

# Confectionary art therapy: Exploring the therapeutic benefits of baking

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## Bio

Vanessa Tsao completed a Bachelor of Arts in Performing and Visual Arts from the University of Witwatersrand. Driven by a desire to use her artistic experience in a meaningful way, she embarked on a journey to become an art therapist. Currently, Tsao is completing her Master of Art Therapy at the University of Johannesburg.

## Abstract

This article focuses on the use of baking as a therapeutic medium in art therapy, specifically investigating its potential benefits for self-care among art therapy trainees. This study acknowledges the importance of self-care in mental health professions and thus explores how baking can provide a comprehensive sensory experience that facilitates emotional regulation, mindfulness, and self-efficacy. Through a qualitative study involving four participants, the article examines the therapeutic process of baking, from preparation to decoration, and discusses its implications for art therapy practice. The preliminary findings suggest that baking can serve as a self-care method, promoting personal growth and well-being. Furthermore, the study highlights the need for further exploration and application of baking in therapeutic settings, emphasising the importance of an art therapist's presence to enhance the experience.

**Keywords:** Art therapy, baking, art therapist self-care, sensory engagement

## Introduction

While a small number of studies have explored baking in relation to mental health, its specific use as a tool for self-care among art therapy trainees remains under-researched. This article seeks to address this gap by

investigating whether baking can serve as a creative and therapeutic self-care practice for trainee art therapists. Traditionally, art therapy has consisted of visual art mediums like painting, drawing, and sculpture (clay). However, there is increasing recognition of the therapeutic potential of unconventional materials and processes within art therapy. Baking is an art form in its own right that demands time, effort, thought, and creativity, resulting in a product that exceeds the sum of its ingredients and holds rich “expressive potential” (Borsato, 2023a, p. 18).

This study aims to investigate the potential therapeutic benefits of baking within an art therapy framework. By analysing the subjective experiences of art therapy trainees, this study seeks to deepen the understanding of how baking can function as a unique self-care practice. Engaging in this creative activity may foster psychological and emotional well-being by offering another creative process to add to the available art therapy resources.

Self-care is crucial in preventing distress, burnout, and professional impairment (Carter & Barnett, 2014). In the South African context, where therapists frequently work with individuals affected by trauma, the practice of self-care becomes particularly vital. Beyond its importance for therapists, self-care is essential for individuals to maintain overall well-being and balance in everyday life.

Leigh Carter and Jeffrey Barnett (2014) define self-care as “the ongoing practice of self-awareness and self-regulation for the purpose of balancing psychological, physical, and spiritual needs of the individual”. Self-care is simply taking care of oneself. In the context of this article, and to evaluate the therapeutic potential of the material, the aspect of self-care that I will focus on is the psychological support an activity can provide to individuals.

As a self-care practice, baking offers art therapy trainees a novel and challenging experience, differing from their usual engagement with art materials. For trainees accustomed to various mediums, working with unfamiliar materials like baking ingredients may place them in a position akin to new clients—those unfamiliar with traditional art materials—thus allowing the trainees to empathise more deeply with their clients. Additionally, baked goods are deeply associated with rituals and celebratory occasions that imbue confectionaries with profound expressive potential (Borsato, 2023b, p. 3). The time investment required also ensures that individuals dedicate significant time to self-care, fostering deeper reflection and engagement.

Sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste are the five basic senses the body uses to experience the world in which it exists. Baking offers a comprehensive sensory experience regulated by the olfactory system—smell and taste—that are potent triggers of autobiographical memories (Herz, 2016, p. 2). This ability to hold expressive potential and trigger memories is indicative of the value baking as a method in art therapy might offer.

For art therapists in training the medium of baking evokes unique sensory qualities to explore if used in the same way that they use art materials. The study this article reflects on seeks to investigate these potential therapeutic benefits by engaging art therapy trainees in independent baking sessions as a method of self-care.

