

ART AS A MECHANISM FOR REGULATING EMOTIONS ACCORDING TO ATTACHMENT STYLES

ARTA CA MECANISM DE REGLARE A EMOȚIILOR ÎN CONFORMITATE CU STILURILE DE ATAȘAMENT

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Abstract

The present theoretical inquiry investigates the function of art as an emotional regulation mechanism in relation to attachment styles, integrating perspectives drawn from attachment theory, the psychology of emotion regulation, and expressive psychotherapy. The study highlights the ways in which artistic experiences can facilitate emotional processing, symbolic containment, and affective integration, with particular relevance for individuals characterized by insecure attachment styles. Furthermore, it analyzes both the clinical relevance of artistic techniques in psychotherapeutic contexts and the potential of art to operate as a symbolic attachment figure. The article also underscores the need to adapt expressive interventions according to the specifics of attachment styles, highlighting the differentiated emotional needs associated with secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized attachment patterns.

The paper argues for the idea that artistic processes can contribute to emotional stabilization, the deepening of self-awareness, and relational reorganization, while simultaneously opening novel perspectives for integrative psychotherapeutic practice and for future interdisciplinary research.

Keywords: attachment, emotional regulation, psychotherapy, art, music, symbolic processing.

Rezumat

Prezentul demers teoretic investighează funcția artei ca mecanism de reglare emoțională în corelație cu stilurile de atașament, prin integrarea unor perspective preluate din teoria atașamentului, psihologia reglării emoționale și psihoterapia expresivă. Studiul evidențiază modalitățile prin care experiențele artistice pot facilita procesarea emoțională, conținerea simbolică și integrarea afectivă, cu relevanță sporită în cazul persoanelor caracterizate de stiluri de atașament nesigur. În plus, sunt analizate atât relevanța clinică a tehnicilor artistice în context psihoterapeutic, cât și potențialul artei de a opera ca figură simbolică de

atașament. Articolul subliniază, necesitatea adaptării intervențiilor expresive în funcție de specificul stilurilor de atașament, reliefând nevoile emoționale diferențiate asociate modelelor de atașament securizant, anxios, evitant și dezorganizat.

Lucrarea pledează pentru ideea conform căreia procesele artistice pot contribui la stabilizarea emoțională, la aprofundarea conștiinței de sine și la reorganizarea relațională, deschizând, totodată, perspective inedite pentru practica psihoterapeutică de tip integrativ și pentru cercetările interdisciplinare viitoare.

Cuvinte-cheie: atașament, reglare emoțională, psihoterapie, artă, muzică, procesarea simbolică.

Introduction Emotion regulation represents one of the fundamental processes of psychological functioning, playing an essential role in the individual's adaptation to the social environment and in the organization of internal experience. The ability to identify, modulate, and integrate affective experiences is closely linked to mental health and the quality of interpersonal relationships, being considered a central indicator of adaptive functioning [4, p. 271].

In terms of development, this ability does not emerge spontaneously but is gradually constructed within early attachment relationships. Attachment theory, formulated by Bowlby, highlights that repeated interactions between the child and the caregiver contribute to the formation of internal working models, which will subsequently guide the way the individual perceives and regulates emotions [1, p. 89]. Thus, emotion regulation initially has an interpersonal character, depending on the availability and sensitivity of the attachment figure, only later being internalized as self-regulation.

Subsequent research has demonstrated that attachment styles are associated with distinct patterns of emotional and relational functioning. Securely attached individuals exhibit an increased capacity to tolerate negative affects and to integrate emotional experience, whereas insecure styles are associated with difficulties in emotion regulation, either through hyperactivation or affective inhibition [8, p. 156]. In parallel, in recent decades, the literature

has paid increasing attention to the role of artistic experience in emotional processing. Art, by its symbolic and expressive nature, offers an alternative space for accessing affective contents that cannot always be formulated verbally. Artistic activities allow the externalization of internal experiences and their reorganization into a coherent form, thus facilitating the process of emotional integration [7, p. 32].

Music, in particular, stands out for its ability to rapidly and profoundly influence affective states, activating neurobiological structures involved in emotion processing. Studies in neuroscience indicate that musical experience engages the limbic system and reward circuits, contributing to mood regulation and stress reduction [5, p. 172].

