



# A Mixed-Method Mindful Self-Compassion Art Therapy Postpilot Program Evaluation Study: Metaphors and Media to Increase Adults' Acquisition of MSC Program Benefits (Étude d'évaluation post-pilote d'un programme d'art-thérapie d'auto-compassion à méthodes mixtes : métaphores et médias pour accroître l'acquisition des avantages du programme MSC pour les adultes)

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# A Mixed-Method Mindful Self-Compassion Art Therapy Postpilot Program Evaluation Study: Metaphors and Media to Increase Adults' Acquisition of MSC Program Benefits (Étude d'évaluation post-pilote d'un programme d'art-thérapie d'auto-compassion à méthodes mixtes : métaphores et médias pour accroître l'acquisition des avantages du programme MSC pour les adultes)

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## ABSTRACT

This mixed-method quasi-experimental design pilot study evaluates the integration of the Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program with art therapy, utilizing the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) to select media and metaphors that enhance self-compassion and emotional well-being. A MSC Art Therapy Group was held with 11 adult participants (male = 18.2%, female = 81.8%). Postgroup feedback was collected through a survey with Likert scale and open-ended questions. The ETC framework informed the selection of art materials and metaphors to promote therapeutic benefits. Feedback from 18.2% of participants produced mean scores of 90% for both helpfulness and enjoyment. Qualitative responses highlighted the facilitation of community, creative expression, and emotional processing, which may have affected increased self-compassion and emotional resilience. The pilot study suggests that merging MSC with art therapy can positively impact self-compassion and emotional well-being. The limitations include a small sample size, lack of a control group, and potential self-selection bias. Future research should involve larger, more diverse populations and rigorous control measures. This study provides initial support for combining MSC with art therapy and highlights the value of intentional media and metaphor selection in enhancing therapeutic outcomes.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude pilote à méthodes mixtes de conception quasi-expérimentale évalue l'intégration du programme *Mindful Self-Compassion* (MSC, autocompassion de pleine conscience) avec l'art-thérapie, en utilisant le continuum des thérapies expressives (ETC) pour sélectionner des médias et des métaphores qui améliorent l'autocompassion et le bien-être émotionnel. Un groupe d'art-thérapie MSC a été organisé avec 11 participants adultes (hommes = 18,2 %, femmes = 81,8 %). Les commentaires postgroupe ont été recueillis au moyen d'une enquête avec une échelle de Likert et des questions ouvertes. Le cadre ETC a éclairé la sélection de matériaux artistiques et de métaphores pour promouvoir les bienfaits thérapeutiques. Les commentaires de 18,2 % des participants ont produit des scores médians de 90 % tant pour l'utilité que pour le plaisir. Les réponses qualitatives ont mis en évidence la facilitation de la communauté, de l'expression créative et du traitement émotionnel, ce qui peut avoir favorisé une meilleure autocompassion et un plus grand bien-être émotionnel. L'étude pilote suggère que la fusion du MSC avec l'art-thérapie peut avoir une incidence positive sur l'autocompassion et le bien-être émotionnel. Les limites incluent la petite taille de l'échantillon, l'absence de groupe témoin et un biais potentiel d'auto-sélection. Les recherches futures devraient impliquer des populations plus grandes et diversifiées et des mesures de contrôle rigoureuses. Cette étude fournit un premier soutien pour combiner le MSC avec l'art-thérapie et met en évidence la valeur de la sélection intentionnelle des médias et des métaphores pour améliorer les résultats thérapeutiques.

## Introduction

Art therapy is the combination of the creative process and psychotherapy to help clients express experiences that would be difficult to articulate (CATA, 2024). Art therapy, facilitated by an art therapist, provides physical and relational space to explore, interact, understand, and resolve queries with the self, one's experiences, thoughts, and emotions through the art-making and reflection process (Malchiodi, 2016). Specific materials and metaphors are better suited for certain cultures and differing issues, needs, and goals (Hinz, 2020). An art therapist may consult the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC; Hinz, 2020) to assist with their selection of media and metaphor. The ETC is a model of creative functioning to understand how a client interacts with and benefits from the creative process and product (Hinz, 2020).

The Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program, developed by Christopher Germer and Kristen Neff in 2018, is a manualized six- or eight-week program designed to increase participants' self-compassion through the learning and experience of mindfulness-based teachings, exercises, and practices (2019b). Mindfulness-based art therapy is well supported by research, and art therapist researchers in the field have developed effective techniques and frameworks to enhance clients' mental and emotional well-being (Newland & Bettencourt, 2020). The MSC program has been combined with art therapy, but the corresponding use of specific media and metaphors with MSC exercises and practices have yet to be suggested or justified in the literature (see Isis, 2022; Williams, 2018).