This article is based on my ongoing dissertation, which I completed as part of my master's in art therapy. The dissertation is centred on a study of four unaccompanied participants baking a cake in their respective locations, with the prompt of using this activity as a self-care method. Throughout this article, the four participants are referred to as Angela, Georgia, Faye, and Serena to ensure confidentiality. Due to the limited research on therapeutic baking, the article follows a bottom-up approach, drawing from various areas of research on which to build the methodology. The structure of the article is as follows: the literature review discusses the concept of self-care in the context of mental health professionals, the role of art in self-care, and the potential of sensory-rich activities like baking. The literature focuses on various elements that build up to the use of preparing food as a therapy due to the limited research on that topic. Following this, the methodology of the study is outlined, detailing how the intervention was carried out with the participants. The results and reflections of the trainees' experiences are then analysed, shedding light on the broader implications of baking as a therapeutic medium within art therapy. Finally, the discussion explores the relevance of these findings to the art therapy field and suggests future research directions in this emerging area.

## Literature review

### *Self-care*

Self-care is often assumed to be a straightforward concept, yet defining it is crucial to anchoring any scholarly exploration. Christina Godfrey, Margaret

Harrison, Rosemary Lysaght, Marianne Lamb, Ian Graham, and Patricia Oakley (2011) thoroughly reviewed the history and evolution of self-care definitions, drawing from diverse perspectives across research, practice, policy, and industry. Their work highlights the complexity and breadth of self-care, arriving at an expansive operational definition. For this paper, I will focus on the psychological needs of the individual in the context of self-care from an art therapy perspective.

According to Godfrey et al. (2011, p. 11), "Self-care involves a range of care activities deliberately engaged throughout life to promote physical, mental, and emotional health, maintain life, and prevent disease". The care activities include social support and meeting social and psychological needs. In the event of illness, disability, or injury, self-care continues to be practised, either individually or with support from others, ensuring continuity of care.

The importance of self-care for healthcare professionals has been well established. Self-care has been widely studied within mental health professions, as it is recognised as an essential element for providing ethical and quality care to clients (Bamonti Keelan, Larson, Mentrikoski, Sly, Travers, & McNeil, 2014, p. 254; Barnett, Baker, Elman & Schoener, 2007, p. 604; Barnett & Homany, 2022, p. 319). The literature clearly states that individuals within the caring professions are at a higher risk of stress, burnout, and professional impairment (Barnett & Cooper, 2009, p. 16), which self-care can prevent (Posluns & Gall, 2020, p. 3). Regulatory bodies such as the Canadian Psychological Association (2017) often have documents such as the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists, which states in Section II.12 that "in accordance with the Principle of Responsible Caring, members are to engage in self-care activities that help to avoid conditions (e.g., burnout, addictions) that could result in impaired judgment and interfere with their ability to/benefit and not harm others" (Posluns & Gall, 2020, p. 2). Although the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) has no direct reference to self-care, appropriate knowledge and skills are stated to be important and an ethical responsibility. Ethically practising as a mental health practitioner can only be upheld if the individual is healthy enough in all spheres of life, and as the literature has discussed, self-care is necessary for mental health practitioners (Barnett et al., 2007; Barnett & Homany, 2022; Miller, 2022).

According to Jeffrey Barnett and Grace Homany (2022, p. 317), "The goal of a strong self-care routine is to promote wellness and optimal functioning

and mitigate the impact of ongoing stressors in one's work or personal life that may lead to deterioration in professional competence". Emphasis is placed on pre-emptive self-care before negative consequences arise, where cognitive awareness and daily life balance are essential to effective personal and professional functioning (Posluns & Gall, 2020, p. 2; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019).

There is a movement to create a culture of self-care in training as a healthcare professional, a call for systemic changes in education and training (Bamonti et al., 2014), advocating for the integration of self-care modules within courses and the creation of a supportive professional environment that values and promotes self-care (Barnett et al., 2007). This current study focused on self-care in the university space with art therapists in training, which seems appropriate given the current conversations in the literature. "Effective self-care should be seen as a routine that is individualised to include activities that are relaxing, rejuvenating, enjoyable, and accessible" (Barnett & Homany, 2022, p. 317). In this case, baking could provide that experience for individuals and can be tailored to each person's needs.