In this context, exploring the relationship between attachment styles and the use of art as an emotion regulation mechanism becomes relevant. If emotion regulation is initially mediated by relationship, and art offers a symbolic space of containment, it can be assumed that artistic experience may, to some extent, take on functions similar to those of an attachment figure.

The aim of this article is to analyze the role of art as an emotion regulation mechanism according to attachment styles and to highlight the clinical implications of this relationship. The central thesis of the article is that *“art can function as a symbolic substitute for an attachment figure, particularly in insecure styles.”*

The objectives of this theoretical synthesis are: to describe the relationship between attachment styles and patterns of

emotion regulation; to analyze the mechanisms through which art (especially music and visual expression) facilitates the symbolic processing of affects; to identify differentiated associations between each attachment style and the mode of using art; to propose expressive therapeutic interventions adapted to the attachment profile; and to discuss the potential of art to become a symbolic attachment figure.

Furthermore, the paper aims to outline an integrative perspective that articulates the contributions of attachment theory, emotion psychology, and expressive psychotherapy.

Attachment and the Development of Emotion Regulation

Attachment represents a fundamental, biologically based motivational system oriented toward maintaining proximity to the caregiver in situations of stress or danger. From this perspective, the attachment relationship serves not only a physical protection function but also an emotion regulation function, providing the child with a framework for containing and organizing affective experiences [1, p. 101].

In the early stages of development, the child does not possess the capacity for self-regulation, being dependent on the co-regulation process carried out in interaction with the caregiver. The caregiver's sensitivity—the ability to recognize and respond appropriately to the child's emotional signals—contributes to the development of internal regulation mechanisms. Through the repetition of these experiences, the child internalizes regulatory functions, gradually developing the capacity for self-regulation [9, p. 210].

Ainsworth and her colleagues highlighted the existence of distinct attachment patterns, which reflect the quality of the relationship with the caregiver. Secure attachment is characterized by trust in the other's availability and by the ability to use the relationship as a secure base for

exploration. From an emotional perspective, this style is associated with good affective integration and flexibility in emotion regulation [2, p. 135].

In contrast, insecure attachment styles involve different strategies for adapting to an environment perceived as unpredictable or insufficiently containing. Anxious attachment is characterized by hyperactivation of the attachment system, manifested through heightened emotional intensity, sensitivity to rejection, and difficulties in calming down. Individuals with this style tend to experience emotions in an amplified manner and to depend on external validation for their regulation [8, p. 189].

Avoidant attachment, on the other hand, involves the inhibition of emotional expression and the avoidance of intimacy as a strategy for protection against rejection. These individuals display an apparent emotional autonomy, which conceals difficulties in accessing and integrating affective experiences [*ibidem*, p. 203].

Disorganized attachment reflects an incoherence in regulation strategies, being frequently associated with traumatic experiences or with relationships characterized by ambivalence and inconsistency. In this case, emotions may be experienced as overwhelming and difficult to organize, which profoundly affects the capacity for self-regulation [3, p. 87].

From a developmental perspective, these patterns represent not only relational styles but also distinct ways of relating to one's own emotional experience. Thus, attachment can be understood as a fundamental matrix of emotion regulation, influencing how the individual manages stress, relationships, and their own internal experiences.

Emotion Regulation: Mechanisms and Dimensions

Emotion regulation represents a complex set of processes through which the individual influences the nature, intensity,

and duration of their emotions, as well as the manner in which these are expressed and integrated into conscious experience. From the perspective of the process model proposed by Gross, emotion regulation can intervene at different stages of the emotional process, including situation selection, context modification, attentional deployment, cognitive reappraisal, and response modulation [4, p. 275].

This model highlights that emotion regulation is not a unitary process but a multidimensional one, involving both conscious and unconscious mechanisms. Regulation strategies can be adaptive or maladaptive, depending on the flexibility of their use and the context in which they are activated. From a developmental perspective, the capacity for emotion regulation is closely linked to early relational experiences. In the absence of a secure attachment relationship, the individual may develop rigid or inefficient strategies, such as emotional avoidance, suppression, or affective hyperactivation. Although these strategies may have an adaptive function in childhood, they become dysfunctional in adulthood, limiting the capacity for emotional integration [3, p. 112].