The literature review for this paper operated as the foundation of a six-week MSC Art Therapy Group of 11 participants that was co-hosted in the fall of 2023 by Monique Mercier, Trained MSC Teacher and Psychological Associate and I, Melissa Miller, art therapist. At the time, I was a Master of Counseling student completing my practicum requirement hours. We collected feedback informally and casually throughout the group and after the group *via* a Google Forms feedback form. It was discovered that participants found the combination of the MSC Program with art therapy helpful to them. The group was not

initially intended or advertised as a single group design pilot program evaluation, but it was later recognized as such. The ETC was used to purposefully choose materials and metaphors that are suitable to enhance and deepen the experience of self-compassion, examine, and reimagine dynamics in difficult relationships, and face and work with difficult emotions, the goals of the MSC program itself (Neff & Germer, 2018). The hypothesis is that the combination of art therapy, utilizing specific metaphors and media, with MSC would increase adult participants' acquisition of MSC skills and resources. These skills and resources that are promoted through the MSC topics, exercises, and practices aim to increase self-compassion and mental and emotional well-being. A framework for the sessions is included and the mixed quantitative and qualitative anonymous participant feedback helps to illuminate the benefits of the application of the suggested and justified media and metaphors. The following topics form the foundation of MSC Art Therapy in practice to warrant this combination as conducive in increasing participants' self-compassion and emotional and mental well-being.

## Art therapy

Art therapy has been shown to reduce negative symptoms and enhance positive symptoms for depression (Jenabi et al., 2022; Yin et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2021), anxiety (Boehm et al., 2014; Newland & Bettencourt, 2020), and trauma (King, 2014; Schouten et al., 2014). This pilot program involved self-referred adults, mostly female identifying, who were not thoroughly or formally assessed for their mental and emotional health status, so they may have varied in their experiences and levels of depression, anxiety, and trauma. According to Malchiodi (2016), art therapy can benefit the general population by improving self-perception, emotional regulation, behavior change, and insight through visual expression.

## Mindful art therapy

Mindfulness and art therapy are a suitable and beneficial combination because the utilization of the present moment empowers the client to turn

toward emotions, thoughts, and sensations throughout the art-making and reflection process (Kass & Trantham, 2014). This may help the client to foster insight and deeper understanding of themselves and their experiences and move toward their goals (Kass & Trantham, 2014). Mindfulness and art therapy have been combined in various approaches and programs including Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy (Jones-Callahan, 2016; Newland & Bettencourt, 2020), Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and art therapy (Slom, 2020), and the Compassionate Arts Psychotherapy Program (Hass-Cohen et al., 2023).

Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy is a popular therapeutic approach, its precursor is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy has been found in a systematic review and meta-analysis by Newland and Bettencourt (2020) to enhance adults' emotional regulation, self-awareness, self-acceptance, and personal expression thereby decreasing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and fatigue. These benefits are likely due to the increased awareness and presence necessitated by the immersive and impactful experience, stress reduction and relaxation through breathwork and sensation awareness, creative expression with emotional release and insight, and self-reflection, exploration, and acceptance practices (Newland & Bettencourt, 2020).

The Compassionate Arts Psychotherapy Program integrates art therapy and Compassion-Focused Therapy to support emotional expression, compassionate self-engagement, and promote emotional and psychological well-being (Hass-Cohen et al., 2023). In Hass-Cohen and colleagues' mixed methods pilot program evaluation, it was found to increase adult, mostly female, clients' self-compassion and to decrease emotional distress alongside increased openness to new experiences, mindfulness, and self-compassion. MSC and art therapy share similar foci to Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy and generalizability of the Compassionate Art Psychotherapy Program in that it is also mindfulness-based, compassion-focused and utilizes art therapy with adult, mostly female participants.

Specifically, MSC and art therapy have been found to be a fitting pairing to enhance and deepen clients' skills and resource acquisition (Isis, 2022; Williams, 2018). Williams (2018)

argued that the use of art therapy within the MSC program can increase self-expression and emotional regulation related to unworthiness, self-criticism, and shame because "art therapy strengthens the innate capacity of self-compassion to transform one's core sense of self and relationship to the world" (p. 30). In art therapy, clients can bring subjective and complex experiences into clearer focus, reflect on both the process and the outcome, and use media and metaphor to explore meaning (Isis, 2022; Williams, 2018).