Self-care is closely linked to mindfulness, as highlighted in the literature. The body of research on mindfulness is extensive and robust, with numerous academic studies highlighting a wide range of benefits. These studies demonstrate the positive impact of mindfulness on various aspects of well-being, including stress reduction, self-compassion, and emotional and behavioural regulation (Keng, Smoski & Robins, 2011; Milligan, Irwin, Wolfe-Miscio, Hamilton, Mintz, Cox, Gage, Woon & Phillips, 2016; Newsome, Waldo & Gruska, 2012). The volume and diversity of findings make a compelling case for incorporating mindfulness practices into daily life. Following the increase in research on mindfulness-based interventions, scholars used this practice with proven psychological benefits incorporating art to create various mindfulness-based art therapy interventions (Coholic et al., 2021; Ho et al., 2021; Monti, 2004). These interventions recognise the value of artmaking and pair it with mindfulness practices.

### *Art as an approach towards self-care*

Art has been effectively used in various disciplines to promote well-being, as seen from the following examples: Firstly, artmaking has helped homeless youth manage mental health challenges, recover from trauma, and develop positive self-esteem (Schwan, Fallon & Milne, 2018). Secondly, medical

students have also benefited from art, as it has improved their observational skills, self-awareness, and self-care through reflective art practices (Gowda, Dubroff, Willieme, Swan-Sein, & Capello, 2018). Thirdly, for social workers in war situations, creative expression has proven to be a cost-effective tool for stress reduction and self-care (Huss et al., 2010).

Stephanie Lewis Harter (2007) theorises how art is used to reflect and express experiences beyond words, finding that it provides a fresh perspective and growth as a therapist. Art therapists have explored the idea that artmaking can be a form of self-care in various studies. Harriet Wadeson (2003) demonstrates how art therapists use art to process their therapeutic work, revealing unconscious feelings and enriching their clinical practice. This reflective process can be an integral part of self-care, helping to manage the emotional burden of therapeutic work. Barbara Fish (2012) further explores response art<sup>1</sup> as a personal and professional growth method, suggesting its potential as a self-care practice.

### *Importance of material: Innovative materials and their unique abilities*

Art therapy is a mode of psychotherapy where various physical materials are used in a creative process to produce images and objects that are integrally part of the therapeutic relationship and process used to reach a therapeutic goal (SANATA, 2020). Typically, art therapists have a sophisticated understanding of art materials and can facilitate non-verbal communication, fostering curiosity and exploration for both the participant and therapist. Through the utilisation of diverse mediums, symbols, metaphors, and expressive mark-making, art therapy serves as an alternative means of articulating thoughts and emotions that may be challenging to express verbally (Hogan & Coulter, 2014, p. 1). The image or object can serve as a container of feelings that can be expressed, externalised, and analysed (Hogan, 2016, p. 2). In art therapy, the unseen/intangible emotions, thoughts, or ideas are externalised through the use of a medium, for example, paint, clay or crayons, and in the case of my study, baked cakes. The physical form that inner emotions and feelings take on is significant

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1 Response art is created by art therapists in response to material that arises within the therapy space that can serve many functions. This will be further explored in the dissertation and is not within the scope of this article.

(Pénzes et al., 2014, p. 490; Poon, 2017, p. 36) and can communicate extensive information that might not be apparent upon initial inspection.

Art therapy does not exclude any materials and processes. Rather, it provides the space for exploring innovative mediums, as can be seen in the literature, where photography and digital art are introduced and used in meaningful ways (Adaskina, 2021; Kopytin, 2004; Thong, 2007; Weiser, 2015). Catherine Moon (2010) establishes the need to expand the visual vocabulary of art therapy, presenting case studies of innovative materials like photography, installation, printmaking, mail art, nature, and found objects. Baking thus fits into this idea and offers new experiences with innovative insights, and thus, hopefully, baking can become a useful medium to be utilised.

Another geographically appropriate case study is an art therapy group of Caroll Hermann (2021). She is based in KwaZulu-Natal and successfully used bonsai as a healing tool for traumatised youth. Group members who were unfamiliar with bonsai used the bonsai to symbolise growth, hope, and strength while nurturing and caring for the plants.

Julie Brooker (2010) conducted a study using unusual materials and based her therapeutic process on using found objects to help her client think outside of herself and improve her self-esteem, self-expression, and mental and emotional health. This innovative way of working provided a unique experience and offered interventions that Brooker (2010) suggests traditional art materials would not have been able to do. The results from these two approaches support my argument that baking can offer meaningful and unique experiences of material engagement, as baking is also an unusual process using unconventional materials, especially for art therapy trainees who frequently engage with various art materials.