Fonagy and colleagues emphasize the role of mentalization in emotion regulation, highlighting that the capacity to reflect upon one's own internal states and those of others contributes to the organization of affective experience. The lack of this capacity is associated with difficulties in identifying and differentiating emotions, as well as with a tendency to react impulsively or to avoid emotional experience [*ibidem*, p. 145]. In this context, emotion regulation cannot be reduced to a set of techniques but must be understood as an integrative process involving the relationship between body, affect, and cognition. Thus, the development of alternative regulation modalities becomes essential, especially for individuals who

have not benefited from secure relational experiences.

Art as a Symbolic Space for Emotional Processing

Art occupies a distinct place in the process of emotion regulation, through its ability to facilitate access to affective experiences that cannot always be expressed verbally. Unlike conceptual language, artistic expression allows an indirect approach to emotions, offering a symbolic framework in which they can be explored and transformed. From a psychodynamic perspective, art functions as a medium for symbolization, facilitating the transition from raw emotional experience to its representation in an organized form. Kramer emphasizes that artistic activity allows for the elaboration of unconscious contents, reducing internal tension and facilitating the integration of affective experience [7, p. 58]. At the same time, Winnicott conceptualizes the artistic space as a transitional space, situated between internal and external reality. In this space, the individual can experience intense emotions in a safe setting without being overwhelmed by them. This symbolic containment function is essential for the process of emotion regulation [10, p. 73].

From a neuropsychological perspective, artistic experience involves the activation of the limbic system and reward circuits, contributing to the modulation of affective state [5, p. 174]. Music, in particular, has the ability to rapidly induce and modify emotions, being frequently used as an instrument of emotion regulation. Studies show that listening to music can reduce stress levels and facilitate emotional processing. Levitin highlights that music acts upon the brain in a complex manner, integrating cognitive, emotional, and sensory components [6, p. 92]. It can facilitate access to affective memories and contribute to the reorganization of emotional experience (Table 1).

Table 1.
Attachment styles and the use of art as an emotion regulation mechanism

Attachment Style	Relational & Emotional Characteristics	Function of Art	Use of Music & Visual Expression	Therapeutic Intervention Goals	Recommended Techniques	Art as Symbolic Attachment Figure
SECURE	Trust in the other's availability; good affective integration; flexibility in emotion regulation.	Exploratory and authentic expression; natural extension of self-regulation.	Flexible and integrative use; accessing emotions without being overwhelmed.	Supporting authentic expression and consolidating internal resources.	Free and creative interventions; combined expressive journaling; thematic drawing.	Symbolic secure base that reflects and extends the internal capacity for safety and exploration.
ANXIOUS	Hyperactivation of the attachment system; heightened emotional intensity; sensitivity to rejection.	Compensatory; mechanism for emotional stabilization and reduction of affective intensity.	Music frequently used to maintain symbolic connection and for calming.	Developing internal regulation resources and reducing emotional hyperactivation.	Slow-tempo music; expressive writing exercises; emotional collage.	Permanently available attachment figure offering symbolic validation and proximity to soothe anxiety.
AVOIDANT	Inhibition of emotional expression; avoidance of intimacy; apparent emotional autonomy.	Space of control; cognitive approach to avoid deep emotional involvement.	Controlled and distanced use; avoiding direct contact with affect.	Gradual access to emotional experience and reduction of resistance/defensiveness.	Abstract drawing; work with symbols; guided imagery with musical support.	Secure framework allowing distal interaction, offering control over emotional intimacy.
DISORGANIZED	Incoherence in strategies; overwhelming emotions; internal fragmentation; major self-regulation difficulties.	Psychic reorganization; framework for integrating and restructuring fragmented experiences.	Reflects emotional chaos while also offering a potential structuring framework.	Organizing internal experience and integrating contradictory emotions into a coherent form.	Interventions within a stable framework; emotional collage for organizing experiences; guided listening.	Source of predictability and continuity that contains chaos without being threatening.