### ***The Expressive Therapies Continuum***

Hinz (2020) expands upon the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) that was developed by Kagin and Lusebrink in 1978 (Hinz et al., 2022). Using a cognitive neurodevelopmental foundation, the ETC model can explain how different levels of engagement with the ETC can elicit specific therapeutic benefits. The ETC consists of three levels, each progressively more complex than the previous, on a continuum that implies the client's use of either the left or right brain functions and processes. The levels each have their inherent therapeutic benefits, and the processes may be encouraged or initiated by offering certain materials and metaphors (Hinz, 2020). Respectively, written in the corresponding left brain-right brain format, alongside their therapeutic benefits, the ETC includes (Hinz, 2020; Hinz et al., 2022; Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978; Lusebrink, 2010):

1. Level one – Kinesthetic-Sensory: Kinesthetic represents the satisfaction in movement. Sensory is the experience of the senses, including but not limited to sight, smell, and touch. Therefore, the corresponding physical and movement areas of brain, the basal ganglia, primary motor cortex, and primary somato-sensory cortex may be stimulated when engaging in this level. An example includes fluid materials for stress and tension-reducing, soothing, and emotional expression through materials like clay, paint, or ink.
2. Level two – Perceptual-Affective: Includes the Perceptual processes of conscious awareness of the elements of visual

expression, including form, shape, and color, as well as the Affective emotional, and raw experience of the expressed image without concern for the elements. In the brain, this may indicate processes in visual processing in the ventral system and the amygdala's function of expression of affect. Using materials with both fluid and restrictive properties such as plasticene and markers can help clients explore and regulate emotions while increasing self-awareness and emotional insight.

3. Level three – Cognitive-Symbolic: Represents the experience of Cognitive understanding of creation and its symbolic meaning, and Symbolization through intuitive planning and action. The Cognitive component, according to Lusebrink (2010), may be connected to the prefrontal cortex, specifically dorsolateral prefrontal and anterior cingulate cortex, responsible for spatial structure and relationships, conceptual meaning, and verbal processing. The Symbolic may stimulate the orbitofrontal cortex, specifically the posterior cingulate linked to intuitive problem-solving, self-discovery, and spiritual insight. Resistive materials to promote feelings of control, cognitive stimulation, and structure include, for example, pencil drawing and collage, aiding clients in organizing thoughts, and exploring deeper meaning in their experiences.
4. Level four: The creative phenomena occur at all levels of the continuum and has an integrative, transcendent flow function between the left and right hemispheric processes, indicated by discourse between the creator and the art media. This ongoing dialogue can lead to increased self-awareness, problem-solving, and emotional balance.

The purposeful selection of art materials can impact neurological stimulation and overall therapeutic outcomes (Han et al., 2024; Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015; Lusebrink, 2010; Malik, 2022). Eliciting neurological stimulation to both the right-brained sensory, affective, and symbolic content, as well as the left-brained kinesthetic, perceptual, and cognitive processes, can help clients access and contain emotions, work through

difficulties, and reinforce strengths (Lusebrink, 2010; Lusebrink & Hinz, 2016). In a systematic narrative review, Malik (2022) found that the properties of various media stimulate different levels of visual and cognitive processing in accordance with the ETC levels. Building on this, Han and colleagues (2024) utilized functional near-infrared spectroscopy to measure changes in oxygen saturation in the frontal lobe during art activities. The results indicated distinct activation patterns in various brain regions. There was notable increase in activation in the left frontopolar and orbitofrontal cortexes—areas connected to empathy and feedback—during paper drawing compared to tablet drawing, suggesting traditional, analog media may provide greater emotional and cognitive stimulation than digital media.

The use of metaphor may further support the Cognitive-Symbolic level of the ETC. Moon (2007) emphasizes the essential role of metaphor in art therapy. Metaphors facilitate cerebral and representational activation by expediting new expressions, perceptions, perspectives, and meaning making (Moon, 2007). This suggests art therapy activities, such as exploring metaphors through art making, can help clients engage with the ETC model and access the sensorily, emotional regulatory, and cognitive organizational benefits.

The intentional selection of media and metaphor can support the integration and interconnectedness of brain systems to address clients' issues, needs, and goals (Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015). Engaging with the ETC structure in the creative process can integrate physical and sensory experience, regulate emotions, process cognitive elements, and explore symbolic meaning (Hinz et al., 2022). This integration can lead to enhanced self-awareness, problem-solving abilities, emotional and physical regulation, and improved coping mechanisms (Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015; Hinz et al., 2022).

I have used the ETC structure to guide my choice of materials and metaphors to help MSC Art Therapy Program participants engage both the right brain for sensory, soothing, and expressive processes, and the left brain for reflection, organization, and understanding. By consulting the ETC and curating media and metaphors for clients, this method aims to enhance their emotional and psychological well-being.

