being, and evoke emotional resonance among peers.

Through these efforts, YMHArt has helped build a distinctive community in which mental health is no longer treated as an overwhelming burden but is instead recognized as a natural and visible part of human life.

The YMHArt project has three central objectives.

First, it encourages young people who initially engage with the gallery as viewers to become creators themselves. The creative process does not require perfection or technical precision. Instead, it emphasizes expressing, processing, and transforming emotions; reconsidering internal perceptions; and engaging in self-exploration and healing to support psychological reconstruction.

Second, it uses artistic expression to transform personal inner experiences into shared experiences. Through the sharing of artwork, the project aims to foster social empathy, raise public awareness, reduce stigma surrounding youth mental health, and evoke emotional resonance among youth.

Third, it encourages young people to seek professional support from art therapists. The core lies in the use of non-verbal creative processes to bypass the defensive mechanisms of linguistic logic, thereby enabling direct access to, expression of, and processing of deep-seated emotions within the subconscious.

The first two objectives correspond to the left-hand dashed box in Figure 2. They are implemented through the following approach.

The project team established a dedicated creative group, and the initial collection of the online gallery consisted of artwork created by team members. YMHArt subsequently launched the *Make Youth Live Well* art competition series, soliciting submissions quarterly. Winning entries from each competition are added to the online gallery, creating a continuous cycle of psychological empowerment through artistic creation and public sharing.

The third objective corresponds to the right-hand dashed box in Figure 2. Psychological treatment is not merely a means of treating mental health conditions, but also a powerful pathway to self-exploration, cognitive stimulation, and psychological healing.

Art therapy intentionally integrates different artistic forms to support emotional expression, self-exploration, cognitive stimulation, and psychological healing.

YMHArt has recruited three experienced, licensed art therapists to serve on its advisory committee. Two of them are internationally recognized art therapists, scholars, and educators. Art therapists receive specialized training in psychology and mental health care, using art as a distinctive communication tool and therapeutic medium to support clients.

Their involvement enables the project team to provide educational information about art therapy

and obtain professional psychological guidance when urgent situations arise.

After more than two years of operation, YMHArt has had a positive impact on local communities, audiences across the United States, and participants around the world. Its online art gallery has received more than 110,000 views from over 30 countries.

The competition committee has received artwork submissions from countries including China, Japan, and Pakistan. The project has also supported several high school students experiencing significant distress associated with self-harm and anxiety.

These quantitative indicators and practical experiences provide preliminary support for the practical framework proposed in this section, demonstrating its potential value and effectiveness.

4. Art Healing and Art Therapy

The practical framework in Figure 2 explains how artistic expression can contribute to mental health interventions through two dimensions: psychological healing and psychological treatment.

This section first compares these approaches and then draws on expert interviews to explore how each can help Asian American youth navigate mental health challenges.

4.1 Comparison of Art Healing and Art Therapy

Although both art healing and art therapy use artistic forms to support individuals, they differ in their target populations, professional requirements, and depth of intervention.

Dimension	Art Healing	Art Therapy
Definition	Individuals in the general population engage in artistic creation to relax and relieve everyday stress.	A clinical intervention led by a qualified professional therapist that integrates psychological principles with creative processes.
Target Population	Generally healthy individuals or those experiencing relatively mild difficulties with well-being.	Clinical populations, including individuals experiencing mental health conditions, significant psychological trauma, depression, or autism.
Primary Goals	Self-exploration, emotional release, and improved well-being.	Assessing and addressing underlying psychological difficulties and supporting

		recovery from psychological trauma.

4.2 Art Healing

The B.R.I.D.G.E. Lab Foundation [21], whose name stands for Building Resilience through Inclusively designed Guidance and Education, is a Southern California nonprofit organization dedicated to reducing mental health stigma and supporting psychological resilience among young people and families through art healing and youth mentorship programs.

One of its principal platforms for art healing is the well-known Frontline Youth Leadership and Mental Health Advocacy Program. Operated by the B.R.I.D.G.E. Lab Foundation, the Frontline program provides a free, year-long leadership and mental health advocacy program for AANHPI and BIPOC youth aged 14–25.

I interviewed Kristin Calabria, founder of the B.R.I.D.G.E. Lab Foundation, who shared her perspectives on the meaning of healing.

Calabria offered a metaphor that redefines healing [22]: **“Healing is like an outward-expanding spiral.”** This challenges the common assumption that recovery means a problem has completely disappeared.

She explained that when healing begins, something changes: the spiral expands outward, increasing in diameter. Because the diameter has grown, individuals can travel farther before encountering another challenge.

In her view, this is what healing truly looks like. Challenges do not necessarily disappear, but the

intervals between difficult experiences become longer. Moreover, each time individuals encounter another challenge, they have greater strength and resources with which to respond.

I also interviewed artist Ines Nefzi during Community Art Day, organized by the San Diego River Art Alliance.

When discussing the personal significance of artistic expression, Nefzi referred to a widely circulated idea: some people cannot afford psychological counseling and therefore turn to creative expression to support their own healing [23].

