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Art as an Intervention for Healing and Empowerment

Erin Barrus

Western Michigan University - USA, erin.m.barrus@wmich.edu

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Art as an Intervention for Healing and Empowerment

Abstract

Komal Patel, an occupational therapist and artist residing in New Jersey, USA, provided the cover art for the Fall 2024 issue of the *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). "Emotions" is a piece made from acrylic on canvas that depicts the emotional complexities the human mind goes through during a person's experience or stage of life. The inspiration comes from her personal journey of moving to the United States from India and the emotional turbulence, both negative and positive, she experienced. Art has become part of the healing story for herself and others. She shares how incorporating this intervention leads to improvement in physical, emotional, and social outcomes close to the individual but also for society.

Keywords

Komal Patel, occupational therapy

Credentials Display

Erin Barrus, MS, OTRL, BFA

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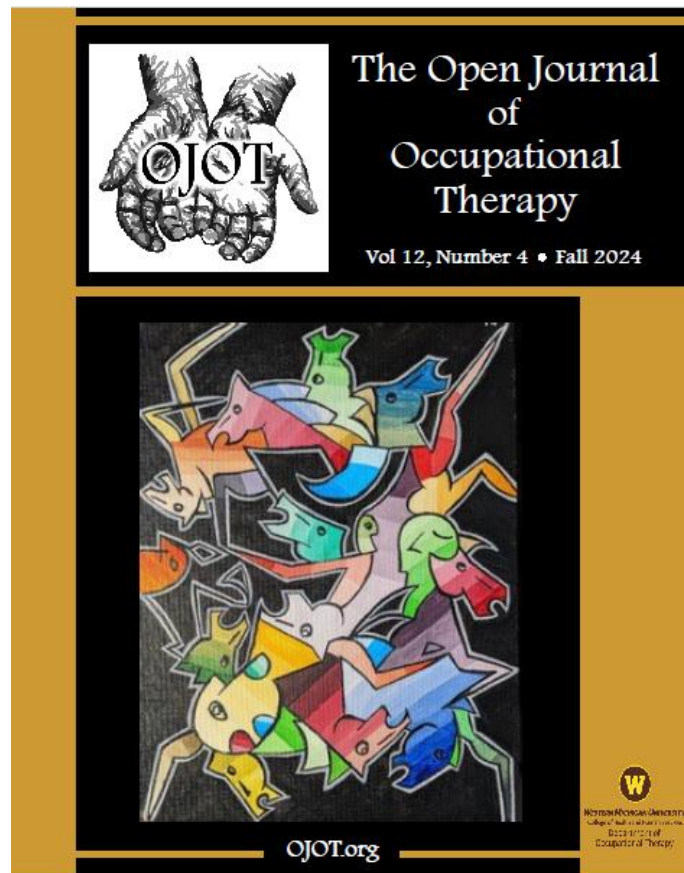
Komal Patel is an occupational therapist, a director of rehabilitation, and artist living in New Jersey. Her piece “Emotions” is highlighted as the cover art for the Fall 2024 edition of the *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). The piece (see Figure 1) is a depiction of the emotional complexities the human mind goes through during a person’s experience or stage of life. The inspiration comes from her personal journey of moving to the United States from India and the emotional turbulence, both negative and positive, she experienced.

Komal was born in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. She received her Bachelor of Occupational Therapy at Ahmedabad Institute of Medical Sciences in 2012 and her Master of Occupational Therapy at Jaipur Occupational Therapy College in 2014. While practicing in India, she worked with many clients who had neurological conditions and learning disabilities. In 2017, after going through a very rigorous process to obtain her work Visa in the United States, she started her occupational therapy career working in pediatrics in Queens, New York, with the River View School district and at the East Harlem Scholars Academy Charter School in Manhattan. In addition, she worked for RCM Healthcare Services, working with adults at their various skilled nursing facilities and rehabilitation centers. In 2019, she began her journey in leadership as a supervisor and is now working at Kingsbridge Heights Nursing and Rehabilitation Center as the director of rehabilitation in the Bronx, New York.

Her journey with art started in her early childhood and has evolved as she began her career as an occupational therapist when she started using art as an intervention tool in her practice. This is when she found that the arts were a global tool that could impact persons of all ages, genders, and abilities. In addition, she has grown in her identity as an artist by founding Art and Ability and as a philanthropist and advocate for endangered species. She is primarily self-taught and has completed several courses through Udemy and Alison. Komal started Art and Ability in 2020 during her personal experience with COVID-19. Art was a source of inspiration and aided in the recovery of her mental and physical health. Her goals in creating this platform were to showcase her art, share messages of hope and awareness, and champion the talents of artists with various disabilities. She aims to amplify their visibility in the art community, provide a space for creativity to flourish, and inspire new perspectives. She plans to continue to grow this online presence by engaging in more exhibitions to promote awareness and the power of art as an occupation. Komal has also authored two books, *Basic Concepts of Portrait Drawings: A Step-by-step Guide* and *Basic Shapes and Figure Drawing*, to help aspiring artists explore their creativity and develop and refine their skills.

Figure 1

Emotions OJOT Vol 12, Number 4, Fall 2024
9x12 acrylic on canvas



When working in schools and skilled nursing facilities, Komal found that art allowed her clients and patients to engage more meaningfully in her sessions and throughout the rest of their day. She recalls a student who struggled with attention and handwriting during class activities. The student would frequently get frustrated when asked to write during activities. When Komal identified that this student was interested in art, she used coloring with various tools and on various surfaces to provide a “just right” challenge for attention and to strengthen the muscles needed for improved fine motor coordination. She also found that art aided in calming students with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism, as it provided a sensory experience they were not getting in the classroom. After she transitioned to adults, her clientele predominantly had experienced a neurological event, such as a stroke or traumatic brain injury, or possibly living with advanced Parkinson’s. She noticed symptoms of isolation and depression during her sessions and would use art to build rapport and trust. This led to a much stronger therapeutic relationship and improved engagement in her sessions. When asked about empowering her team to use art, she said she does identify barriers to incorporating art into sessions because of insurance requirements, in addition to productivity expectations.

In 2019, Komal participated in the Art Impact International exhibition. This is a non-profit organization that organizes online exhibitions to showcase various artists. She was very inspired by the work she saw and began researching endangered species. She realized how much awareness needed to be spread. In her pieces “The Journey” (see Figure 2) and “Survival” (see Figure 3), Komal shares a message with others that we all have a moral responsibility to preserve the planet, protect wildlife, and support habitats through their survival needs. Her piece “Emotions” (Figure 1) is also highly personal, as it depicts the emotional complexity a human can go through during various stages of their life or during, and due to, specific experiences. When Komal moved to the United States, it was a time of profound loneliness that required significant adjustments to an entirely different culture. One of the greatest challenges she experienced was visa sponsorship, as employers have specific requirements for completing evaluations. Practicing occupational therapy in the

Figure 2

The Journey
8x10 acrylic on canvas



Figure 3

Survival
9x12 acrylic on canvas



United States was quite different from practicing in India, particularly around documentation, productivity, and government requirements for treatment, not only with pediatric patients but also insurance for geriatrics. Art was a key connection between her previous experiences and her career in the United States.

Komal has blended many aspects of her personal and occupational history into a profound career as both director of rehabilitation and an artist. She continues to share the creative process in all aspects of her life to empower those who may be struggling with mental health and cognitive and/or musculoskeletal deficits. Art has become part of the healing story for not only herself but for others and shares how incorporating this intervention leads to improvement in physical, emotional, and social outcomes, both close to the individual but also for society.

View more of Komal's work in the OJOT Gallery:

https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/

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