## Mindfulness self-compassion

### Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the practice of in-the-moment nonjudgmental acceptance and awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), and its practice can be beneficial in supporting mental wellness across cultures and populations (Calin & Ginara, 2023; Germer, 2013; Goldberg et al., 2018; 2022). Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 2011) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Piet & Hougaard, 2011; Segal et al., 2002) both employ mindfulness practices to increase attentional control and decrease judgmental attitudes, thereby increasing overall wellness (Crane et al., 2017).

Alsubaie and co-researchers (2017) found in their systematic review that the mechanism of action in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction protocols is mindfulness, as it shows potential as a mediator of change for adults with depression, anxiety, and stress. The mindfulness-based therapy programs support people in discovering their unhelpful, habitual thinking patterns, discovering how fear and avoidance can perpetuate suffering, and supporting the development of mindfulness to endorse discernment and agency rather than automatic reactivity (Crane et al., 2017).

### Compassion

Compassion means “to suffer with,” becoming aware of and accepting the suffering of oneself and others and the desire, motivation, or intention to reduce or alleviate further suffering (Gilbert, 2013, 2019; Gilbert & Choden, 2014). Compassion-Focused Therapy was created by Gilbert in 2000 (Gilbert & Simos, 2022). This therapy was based on evolutionary, developmental, and cognitive psychology combined with traditional Buddhist teachings.

Systematic reviews and a meta-analysis demonstrated that the use of Compassion-Focused Therapy increases self-compassion and self-reassurance in adults, and decreases self-criticism, fear of self-compassion, and depressive symptoms (Craig et al., 2020; Millard et al., 2023). These benefits are attributed to the development of the six compassionate skills of imagery, attention, feeling, behavior,

reasoning, and sensory skills (Carvalho et al., 2017). These skills help individuals apply compassion toward the self and others with greater sensitivity, nonjudgment, sympathy, and distress tolerance (Carvalho et al., 2017).

### Mindful self-compassion program

The MSC manualized program was created by Kristen Neff and Christopher Germer (2018) to enhance participants’ emotional resilience and well-being. Adult participants of the program experience an increase in self-compassion and mindfulness skills, reduced anxiety and depression, and increased well-being (Germer & Neff, 2019a, 2019b; Gilbert & Choden, 2014; Neff, 2015; Neff & Germer, 2013).

Mindful self-compassion has three central tenets. The first is *mindful acceptance* that is presence without judgment. The second includes *common humanity*, which acknowledges that suffering and imperfection are a part of the human experience. The final tenant includes *self-kindness*, which describes a warm and understanding attitude (Neff, 2015).

Activities within the MSC program, sourced from Neff and Germer (2018), helps participants improve their understanding of self-compassion, identifying emotions, and reflection. Some activities include, but are not limited to:

1. *Compassion with equanimity* practice: Participants are encouraged to recall a situation wherein they are currently caring for or have cared for someone else, and it was frustrating or exhausting. Through the phrase and practice of “in for me, out for you” in relation to the breath, participants envision the inhale as compassion for the self, and the exhale for the other, aiming to bring equanimity and prevent burnout.
2. *How is my practice going* check-in discussion: Helps bring the participants into awareness of what self-compassion is and how, when, whether, and to what degree they are experiencing self-compassion through the practices or otherwise.
3. *Meeting difficult emotions* activity: The instructor guides the participants through

labeling their emotions, becoming aware of the emotion in the body, and then practicing soften-soothe-allow. Softening by offering oneself physical compassion, soothing by offering emotional compassion, and allowing mental compassion.

4. *Yin and yang of self-compassion* didactic section: A teaching that the yin side of self-compassion offers the comforting, soothing, and validating aspects, and the yang side offers the protecting, providing, and motivating aspects.
5. *Self-compassion in relationships* topic: A reflection exercise that asks participants to explore the pain of connection (empathy for suffering) and disconnection (rejection, hurt, anger, loneliness), and consider, "What aspects of self-compassion do I need now?" (p. 130).
6. *Taking it forward* topic's *what would I like to remember* exercise: This encourages participants to reflect on what has been learned; "what has touched me, moved me, or shifted inside of me?" (p. 174). They also envision how they will apply what has been learned and experienced going forward.

### The pilot MSC art therapy group

I designed an MSC Art Therapy Group early fall of 2023 with supervision and counsel by Monique Mercier. The Expressive Therapies Continuum helped to justify three materials and three metaphors that correspond to the Kinesthetic-Sensory, Perceptive-Affective, and Cognitive-Symbolic levels. These materials and metaphors are more likely to enhance the client's acquisition of the therapeutic benefits of the MSC program, such as increased self-compassion and emotional and mental well-being.