On the other hand, Jee Hee Moon (2021) found that familiar materials associated with memories might facilitate a more meaningful engagement. Moon (2021) thus raises the importance of the discernment that an art therapist requires in practice.

### *Therapy and senses*

The clay slip game (Klein, Regev & Snir, 2020) was found to have therapeutic significance. This activity involves the use of slip, a material made from clay and water, that is used to bind or glue pieces of clay together as a medium. The process for the clay slip game involves engaging with the material rather

than having an end product in mind. This activity consists mainly of haptic sensory engagement that provides regression and sublimation, as well as focuses on the experience due to there being no end product.

A psychological study has found that memories elicited by smells tend to be more emotional and evocative than those triggered by images or sounds (Herz & Schooler, 2002). Neurologically, this can be attributed to the proximity of the brain's emotion centres to the areas responsible for smell and taste, as opposed to those governing vision, hearing, and touch (Verbeek & Van Campen, 2013, p. 140). Odour memories seem to be enduring and less susceptible to interference (Groes, 2016, p. 39).

The powerful use of the olfactory system to evoke memories is used in nursing homes:

In the care of older people several sense memory projects have started in nursing homes. In particular for people suffering from dementia, these projects have added to their quality of life, since their cognitive abilities are severely affected, childhood memories can often exclusively be evoked by the senses. In a general sense memories provide fuel for conversation, promote social contact, and reduce the loneliness of older people (Verbeek & Van Campen, 2013, p. 145).

Nostalgia is an emotion that naturally emerges in response to psychological threats and plays a role in enhancing psychological well-being; thus, nostalgia can be a relevant experience in therapy. Memories evoke nostalgia, and various activities can tap into a person's memories, such as taste. It is suggested that comforting foods (taste and smell), which are often linked to nostalgic memories and cultural traditions, can help alleviate loneliness and serve as a coping mechanism during challenging times (Reid, Green, Buchmaier, McSween, Wildschut & Sedikides, 2023).

The senses engage the mind fully and provide experiences that single-sense activities might not be able to do. Thus, alternative art materials can be considered, such as edible art that offers a sensory experience different from visual art.

### *Food and art therapy*

The therapeutic use of food is a topic gaining attention within higher education institutions. However, it remains relatively unexplored and lacks extensive



mainstream publication, as I discovered in my research. Nevertheless, emerging evidence in dissertations at various institutions suggests that this area of inquiry may hold significant potential and merits further investigation (Ang, 2022; Clarke, 2013). The proposed study, which this article is based on, is conducted within the South African context, and it aims to contribute to the field by using a different approach and adding a voice from a different context.

Jordan Troisi and Shira Gabriel (2011, p. 751) found that people use food as social surrogates to fulfil psychological needs to feel social connection and reduce loneliness. Their continued research on comfort foods further claimed that people derived a sense of belonging from foods they deemed comfort foods, which serve as a cognitive and emotional reminder of loved ones (Troisi & Wright, 2017, p. 82). Lindsay Clarke (2013) demonstrates this in her thesis by discussing cooking as an art therapy method. Her interest in this subject stems from the memories and deep connections she finds in recipes, cooking, and the food itself (Clarke, 2013). Cooking served as a culinary postcard that supported and developed Clarke's sense of self and provided space for reflection, among many other benefits demonstrating the therapeutic potential of cooking within art therapy. Her research aligns with Claude Fischler's (1988) exploration of the concept of incorporation, emphasising the role of food in identity formation. Incorporation refers to the process of taking food from the external environment into the body, thereby internalising aspects of the external world (Fischler, 1988, p. 280). This process is literal, biological, and symbolic, as incorporation involves assimilating values and cultural elements through food choices. The well-known adage "we are what we eat" encapsulates this idea, highlighting how dietary choices significantly contribute to one's sense of self (Fischler, 1988, p. 280). The act of cooking transforms food from nature to culture (Fischler, 1988, p. 287), from biological to symbolic, which is a significant process and can be used to re-evaluate and reimagine one's identity.