She explained that earlier in her artistic practice, she was more concerned with the final appearance of her work. Over time, however, she came to recognize that the creative process itself was often more important. The moments when her nervous system calmed, her blood pressure decreased, and her thoughts and imagination wandered freely felt, in some ways, like meditation.

In these moments, individuals remain in the real world while temporarily stepping away from its immediate demands and entering a more inward, contemplative space.

Nefzi also reflected on how her understanding of self-expression had evolved with experience. In her earlier years, she focused on whether her work looked attractive and received recognition. Today, she places greater value on the time invested in the creative process, the meaning embedded in that process, and the growth that comes from developing artistic skills over time.

She observed that many people outside the art world feel they are “not good enough,” whereas artists often regard the opportunity to spend extended periods immersed in creative work as a valuable privilege.

Nefzi also emphasized that artistic creation is not exclusively an individual process of healing; sharing is equally important. If a work remains unseen in a room, its potential significance is limited. Only when others encounter it, discuss it, and connect with it emotionally can the other half of its value be realized.

Her advice to young artists was to remain patient. There is no definitive endpoint to an artistic journey; even after graduation, artistic creation can remain a lifelong practice. When creative blocks arise, she recommends stepping outside the studio, visiting museums, traveling, spending time with friends, and drawing inspiration from everyday life before incorporating those experiences into new work.

Artistic creation can serve both as an outlet for personal emotions and as a means of self-understanding and healing. Community events such as San Diego River Community Art Day provide spaces in which creators can see one another, build connections, and experience a sense of community.

4.3 Art Therapy

In psychotherapy, language is often the primary tool of communication. Yet colors, sounds, and bodily movements can sometimes reach emotional pain before words do.

People learn from an early age to communicate their feelings through language, but they receive far less training in expressing themselves through colors, sounds, or physical movement. Artistic creation can help address these limitations by giving clients another way to communicate their inner experiences.

I interviewed Dr. Rhona Chang, an expressive arts therapist, EMDR (Eye Movement

Desensitization and Reprocessing) practitioner, and licensed professional counselor.

For people who have never experienced art therapy, Chang most wanted to communicate one central idea: **imagination and creativity are fundamental human capacities, not privileges reserved for a select few with exceptional talent** [24].

She illustrated this idea with everyday examples. When people are hungry, they imagine food; when trying to lose weight, they may smell fried chicken and imagine themselves eating it. These examples demonstrate how imagination can influence sensory experience.

Chang believes that many people approach artistic creation with excessive fear, worrying that their work will not be perfect or technically accurate. However, art therapy is not primarily concerned with the finished product. Instead, it focuses on how the creative process helps clients express, process, and transform their emotions.

I also interviewed Dr. Barbara Fish, a distinguished art therapist, scholar, and educator who pioneered and has been a major advocate of the concept of Response Art.

Much of Dr. Fish's research explores Response Art, an approach that both therapists and clients can use to examine and express their experiences through image-making [25].

Dr. Fish traces the practice to the theories of Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, who emphasized imagery and symbolism and developed the technique of active imagination. Active imagination can be understood as a form of waking dreaming in which individuals enter their imaginative worlds and engage with the figures and images that emerge within them.

For Dr. Fish, creating art during moments of uncertainty or difficulty in the therapeutic process

can help her move beyond surface-level reactions and access deeper psychological material, whether it arises from her personal unconscious or from what Jung described as the collective unconscious.

Art therapy is not merely a tool for treating mental health conditions; it can also provide a powerful pathway to self-exploration, cognitive stimulation, and psychological healing.

- **Self-exploration** focuses on understanding inner desires, fears, unconscious motivations, and the fundamental question of personal identity: “Who am I?”
- **Cognitive stimulation** focuses on challenging habitual patterns of thought, supporting changes in neural pathways, and enhancing cognitive flexibility and rational thinking.
- **Psychological healing** focuses on emotional repair, the soothing of psychological wounds, and the reconstruction and nourishment of the inner self.

As a relatively young therapeutic discipline, expressive arts therapy is still gaining broader recognition. Chang hopes that the public will understand that this field has a substantial professional and academic foundation and is not merely a recreational hobby.

She also hopes that more people will let go of their fear of artistic creation and their perfectionistic expectations. What matters most in art therapy is not how polished or sophisticated the finished work appears, but the healing potential of the creative process itself.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

This paper made three principal contributions.

First, through interviews with more than ten mental health professionals, the paper conducted an in-depth investigation into the current state of mental health among Asian American youth and examined the psychological challenges they face, along with potential strategies for addressing them.

Second, drawing on community-based research and a review of the literature, the Youth Mental Health Art practical framework was proposed to support improvements in Asian American youth' mental health. The framework was then examined through the practical implementation of the YMHArt project.

Third, the paper explored how artistic expression can help Asian American youth navigate mental health challenges through the complementary perspectives of art healing and art therapy.

I will continue developing the practical framework proposed in this paper and working to improve Asian American youth' mental health through artistic expression.

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