### Method

#### Procedure

The six-week MSC Art Therapy Group was held in late fall of 2023 and advertised through community posters, on the group practice's website, and through an email to the group private practice's email subscribers. There were 13 self-referred participants. Two participants dropped out in the

first two weeks (15.38%), leaving a total of 11 participants. Each session was two and a half hours.

While this research was not sent to an ethical review board for review, efforts have been made to adhere to ethical principles and keep risk at a minimum throughout the process. Throughout the time of registration, the group's sessions, the creation of the feedback form, and the feedback collection, it was not anticipated that the group would be covered in this manuscript. This minimized potential interference with the research. Consent for inclusion of information regarding participants' participation and feedback was collected half a year postgroup. They were informed that there would be no direct benefit to them if they consented. To ensure confidentiality and reduce discomfort, identifying information has been kept to a minimum.

Participants included two self-identifying males (18.2%) and nine self-identifying females (81.8%), ages ranging from 36 to 63 ( $M=52.18$ ,  $SD=7.93$ ). Other demographics and previous art, mindfulness, or compassion experience were not collected or measured. Their mental and emotional state was collaboratively determined between the host and participant *via* a 15-minute phone call a week before the group began to determine whether their mental and emotional state was well enough to participate in the group. A key characteristic of the participants is their self-referral to the MSC program, suggesting a common goal of enhancing mindfulness and self-compassion in their lives through both the MSC curriculum and the integration of art therapy. It is postulated that their interest in this group indicated they have faced challenges that oppose mindful self-compassion such as self-criticism, self-judgment, avoidance, or mindlessness. To preserve participant anonymity, specific details regarding personal difficulties that were shared during the group are not disclosed, as this was not initially designed as a research study. Instead, the focus is placed on the written feedback that participants gave consent for inclusion in this manuscript.

Self-referred individuals suggest personal interest, but pose risks in terms of external validity due to selection, motivation, and expectation biases (Heppner et al., 2015). During the group,

the participants were guided through the six-week program by Monique and I, wherein we paired art therapy materials and metaphors for certain MSC exercises (see [Table 1](#) and [2](#)). Each session consisted of an opening grounding exercise and check-in, MSC teachings, practices, and exercises as presented by the co-hosts with corresponding art making and reflective debriefs, a 10-minute break, and home practice suggestions. Besides the materials presented, pencils, pens, paint, markers, pencil crayons, papers, and miscellaneous found objects were also offered buffet style.

### **Methodology: Program evaluation**

This program included a mixed-method quasi-experimental design and was evaluated with a posttest single group design pilot program evaluation with a difference estimate design. A survey with two Likert-scale questions and three open-ended questions served as the estimate for difference or impact of the program for the adult participants. The data evaluating the success of this program was gathered from a feedback form I created based on the practice's routine to request general comments, commendations, critiques, and suggestions.

A Google Forms feedback form was emailed to participants one week after the group's completion and asked the participants to rate on a Likert scale 0–5 the helpfulness of the program's content and enjoyability of the overall experience. Short-form questions functioned to deepen understanding of Likert answers and included: “what did you appreciate?”; “what were your main take aways?”; and “what aspects of the group should be improved?”. Two participants responded out of the 11, representing 18.2% of the group. The low response rate is hypothesized to result from several factors, including the absence of incentive to provide feedback, the perceived lack of relevance due to frequent requests for feedback throughout the program resulting in possible feedback response fatigue, the timing of the survey during the holiday season when participants may have been busy, the need to click through from an email, and the lack of follow-up reminders. The quantitative and qualitative data were described to recognize any emotional or mental outcomes for participants four months later for the purposes of this manuscript.

Informed consent for inclusion of participant responses in this paper was collected four months after the initial feedback through a Google Form.

### **Art materials**

The choice of art materials is crucial to the therapeutic benefits that clients may experience in art therapy (Dean, 2016; Hinz, 2020; Malchiodi, 2011). The art therapist often allows the client to choose which art material(s) to use in therapy, but “this freedom must be balanced with knowledgeable prescription of materials” (Hinz, 2020, p. 95). Culturally, some participants need or want to create with media outside what is presented. [Table 1](#) describes the specific materials that I used within the MSC and art therapy program, and that I selected using the ETC framework. These art materials, combined with MSC practices, may contribute to participants' increased mindfulness and self-kindness abilities as related to their sensory, emotional, and cognitive experience due to visualization of mark making and responsive physical soothing with Kinesthetic-Sensory materials, gained perspective and mind-body-emotion connection with Perceptual-Affective materials, and increased control, understanding, and problem-solving through Cognitive-Symbolic materials (Hinz, 2020). This indicates certain materials may support an increased capacity to recognize difficult or negative experiences with an opportunity to practice self-compassion, thereby contributing to increased emotional and mental well-being.

