Exploring Zentangle as a virtual mindfulness-based art therapy for people with serious mental illness

Marko Stojcevski, Amy Cheung, Victor Agwu, Xiaoduo Fan[*]

Department of Psychiatry, UMass Memorial Health Care/UMass Chan Medical School, Worcester, MA, 01655, United States

Marko Stojcevski is a third year medical student at UMass. He was born and raised in Serbia. He graduated from UCLA in 2019, majoring in molecular biology and genetics. He is primarily interested in using evidence-based psychosocial interventions within the mental health realm of patient care. In the past, Marko helped lead the Psychiatry interest group at UMass Chan Medical School. Currently he is one of the program leaders for the UMass MIND Community Intervention Program.

Amy Cheung is an MD/PhD student part of the Class of 2023 at UMass Chan Medical School. She completed her PhD in behavioral neuroscience and is a program leader for the UMass MIND Community Intervention Program. She is interested in community outreach efforts to embrace more holistic approaches to patient care and reduce mental health stigma.

Victor Agwu is a second year medical student at UMass. He graduated from UMass Amherst in 2017, majoring in Biology with an interest in psychology. He was engaged in direct patient care in mental health settings in the past which inspired him to pursue a medical education with a goal of adapting a holistic approach to medicine especially in the field of psychiatry. He plans on engaging in community-focused patient care while in medical school and as a practicing medical professional in the future.

Xiaoduo Fan is a Board-certified psychiatrist, and a Professor of Psychiatry at UMass. He is Director of the UMass MIND Clinical and Research Program, which operates the Community Intervention Program as one of its major branches. Dr. Fan's clinical work and research focus on innovative pharmacological and psychosocial interventions for refractory symptoms of schizophrenia, medical co-morbidity, co-occurring substance use disorders, and real life functioning in patients with schizophrenia.

*Corresponding author
Xiaoduo Fan, M.D., M.P.H., M.S., UMass Memorial Health Care/UMass Chan Medical School, Biotech One, Suite 100, 365 Plantation Street, Worcester, MA 01605
Email: xiaoduo.fan@umassmed.edu

Abstract

Background: Zentangle is an emerging form of art therapy that incorporates mindfulness into creative drawing.

Context: This pilot study explored Zentangle as a novel adjunct treatment for people with serious mental illness (SMI).

Approach: Six participants with SMI completed an eight-week Zentangle program. Psychiatric symptoms and overall functioning were evaluated at baseline, 1 week and 4 weeks after the program using the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale (BPRS), Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), and Quality of Life Enjoyment and Satisfaction Scale (Q-LES-Q-SF). Thematic analysis was used to evaluate themes from a semi-structured, 30-minute focus group to better understand the experiences of the participants who completed the Zentangle program.

Outcomes: A significant reduction in psychiatric symptoms was observed as measured by the total score on the BPRS between baseline and 4-week post-intervention (40.7 ± 9.1 vs 33.7 ± 8.9, mean $\pm$ SD, $p = 0.02$). Participants also showed a significant increase in mindful attention using the average score on the MAAS between 1-week and 4-week post-intervention (3.5 ± 0.4 vs 4.2 ± 0.7, mean $\pm$ SD, $p = 0.04$). Four themes were generated from the focus group: 1) fostering a positive environment; 2) power of uncomplicated art creation; 3) understanding the value of self-appreciation, and 4) approaching mindfulness through Zentangle.

Conclusions: This pilot study demonstrates the feasibility and acceptability of Zentangle among those with SMI.

Implications for research: Larger scale studies are warranted to further examine the efficacy of Zentangle for those living with serious mental illness.