Thus, art can be conceptualized as an emotion regulation tool that functions through the externalization of internal experiences, the organization of affective experience, the facilitation of reflection and awareness, as well as through the creation of a space of psychological safety.

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The Relationship Between Attachment Styles and the Use of Art

The manner in which an individual uses art is profoundly influenced by their attachment style, reflecting their emotion regulation strategies and their ways of relating to their own affective experience. Securely attached individuals tend to use art in a flexible and integrative manner. For them, the artistic experience is not merely a means of regulation but also a space for exploration and authentic expression. Emotions are accessed and integrated without being overwhelming, and art becomes a natural extension of the self-regulation process [2, p. 142]. In the case of anxious attachment, art acquires a compensatory function. Difficulties in emotion regulation and the tendency toward affective hyperactivation lead to the use of art as a means of emotional stabilization. Music, in particular, is frequently used to reduce the intensity of emotions and to maintain a form of symbolic connection in the absence of a secure relationship [8, p. 201].

Avoidant attachment is characterized by a more controlled and distanced use of art. Individuals with this style may show interest in artistic activities, but these are often approached in a cognitive manner, avoiding deep emotional involvement. Art thus becomes a space of control rather than a space of affective exploration [*ibidem*, p. 215]. In the case of disorganized attachment, the relationship with art is often ambivalent. On the one hand, it may reflect emotional chaos and the difficulty of organizing internal experience; on the other hand, it may offer a framework for integrating and restructuring fragmented experiences. Artistic expression thus becomes a potential tool for psychic reorganization [3, p. 134]. In this sense, art represents not only an emotion regulation tool but also an indicator of how the individual relates to their own emotions and to interpersonal relationships.

Clinical Implications and Applications in Psychotherapy

The integration of art into the psychotherapeutic process represents an increasingly valued intervention direction when working with emotion regulation difficulties and attachment patterns. Beyond its expressive function, art offers an experiential framework in which emotions can be experienced, contained, and reorganized in a less defensive manner than in direct verbal exploration. An essential point to emphasize is that one's attitude toward learning and development can directly influence the capacity to develop future competencies. If a person approaches a task from the perspective of "I don't like it" and does not make a minimal effort, they will not succeed in acquiring a relevant competence. Thus, active engagement and motivation are fundamental in this process [11, p. 40].

In this context, art functions as a medium of psychological mediation, facilitating the transformation of raw emotional experience into symbolic representation. This process is essential for the development of self-regulation, as it allows distancing from affective experience without avoiding it and facilitates its integration into the structure of the self [*ibidem*, p. 162]. For individuals with insecure attachment styles, emotion regulation difficulties are frequently associated with early experiences of invalidation, inconsistency, or relational trauma. These experiences affect the capacity for mentalization and symbolization, leading either to emotional hyperactivation, affective inhibition, or internal fragmentation [3, p. 158].

A central aspect of using art in psychotherapy is the reduction of resistance. In many situations, direct exploration of emotional contents can activate powerful defensive mechanisms, especially in individuals with a history of relational trauma. Artistic expression offers an indirect pathway to these contents, diminishing the anxiety associated with exposure and fa-

cilitating the patient's engagement in the therapeutic process. Furthermore, art contributes to the creation of a safe space in which the patient can experience intense emotions without being overwhelmed by them. This space can be conceptualized, in Winnicott's terms, as a transitional space, where internal and external reality can coexist and interact in a creative and integrative manner [10, p. 89]. The human being possesses psycho-individual resources that support their efficacy, having a core formed by mission, vocation, and the meaning of life [11, p. 40].

a. Differentiated Interventions According to Attachment Style

The effectiveness of therapeutic interventions is closely linked to the therapist's ability to adapt the methods used according to the patient's attachment style and their particular emotion regulation characteristics. In the case of anxious attachment, the central difficulty consists of emotional hyperactivation and dependence on external validation. Artistic interventions can be oriented toward the development of internal regulation resources and the reduction of emotional intensity. The use of slow-tempo music or expressive writing exercises can contribute to affective stabilization and the development of a sense of internal safety [5, p. 176].