### **Suggested art metaphors for the MSC program**

Metaphors play a significant role in a person's conceptualization of themselves, others, and world, and enable people to effectively express meanings and experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Symbols, both personal and universal, can transcend meaning, while at the same time help the creator in realizing their personal meaning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Using them can, through reflexive distance, promote a new self-definition and understanding, or guide personal growth by using them to find solutions (Hinz, 2020).

The use of metaphors leverages the meaning discovery and making processes of the Cognitive-Symbolic

**Table 1.** ETC-informed art therapy materials and corresponding MSC practice, exercise, or topic.

Suggested materials and their combinations	
	Reasoning
Ink	There is a long tradition in mindfulness practices of painting with ink. Specifically, <i>boku-sho</i> is the spontaneous expression of oneself through brush writing in ink after taking a slow, mindful breath (Jones-Callahan, 2016). The client can have visual proof of their breath and body movement on the page. Ink is appropriate to increase mindfulness of the body and self-regulation skills (Jones-Callahan, 2016; Marchand, 2024).
ETC level	Because ink is a fluid, unstructured material, it is a good fit for the Kinesthetic-Sensory level, which promotes soothing and decreased anxiety alongside an awareness of the body and feeling (Hinz, 2020).
MSC practice	<i>Compassion with equanimity</i> practice (Neff & Germer, 2018; see Table 2).
Art making example	The art therapist may offer the participant to dip the ink brush in the ink and direct them to make a stroke with the in-breath and a stroke with the out-breath. The client can view the in-breath for themselves, and the out-breath for others. Clients may move up the ETC levels and incorporate Perceptual-Affective through mindfully noticing their inward and outward experiences, and Cognitive-Symbolic by considering what the length or shape of their breath on the paper means to them and the level of compassion equanimity in their relationships.
Clay/plasticine	Carpendale (2009) highlights that clay and plasticine emphasize the process and sensory aspects of art making and can facilitate self-reflection and grounding. Seifert et al. (2017) discovered that clay work increases mindfulness, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Crocker and Carr (2021) found that using clay in art therapy assisted the client in gaining perspective and increasing mind-body connection and emotional understanding.
ETC level	This material can suit any level of the ETC but is well suited for the Perceptual-Affective level as emotions may be named and perceived.
MSC practice	<i>Meeting difficult emotions</i> exercise
Art making example	This exercise is well suited for clay work as the emotion can be depicted, sensed, and understood in a back-and-forth guided moving meditation. The process can incorporate insight, emotional experiencing, symbol-making, and cognitive understanding from the other ETC levels. For example, a client who labels the emotion of sadness may, with the clay, carve out a hollow bowl. The art therapist encourages the participant to close their eyes, internally soften, open their eyes, and soften the edges of their sculpture. This process is offered with the soothe-and-allow steps that proceed. The transformation of the artwork may become a reflection of the inner experience and, perhaps, transformation as the participant softens, soothes, and allows their emotion.
Collage	Collage can support the exploration of one's identity, deepen insight, and increase emotional regulation by bypassing language limitations, decreasing stress, and broadening perspective on one's reality (Wang et al., 2019). Carpendale (2009) noted that cutting and gluing is a concrete metaphor for deconstructing and reconstructing self and other. Raffaelli and Hartzell (2016) found that collage work resulted in decreased self-judgment and increased self-soothing and control as it helped to bridge between experience and words, was simple, accessible, and nonthreatening.
ETC level	Although this material utilizes the other levels of the ETC, the Cognitive-Symbolic level may be most prevalent or valuable for some participants. The symbolic and cognitive understanding of the images helps to bridge experience and words to express and explore experience.
MSC practice	<i>Yin and yang of self-compassion</i> teaching
Art making example	Collage can be used to explore how clients practice more soothing (e.g., subjective usage of a soothing color) or protecting (e.g., fence as a depiction of boundaries) modes of self-compassion in their lives.

level of the ETC. In this level, the right brain engages in intuitive concept formation, metaphoric representation, symbolic resolution, while the left side uses logical, linear decision-making and problemsolving (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978). Cross-culturally, the metaphors can hold varied meanings. Table 2 contains the metaphors with suggested MSC practices I used in the pilot group that may enhance a personal and collective meaning for participants through their development and interaction with metaphors.