Cherilnn Ang (2022) compares traditional art materials with various baking modalities, such as icing, baking bread, and cookie decoration. She presents baking as a therapeutic modality, examining its potential to reduce stress and anxiety. Ang (2022) highlights how the process of creating baked goods offers a therapeutic outlet, providing individuals with a means to express themselves creatively while engaging in a mindful activity. As an art form, baking can help reduce stress, foster a sense of accomplishment, and even encourage social interaction when sharing baked creations with others. Baking can ground

individuals and promote emotional well-being through the tactile and sensory experience of mixing, kneading, and decorating (Ang, 2022).

As a therapeutic activity, baking provides a unique avenue for clients to lower their defences and open themselves emotionally. Nicole Gordon (2019) emphasises that cooking can facilitate more open communication and enhance self-perception. Jasmine Cho (2022) uses baked goods to explore complex topics, such as Korean American identity and decolonisation, in a disarming and accessible way. She uses the materiality and form of the baked goods smartly, emphasising the far-reaching potential of the physical vehicle of meaning. Cho (2022) looks at participants' experiences using cookies to explore their Korean American identity. The cookies act as a catalyst for conversation about subjects important to the participants. For example, she uses the format of a cookie to bring attention to decolonisation and start conversations about it. Making cookies offers a unique sense of calm and control (Cho, 2022). The cookie as a material is effectively paired with her message in an almost contradictory way. The physical object containing the message is disarming, whereas the topic of decolonisation alone would possibly be quite divisive.

In Poland, an experimental therapeutic method using bake therapy was introduced in the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry of the Medical University of Lodz (Grzejszczak, 2023). The result of the experimental programme has been promising, and it provides an overview of how baking therapy can benefit young patients by improving self-esteem, fostering emotional expression, and enhancing social skills.

Similarly, cooking interventions<sup>2</sup> are shown to have beneficial psychosocial outcomes on self-esteem (Kim, Choe & Lee, 2020, p. 77), such as social interaction, a decrease in anxiety, enhanced psychological well-being, and quality of life (Farmer, Touchton-Leonard & Ross, 2018). Food art therapy has had a positive effect on the self-expression and social skills of people with mental illness who use community mental rehabilitation facilities (Kim et al., 2020, p. 8).

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2 Multiple cooking interventions, where baking is mentioned once.

## *Making special*

Ellen Dissanayake's (1995, p. 126) concept of 'making special', later termed 'artification' (Dissanayake, 2017, p. 148), grounds artmaking as adaptive behaviour, deeply embedded in human nature. The human tendency to make special emerges from play and ritual. Often employed in stressful situations, this activity ensures deliberate, slow steps and actions instead of automatic reactions to stressors and functions to encourage social cohesion. In many traditional cultures, artmaking and rituals intensify when a group feels threatened, serving to contain and transform anxiety (Learmonth, 2009, p. 4).

Making special is not synonymous with creating art; it describes the human inclination to elevate ordinary things or experiences (Dissanayake, 2017, p. 148). This making special can manifest in simple actions like preparing special meals or wearing distinct clothing for significant occasions (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 175). A cake can be seen as a 'special' food often present at celebrations, marking the importance of an event. The intimate association between rituals, celebratory occasions, and confectionary art imbues baked goods with a rich cognitive and metaphorical framework that enhances its expressive potential (Borsato, 2023, p. 3).

Baking a cake transforms ordinary ingredients into an object associated with celebration and can thus be seen as a method of making special that can be utilised for self-care. This process aligns with the concept of self-care, supporting mental health through mindful engagement. The use of baking as a form of art therapy thus fits well within the idea of artification, meeting the psychological needs of individuals through creative and intentional expression.

## **Methodology**

The research for my study is qualitative as it aims to gather knowledge grounded in human experience. It is situated within the interpretive paradigm and is explorative. Several self-studies enabled me to better understand using baking as a modality in art therapy as self-care.

The four participants, Angela, Georgia, Faye, and Serena, were purposefully selected and invited from the population of art therapy students enrolled at the University of Johannesburg in 2024. This purposeful sampling was because their knowledge and understanding of the therapeutic benefits

of traditional art materials enabled them to investigate the effects of baking as a creative process.

