

ART AS HEALING

INSIGHTS ON INTEGRATING ART THERAPY FOR THE RURAL ELDERLY IN THE ERA PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

The ERA (Elders Rural Aware) Project reached an important milestone through a meticulously planned focus group meeting hosted by **Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University**, the project's coordinating institution. Held on **April 22, 2025**, this session brought together 13 experts, including professors, healthcare practitioners, VR engineers, legal advisors, and professionals working in elderly care.

The diverse group offered invaluable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by elderly populations in rural areas, focusing on how **art therapy** could serve as a meaningful, inclusive, and therapeutic practice.

The conversation explored how rural environments, often marked by isolation and limited access to resources, can still offer unique opportunities for integrating **art-based practices**. This article synthesizes the key findings and insights from the focus group, highlighting how art therapy can address the emotional, psychological, and social needs of elderly individuals in rural communities, and how the **ERA Project** is making strides in this direction.



ENVIRONMENT REINTEGRATION AND AWARENESS-BASED ART THERAPY FOR RURAL ELDERLY

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ART THERAPY IN RURAL
CONTEXTS: A NATURAL FIT

Rural elderly populations, often facing **social isolation**, **physical decline**, and **mental health vulnerabilities**, stand to benefit significantly from the emotional release, creative engagement, and community reconnection that art therapy provides (Malchiodi, 2013). Experts in the focus group agreed that, in rural areas, the healing power of art can be further amplified when it is seamlessly integrated with the natural surroundings and traditional lifestyles of elderly individuals (Stuckey, & Nobel, 2010). This blending of **art therapy** with environmental elements offers a unique approach to addressing the challenges of aging, where **nature-based art practices** become central to the therapeutic process. Several culturally rich and accessible art forms were proposed as suitable for elderly individuals, such as:

Crafting (knitting, crocheting, embroidery, and weaving): These activities not only enhance motor skills but also connect elderly individuals to their cultural heritage and daily routines.

Nature-Based Art: Engaging in activities like **stone painting**, **flower arranging**, and **wood carving** allows elderly individuals to connect with the environment around them, fostering a sense of continuity with nature. This is crucial in rural areas where many elderly individuals have spent their lives immersed in the rhythms of the land.

Culinary Arts: Preparing traditional foods like **bread**, **yogurt**, or **sweets** offers therapeutic benefits through sensory engagement and helps elderly individuals stay connected with their cultural and familial practices.

These activities provide meaningful outlets for creativity while promoting social interaction and intergenerational bonding.

Music Therapy: The practice of creating or playing **traditional folk music** using local instruments, such as the **sipsi** or **wooden spoon**, helps preserve cultural identity, promotes social cohesion, and improves cognitive functions like memory and concentration.

Digital Art & Storytelling: Introducing **VR-based** art and **digital storytelling** activities opens avenues for elderly individuals to share their life experiences, preserving valuable local and family histories while fostering connections across generations.



THERAPY OR PRACTICE? REFRAMING THE LANGUAGE OF ART THERAPY

One of the most crucial takeaways from the focus group was the importance of **language** in shaping the perception and acceptance of art therapy (Camic, & Springham, 2021). The term **"art therapy"** can sometimes carry stigmatizing or clinical connotations, particularly in rural communities where formal mental health services may not be readily accessible (Zubala, & Karkou, 2018).

To mitigate this, participants suggested reframing art therapy as **"creative practice"** or **"cultural activity"**. This shift in language emphasizes that the focus is on creative expression, not on medicalization, and allows elderly individuals to engage more freely without the perceived need for professional psychological intervention.

Such a rebranding would make these activities feel more accessible and less intimidating to elderly participants, particularly in rural settings where community-oriented, self-directed activities are more common.



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CUSTOMIZING FOR AUTONOMY
AND CULTURAL VALUES

The focus group emphasized that **autonomy** is a fundamental aspect of elderly care, especially in rural contexts. As people age, the need for **control over one's life choices** becomes even more pronounced. Experts stressed the importance of allowing elderly individuals to choose the artistic activities that resonate most with them. This process of choosing can be empowering, ensuring that elderly participants feel their personal preferences and identities are respected.

Furthermore, content development for the **Eco-Art Therapy Toolkit** should reflect local traditions, values, and memories. For example, crafting **musical instruments**, performing **folk dances**, and using **local materials** like clay and stone for artistic expression can strengthen cultural pride and create a sense of belonging. These practices also bridge generational gaps, as younger members of the community can collaborate with the elderly to learn traditional crafts and music (Cohen, 2006).

BARRIERS TO
IMPLEMENTATION AND
OPPORTUNITIES

While the focus group highlighted several **barriers** to the widespread implementation of art therapy, including the lack of trained professionals in rural areas and limited financial resources, many opportunities also emerged. Notably, the **collaboration** with **local NGOs**, **retirement associations**, **rehabilitation centers**, and **academic institutions** was identified as crucial to embedding art therapy practices within the existing healthcare and social service systems.

The project can access pre-existing trust networks and lessen the cost of hiring specialised art therapists by collaborating with local actors. Additionally, by raising knowledge of the advantages of art therapy, these collaborations can improve the uptake of these programs in remote areas (Windle, Gregory, & Howson-Griffiths, 2018).



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INTEGRATING ART INTO
THE ERA PLATFORM

The findings from this focus group are directly informing the development of the **ERA Project's Eco-Art Therapy Toolkit**, which aims to provide a comprehensive set of tools and guidelines for facilitating art-based interventions. This toolkit will: Offer **step-by-step guides** for engaging with creative activities using **natural** and **household materials** (e.g., clay, wood, flowers, fabric).

Provide **training modules** for **caregivers**, **community leaders**, and **family members**, helping them facilitate creative practices that promote emotional well-being in elderly populations.

Include **culturally responsive exercises** that align with the values, heritage, and practices of rural communities.

Utilize **VR technologies** where possible, to simulate natural and cultural environments (e.g., forests, gardens, local festivals) to enhance engagement and interaction.



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CONCLUSION: TOWARD A
MORE COLORFUL AND
CONNECTED AGING

The **ERA Project's focus group** reaffirmed that **art** is not simply a luxury for elderly individuals; it is an essential tool for aging with **dignity, creativity, and meaning**. Whether it's crafting, storytelling, music-making, or gardening, the elderly in rural communities possess untapped creative potential that can be harnessed through **art therapy**. By aligning creative practices with **environmental awareness** and **cultural traditions**, the ERA Project is poised to offer **transformative experiences** that promote **social inclusion, emotional health, and self-expression**.

The **Eco-Art Therapy Toolkit** is thus designed to serve as a dynamic, culturally grounded, and **holistically adaptive** resource that empowers elderly individuals, caregivers, and communities to foster **well-being, intergenerational connection**, and a sense of **belonging**. The project sets the stage for viewing aging not as a period of decline but as a vibrant chapter of life that offers new opportunities for personal expression, community engagement, and environmental stewardship.

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