## Results

### Survey feedback

The anonymous feedback garnered from an emailed Google Form helped to assess the impact

of adding art therapy to the MSC program. The feedback provided initial insight into whether this combined approach was supportive of participants' acquisition of MSC skills and resources. Out of 11 participants, two anonymous responses were received. One participant rated the helpfulness of the program five out of five; the other rated four out of five. One participant rated the enjoyability of the program five out of five; the other rated four out of five. This indicates a mean helpfulness score of 90% and mean enjoyability of 90% (See Table 3).

In addition to the above quantitative feedback, qualitative feedback was collected to provide methodological triangulation and increase validity. One participant expressed appreciation for an alternative means of expression; "I enjoyed

**Table 2.** ETC-informed art therapy metaphors and corresponding MSC practice, exercise, or topic.

Suggested metaphors and their combinations	
Plants/garden	Reasoning The plant/garden metaphor supports the representation of the self through means of growth, thriving level, reparative interventions, and surrounding supports and boundaries (Thomas, 2016).
ETC level	The Cognitive-Symbolic level supports participants to consider how elements of their artwork may relate to their own experience.
MSC practice	<i>How is my practice going?</i> check-in
Art making example	Using the metaphor of a garden, the participants are encouraged to depict and explore their here-and-now relationship to self-compassion. They may explore the subsymbolism of nutrients in the soil, the tools used to garden, the types of plants in their garden, the boundaries surrounding their self-care garden, and more. In practice, this may look like a participant depicting flourishing dahlias their grandma used to grow, which represents caring and compassion in their life, with a thorny bush that represents their irritable attitude when they try to be compassionate with themselves. Insight into their current self-compassion practices, or lack thereof, may be realized from this exercise.
Animals	Animals can represent many metaphors for a participant. In art therapy, the use of animals can aid in a client's self-exploration, externalization, and normalization of experience and emotions (Henderson, 1999) through the identification of an animal's strengths, roles in the context of relationships, and needs, and the generation of solutions (Herman & Chilton, 2023).
ETC level	The Cognitive-Symbolic level supports participants to consider how elements of their artwork may relate to their own experience.
MSC practice	<i>Self-compassion in relationships</i> practice
Art making example	I recommend that clients depict themselves and the other(s) they care for as animals to explore relationship situations. The participants can liken the animals to themselves and explore how self-compassion is employed or absent in the image and relationship, considering it through cognitive processes and intuitive symbolic representation. A potential example of animals used in consideration of self-compassion in relationships is the participant's depiction of themselves as a small rabbit and their relative as a fox. The participant may consider how the rabbit and fox relate or offer compassion to each other and if any metaphorical transformation in the image and any new concrete approach in their relationship may help to make compassion possible.
Mandalas	Mandala creation has a long history, grounded in Buddhist and Tibetan spiritual practices, used to aid in meditation and represent wholeness characterized by a circular shape (Sari Ozturk & Kilicarslan Toruner, 2022). Zhang et al's (2024) systematic review found that creating mandala art may improve psychological well-being. The use of mandalas, or working within a circle, likely due to its promotion of mindfulness and self-soothing through its repetitious pattern during creation, can increase a sense of hope (Kim et al., 2018), comfort, mindfulness, resilience (Özsavran & Ayyıldız, 2023), spiritual well-being (Sari Ozturk & Kilicarslan Toruner, 2022), and decrease anxiety (Kostyunina & Drozdikova-Zaripova, 2016; Sari Ozturk & Kilicarslan Toruner, 2022), stress, and depression (Shah & Borkar, 2021). Mandalas offer an anchor of structure for its creator to center and ground through focused attention to integrate parts into a whole, the self, and one's experiences (Isis, 2022).
ETC level	The Cognitive-Symbolic level supports participants to consider how elements of their artwork may relate to their own experience.
MSC practice	The <i>Taking it forward</i> practices
Art making example	This metaphor fits as the circle and the promotion of repetition parallels the mindfulness practices the participants will have performed. It is a means to unify what they have learned through, perhaps, the patterned representation of their personal metaphors developed throughout the sessions. For example, yellow may have represented self-compassion throughout the program, and in their mandala, it has multiplied and grown.

**Table 3.** Quantitative feedback results.

Variable	n=	M	Group representation	Standard deviation
Helpfulness	2	4.5/5 (90%)	18.18%	0.71
Enjoyability	2	4.5/5 (90%)	18.18%	0.71

connecting the concepts to the art and pushing myself to go out of my comfort zone." They shared that the group format increased their sense of kinship and common humanity; they stated, "I appreciated the sense of community and knowing that I am not alone in this journey, many people feel this way as well." They added "Society is way too hard on us and thus we are hard on ourselves." They emphasized the importance of self-compassion, "We need to show

grace, to ourselves and to others." Another participant emphasized the importance of self-compassion as well, "We need to show grace, to ourselves and to others." In terms of the combination of art therapy with MSC, participants expressed that it supported them emotionally: "It surprised me how much art can assist in processing emotions... which was helpful. Thank you." In terms of tailored media and metaphor offerings, this participant expressed appreciation for "the respect from both facilitators to personalize the experience. It was so different for everyone." This was the extent of the feedback provided. Neither participant suggested ways to improve the program.