Art therapy trainees regularly engage in artmaking practices as part of their training to gain a deeper understanding of materials and processes used by their future clients. The research procedure I used in my study required the trainees to treat baking as art material and take note of the therapeutic benefits experienced, if any. Each individual was given a simple vanilla cake recipe to follow, with the invitation to modify it if desired. This freedom to modify allowed an optional layer of expression and meaning to be added to the process.

The preparation and mixing of the batter took between 20 and 40 minutes. The baking time was 20 to 30 minutes. The cooling time for the cake was about two hours, but the cake could also be baked and cooled for any length of time based on the participants' needs. Therefore, the trainee could return to decorate it when ready. The last step was decorating the cake with icing. There was no time limit for this, but a minimum of 20 minutes was estimated for the task. The total time was estimated to be four to five hours. The participants were given the freedom to engage in the process in a personalised way. This freedom of engagement is because self-care is defined by Carter and Barnett (2014) as "the ongoing practice of self-awareness and self-regulation to balance psychological, physical, and spiritual needs of the individual". Minimal instructions were provided to allow for space for individualised self-care.

After completing the baking session, participants were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews with me. These interviews provided an opportunity for participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and insights which they gained from the baking activity. Interviews allowed for the sharing of the participants' "in-depth experiences as well as their perceptions of the therapeutic potential of the material given their extensive clinical experience" (Klein et al., 2020, p. 66). In order to facilitate subsequent thematic analysis, the interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim, along with any notes taken.

## Ethical considerations

The study this article is drawn from has received ethical clearance from the Faculty Higher Degrees Committee with ethical clearance number SEM

2-2023-057 on 23 October 2023. Participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the research, with the freedom to withdraw at any moment without having to justify their withdrawal. The participants signed consent forms allowing recording, transcription, and use of their images in the research.

## Discussion and preliminary findings

### *Material engagement*

The expressive therapies continuum (ETC) by Sandra Kagin and Vija Lusebrink (1978) is a valuable conceptual model for understanding how individuals interact with art materials and how these interactions can facilitate therapeutic experiences. The theory poses various levels of material interaction: kinaesthetic/sensory, perceptual/affective, and cognitive/symbolic, interconnected by the creative level (Lusebrink et al., 2013, p. 77). Angela, Georgia, Faye, and Serena's baking processes were analysed through the lens of baking as a therapeutic medium. Here, the ETC is especially relevant because it helps frame the sensory, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of a participant's engagement with the activity. In baking, these levels are activated through:

- **Kinaesthetic/sensory level:** The kinaesthetic aspect involves movement (mixing), while the sensory aspect focuses on tactile experiences (textures and smells). Among the participants in this study, Faye found sensory grounding, but Georgia did not find making the batter therapeutic.
- **Perceptual/affective level:** Observing the transformation of ingredients into a cohesive mixture or seeing the process engages the perceptual aspect, while the satisfaction of creating something edible touches the affective aspect, evoking positive emotions.
- **Cognitive/symbolic level:** The cognitive aspect involves planning and following recipes, while the symbolic aspect relates to reflecting on the process' deeper meaning.

By shifting between these various levels of material engagement, baking engages multiple levels of the ETC, offering a well-rounded therapeutic experience. The structured aspects of baking (recipe-following) balance with the freedom of decorating, allowing for engagement across the continuum, which can suit various therapeutic needs.

## *Evocative nature of baking*

Serena spoke about her associations with baking. She recalled the recreation of her late grandmother's signature chocolate cake for her funeral. Serena recounts:

[My grandmother] would always make a chocolate cake. It was always the same style. It always had little maraschino cherries on top. She would make her cake no matter what. It didn't matter what the event was, the cake would arrive. So it felt fitting that there needed to be one at her funeral.

The presence of this cake, which Serena had made in memory of her grandmother, became a symbolic gesture in which the whole family could find meaning. This baking gesture highlights the role of food culture in marking life transitions and expressing emotions that words cannot convey, aligning with Dissanayeke's (1995, p. 83) description and purpose of ritual that she connects with artmaking.

Angela expands on the concept, describing baking as a "portal or memory box" that taps into memories through sensory experiences like smells and textures. This sensory memory makes baking not just a physical activity but an emotional one with potential therapeutic applications. For many, baking evokes nurturing relationships and creates connections to the past. Angela suggests that the act can help individuals process deeply held memories and emotions, potentially aiding healing.