For individuals with avoidant attachment, the main challenge lies in avoiding contact with emotions and the tendency toward cognitive control. In these cases, the introduction of artistic interventions must be carried out gradually to avoid activating defenses. Techniques such as abstract drawing or working with symbols allow indirect access to emotional experience, reducing resistance and facilitating progressive exploration [7, p. 61]. In the case of disorganized attachment, interventions must be carried out within a stable and predictable therapeutic framework, as the patient may experience emotions as chaotic and overwhelming. Art can play an essential role here in organizing inter-

nal experience, allowing the simultaneous expression of contradictory emotions and facilitating their integration into a coherent form [3, p. 170]. For individuals with secure attachment, the use of art can have a more exploratory and developmental role, supporting authentic expression and consolidating internal resources. In these cases, interventions can be freer and more creative, without being predominantly oriented toward regulation.

b. Expressive Techniques Usable in Clinical Context

To support the practical applicability of these interventions, various expressive techniques can be integrated, adapted to the patient's needs and functioning style. These include: **combined expressive journaling**, which associates writing and drawing for processing emotions and increasing affective awareness; **guided music listening**, followed by reflection and verbalization, to facilitate emotional integration; **thematic drawing**, oriented toward exploring significant relationships and internal working models; **emotional collage**, which allows the symbolic organization of experiences and the identification of recurrent affective themes; as well as **guided imagery with musical support**, used to access unconscious contents and to restructure emotional experiences. These techniques can be integrated into various psychotherapeutic orientations and can be adapted according to the intervention objectives and the patient's particular characteristics.

c. Art as a Symbolic Attachment Figure

A particularly relevant aspect in understanding the role of art in emotion regulation is its symbolic function, which can reproduce, to a certain extent, the characteristics of an attachment figure. Thus, the artistic experience can offer **predictability**, through the repetition of certain structures or themes; **continuity**, through constant access to the artistic experience; and **emotional containment**, through the

capacity to sustain intense experiences without invalidating them. For individuals with insecure attachment, these functions can play a compensatory role, contributing to the development of a sense of internal safety. In this sense, art does not substitute for interpersonal relationships but offers additional support in the process of emotion regulation and the reorganization of affective experience.

Conclusions

The results of the theoretical analysis suggest that art can be conceptualized as a complex emotion regulation mechanism, closely linked to the attachment system. Particularly in the case of insecure styles, it may play a compensatory role, offering a framework for emotional stabilization in the absence of a secure relationship. However, it is important to emphasize that art does not substitute for interpersonal relationships but complements them. The effectiveness of its use depends on the individual's capacity to integrate the artistic experience and on the relational context in which it is used. The presented results suggest the need for an integrative approach to understanding emotion regulation, in which the relational and the symbolic dimensions are interdependent. In this sense, art should not be viewed exclusively as an auxiliary therapeutic tool but as an active medium of psychic transformation, capable of supporting the reorganization of emotional experience in ways often inaccessible to verbal processing.

This paper represents an initial theoretical synthesis of the relationship between attachment styles and art as an emotion

regulation mechanism, proposing an integrative conceptual framework that awaits extension through further research. Future studies will be able to develop this foundation by: adopting a systematic literature review methodology to ensure reproducibility; exploring the intercultural dimension; differentiating the specific effects of different artistic modalities; experimentally testing the concept of "art as a symbolic attachment figure"; and conducting controlled clinical evaluations of the proposed interventions, including potential risks in traumatic contexts. Thus, the present article constitutes a valid starting point for a broad agenda of transdisciplinary research. Future research directions could include investigating the relationship between artistic preferences and attachment styles, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of expressive interventions in different clinical contexts. Art represents a valuable medium for emotion regulation and a relevant tool for understanding and intervening in attachment styles. Through its symbolic and experiential nature, it facilitates the processing and integration of affective experience, contributing to the development of self-regulation.

The integration of art into psychotherapy offers promising perspectives for developing flexible interventions adapted to individual needs, supporting both emotional and relational functioning. Therefore, including the artistic dimension in clinical practice and research opens new directions for understanding the relationship between emotion, attachment, and symbolization.

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