## Discussion

This mixed-method, quasi-experimental posttest pilot evaluation study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of combining the MSC program with art therapy to enhance participants' self-compassion skills, resources, and emotional and mental well-being. The feedback outlined is descriptive of the participants' experience and suggestive of different outcomes. The positive feedback received indicates that the respondents found the integration of MSC principles with art therapy both helpful and enjoyable. Respondents, representative of 18.2% of 11 participants, rated the helpfulness and enjoyability of the program highly, with mean scores of 90% for both dimensions. This aligns with existing literature on the benefits of combining mindfulness and art therapy (Jones-Callahan, 2016; Newland & Bettencourt, 2020; Williams, 2018).

The qualitative feedback highlighted several benefits of the MSC art therapy group. Participants noted value of community and shared acknowledgment of suffering decreasing emotional and mental distress, increased value and experience of compassion and self-compassion, creative and novel expression, and the emotional processing facilitated by the addition of art therapy. The feedback is in line with existing research suggesting that art therapy, particularly when combined with mindfulness techniques, can notably enhance emotional and psychological well-being (Jenabi et al., 2022; Kass & Trantham, 2014; Newland & Bettencourt, 2020). The intentional selection of art materials and metaphors, guided by the ETC, may have been a key factor in the therapeutic process. The use of the ETC framework likely stimulated various areas of the brain (Han et al., 2024; Lusebrink, 2010; Malik, 2022), supporting the MSC program's goals of increasing self-compassion and enhancing clients' mental and emotional well-being. Specifically, the Kinesthetic-Sensory materials may have provided stress relief and emotional expression, the Perceptual-Affective materials may have facilitated emotional exploration and self-awareness, and the Cognitive-Symbolic materials and metaphors may have encouraged deeper cognitive processing and problem-solving as suggested by Hinz (2020) and Lusebrink

(2010). These benefits were validated by a participant who found that the program aided them in processing emotions and experiencing self-compassion, aligning with literature on the role of the ETC's purposeful utilization in enhancing therapeutic outcomes (Han et al., 2024; Malik, 2022). Additionally, metaphors can enable clients to explore and express new perspectives, complex emotions and experiences through symbolic representation (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Moon, 2007). A participant appreciated the personalized approach, which may have enriched their engagement with the MSC practices and deepened their self-understanding.

This was a very small-scale pilot program conducted with 11 adult participants and a small number of feedback respondents. A larger scale pre- and posttest pilot study with a more identified and diverse participant pool is required to confirm the benefits of this combined approach (Heppner et al., 2015). Trusted scales increased and diversified sample size, multiple data sources with data triangulation, randomized controlled studies, and cultural adaptations can increase external validity of studies (Heppner et al., 2015). It is recommended that future studies use valid self-compassion, emotional, and mental wellness scales alongside targeted open-ended questions and other data sources to lead to richer insights. More research to indicate the efficacy of art therapy utilizing specific media and metaphors combined with the MSC program are necessary. Further cultural adaptations of suggested materials and metaphors for MSC art therapy groups are essential.

## Conclusion

This mixed-method quasi-experimental design pilot study represents the first to offer explicit suggestions of metaphors and materials to use in the implementation of art therapy in the MSC program and joins the currently small but growing body of general evidence supporting the efficacy of MSC combined with art therapy (Isis, 2022; Williams, 2018). Creative expression with mindfulness-based practices can be an effective approach for enhancing self-compassion, emotional and mental resilience, and well-being

(Hass-Cohen et al., 2023; Kass & Trantham, 2014; Newland & Bettencourt, 2020). Purposefully selecting media and metaphors engages relevant brain systems to resolve client issues (Han et al., 2024; Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015; Lusebrink, 2010; Malik, 2022). The intentional selection of media and metaphor in the MSC program has practical implications for therapists looking to expand their practice methods and incorporate more holistic approaches to support clients' mental health. Overall, this pilot study provides a foundation for further exploration of mindful self-compassion art therapy programs and their application in therapeutic settings with adults seeking to improve their overall mental and emotional well-being.

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I am a Registered Psychotherapist (Qualifying) with the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario, and a Professional Art Therapist with the Canadian Art Therapy Association.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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