Faye's account emphasises the emotional impact of baking, particularly through scent. Her cranberry cinnamon pecan cake brought back memories of her grandmother, highlighting the role of smell in recalling autobiographical memories, as Herz (2016) suggests. These sensory experiences can evoke positive emotions, alleviate negative moods, and provide comfort. Faye's reflections demonstrate how baking can be a source of emotional grounding, allowing individuals to reconnect with cherished memories of loved ones.

## *Transformative nature of baking*

A sponge cake starts as simple everyday materials mixed into the fluid batter and then transforms into a solid through baking. This transformation can metaphorically speak to life processes of change and patience. Faye says that:

There is something really important about baking in that it takes time, and it allows us to reflect on the fact that our feelings or our emotional processes also take time. You can't go from being a mixture to being a baked cake without the process time in the oven.

The batter is fluid and easy to manipulate, while the final baked product is resistive and solid. This transformation symbolises the change from a flexible to a stable state that could mirror personal growth. The recipe selection and modification also carry meaning, adding depth to the process.

Participants experienced baking differently when focused on self-care, which all the participants reflected in their responses. The use of baking as a self-care process is fitting, as it forces a person to use a large amount of time to reflect on their own needs. Serena demonstrated the effectiveness of deliberate time-taking for self-care by saying that she really needed the time she took to complete this process. She carved out a large chunk of time from her day to dedicate to baking, as did every one of the participants.

An important key to the baking activity was that it had no specific outcome requirements other than engaging in a process of self-care through baking, thus allowing for freedom in the process. Freedom to allow for an individualised experience free from expectations. According to Serena's reflections, the process provided challenges and subverted her expectations, allowing her to 'let go' in multiple instances. In doing so, she showed kindness and compassion to herself and accepted the reality of the process without judgment and striving.<sup>3</sup> The cake baked in Figure 1 displays this freedom and kindness she showed herself, allowing space for the unexpected and embracing it. The resulting cake is an object that is the culmination of a meaningful process. The resulting cake is not merely a finished product but a tangible representation of a meaningful and introspective process. Notably, the centre of the cake is blue, a colour Serena typically avoids in food. She only recalled her aversion after adding the colouring to the batter, and the colour did not blend as she had expected. However, Serena did not perceive this as

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3 Accepting the process without judgement and striving refers to the mechanism of attitude in mindfulness (Shapiro et al., 2006, p. 377) where this desirable attitude is described: "We posit that persons can learn to attend to their own internal and external experiences, without evaluation or interpretation, and practice acceptance, kindness, and openness, even when what is occurring in the field of experience is contrary to deeply held wishes or expectations". Serena did this in her baking experiment.

a mistake or a problem. Instead, she emphasised how letting go of the need for a specific outcome reduced stress and allowed her to enjoy the process with less control over the final result. While the cake may appear successful by conventional standards, to Serena, the focus was not on achieving a specific outcome but on embracing the freedom and enjoyment of the creative journey. Thus, the cake's significance lies not in its appearance, but in the personal growth and freedom it represents.



**Figure 1:** Serena's cake, photograph by Serena, 2024

### *Mindful process*

Art therapy values the process. This process requires focus and attention, which naturally centres one in the present moment. Georgia experienced the baking task in a positive way, which contrasted with her usual feelings of anxiety in her body. The first layer of the cake is the beach, while the second layer depicts the Northern Lights. Georgia felt that the colours of the Northern Lights were not as vibrant as she had envisioned. She expressed this during the process, but her daughter gently reminded her not to be overly critical, offering support throughout the process. This encouragement made the experience especially meaningful for Georgia. What she typically



found tedious, however, was washing the dishes afterwards. Yet, even this task became calming as she noticed the flowing water transform the leftover coloured icing into vibrant colours spilling over the dishes. Georgia found that calming and soothing and recognised the moment as significant.



**Figure 2:** The first layer of Georgia's cake, photograph by Georgia, 2024



**Figure 3:** The second layer of Georgia's cake, photograph by Georgia, 2024

By engaging in the physical act of baking, individuals can experience a state of mindfulness and presence that is beneficial for emotional regulation and stress relief. This experience can be better understood by examining how the process of following a recipe can foster mindfulness. Intention, attention, and

attitude are all mechanisms of mindfulness (Shapiro et al., 2006, p. 375) and are all present when following a recipe. Georgia said, “[I was] deliberately and intentionally shifting my original concept of baking to a self-care activity”. This intentionality is crucial as it highlights the importance of mindset in mindfulness and task engagement (Shapiro et al., 2006).

Combining the focus on self-care with the baking medium provides an avenue to a mindful experience, allowing oneself to re-perceive.<sup>4</sup> Angela’s comment demonstrates this:

It brought up a lot about body image, the baking in general. For the first time, because I was being mindful, I sort of encountered that head on and so I said, well, what does it make me feel like? While I’m baking, I feel a heightened awareness of my body, especially a heightened awareness of, particularly what makes me feel fat if I am being honest. And shame is also something associated with baking.

The smells, textures, and tastes evoked this shame. She continues:

I know it’s a very negative subject matter, but I think I was able to encounter it from a balanced perspective, I think. I wasn’t hyper emotional and I was just like, huh? I actually feel different when I’m baking, and I actually feel quite a bit of shame.

Angela, because she was “intentionally attending moment by moment with openness and nonjudgementalness” (Shapiro 2006, p. 378), could view her internal experience objectively and not be overwhelmed by feelings. This realisation of her experience provided her with a greater self-awareness and allowed her to address this feeling. The process (re-perceiving) that took place during her baking task can be seen as part of her self-care and will enhance her well-being in the long term.

### *Building self-efficacy*

In my experience, the baking process serves as a mastery aid, where the task of baking a cake can be seen as similar to “coping tasks [that] are broken down into subtasks of easily mastered steps” (Bandura, 2012, p. 6) this is because a recipe consists of direct, clear steps. Completing a mastery aid can heighten

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4 According to Shapiro et al. (2006, p. 377), “Through the process of mindfulness, one is able to disidentify from the contents of consciousness (i.e., one’s thoughts) and view his or her moment-by-moment experience with greater clarity and objectivity”. This process is re-perceiving.

coping efficacy and thus self-efficacy, which enhances personal well-being in many ways (Bandura, 2012, p. 1). This improvement in coping that can be fostered within the baking activity is also subtly demonstrated in Angela's statement: "The feeling of having started with nothing, and using your own ingredients, and getting to an endpoint is useful". Conversely, if the baking process does not go as planned, it offers a valuable opportunity for the baker to investigate errors, learn from them, and develop problem-solving skills. This reflective practice can enhance a person's confidence in addressing larger life challenges.

### *Need for an art therapist/holding space*

Significant moments in the process highlight the need for a therapist to contain, support, and discuss what arises. The presence of an art therapist can help maintain focus and mindfulness, which I found challenging in my own study. The participants and I experienced distractions, echoing the need for guidance. The process is long, and mindfulness throughout is challenging, especially if one is not in the habit of maintaining a self-care routine. An art therapist can provide prompts for deeper reflection on the process, relating the process to past experiences as the sensory elements evoke memories. Literature highlights the importance of holding space, the witness of another, and triangulation in an art therapy setting (Hass-Cohen & Clyde Findlay, 2015). In the interviews and my own experience, there are many opportunities within the baking experience where the presence of an art therapist could enhance and facilitate a therapeutic experience.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of the baking approach could be the lack of resources and lack of access to a kitchen. Another limitation of the study is the small sample size, which makes the findings difficult to generalise. This article speaks to initial findings further explored within the study on which it is based.

### **Conclusion**

As a therapeutic medium in art therapy, baking offers a unique and engaging approach to self-care, fostering mindfulness, emotional regulation, and self-efficacy. The structured yet creative process of baking provides a rich sensory

experience that can transform ordinary actions into meaningful rituals. The presence of an art therapist can enhance this process, providing necessary support and reflection. Despite the challenges and limitations, the integration of baking into art therapy presents significant potential for personal growth and well-being, warranting further exploration and application in therapeutic settings.

Suggestions for future research would be to have a standardised test that can be taken before and after an intervention and to increase the sample size. Baking might offer a valuable communal element where group work could prove to be valuable.

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