A Body-Mind-Spirit Art Therapy Intervention
for Stress Reduction in Firefighter Spouses

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ART THERAPY FOR FIREFIGHTER SPOUSES

Abstract

Spouses often sense when their firefighter had a “bad call.” With no words spoken, the spouse can suffer an ambiguous loss, witnessing their firefighter’s presence but emotional absence (Regehr, Dimitropoulos, Bright, George, & Henderson, 2005). Over progressive shifts, spouses experienced compassion fatigue, unable to maintain empathy for the continual stressors. As seen in spouses of veterans with PTSD, symptomology can evolve into psychological distress, posttraumatic stress, depression, anxiety, marital conflict, and adjustment issues (Renshaw, Rodreigues, & Jones, 2008; Kees & Rosenblum, 2015). To exacerbate problems, spouses worked full-time or firefighters have second jobs to supplement public service pay. Firefighters work days apart, leaving the spouse to act as a single parent, shouldering the demands of family life. Fire couples may grow apart leaving spouses resentful of the constant energy required to support the lifestyle (O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017; International Association of Firefighters [IAFF], 2017, December 26).

Adapted from Ng, Boey, Mok, Leung, and Chan’s (2016) holistic intervention, this qualitative study analyzed a Body-Mind-Spirit Art Therapy (BMS-AT) intervention to reduce stress with firefighter spouses. Informed by the Expressive Therapies Continuum, a client-centered focus helped spouses own their role in the family and find creative methods to achieve positive well-being (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978; Raskin, Rogers, & Witty, 2014). The holistic artmaking directives embody mindful approaches that helped to identify symptoms, connect with others, and focus on goals as coping strategies (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.).

Keywords: art therapy, body-mind-spirit, stress reduction, work-family conflict
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I give thanks to God that through our journey together, the seed of art therapy was planted early on. At a random book fair, I purchased my first book about art therapy, Gardner’s (1980) *Artful Scribbles: The Significance of Children's Drawings.* Unbeknownst to me, I would hold onto that book through many moves for over 20 years. In a desire to unite my love for artmaking with helping others, God later planted a call to serve Him using my spiritual gift of art. As a mother and wife, God’s timing doesn’t always make sense, but I dutifully followed His dream. I am grateful for the Saint Mary-of-the-Woods Master of Arts in Art Therapy Degree for providing me the knowledge, flexibility, and spiritual place to enter this new art therapy profession. I would like to recognize Dr. Tamar Einstein, Ph.D., REAT for providing needed guidance, positivity, and creative approaches as I pursued my passion for supporting firefighter spouses and the healing benefits of body-mind-spirit art therapy. I give thanks to Kathleen Sullivan, ATR-BC, ATCS for providing me encouragement, resources, and sound advice at times I needed it most. To my friends, family, and church, I give you thanks for your encouraging words and support.

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Chapter I

Introduction

As a spouse of a firefighter, firefighters, who are often considered to be heroes, have taken center stage with their supportive families in the shadows. Behind the scenes, spouses, while proud of their firefighters, developed a creative way of life to support the work of the fire service. Firefighter spouses have valued loving and reassuring their significant other, while maintaining the family unit. Spouses have performed a balancing act to manage their life and depend heavily on family to fill in gaps. Over time, the weight of balancing everyone else’s needs may have exacerbated stress. Stressors included isolation, compassion fatigue, single parent role, and sacrificing self (O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017; International Association of Firefighters [IAFF], 2017, December 26).

Problem Statement

Firefighters heroically have come to the aid of others to protect life and property while they were working in one of the most stressful and dangerous jobs in the United States (The most stressful jobs of 2018, 2018). Firefighters arrived first on the scene to witness pain and tragedy in unimaginable circumstances including infant death, child abuse, or murders (Milen, 2009). Emergency calls were unpredictable in timing, number, and nature and placed a firefighter in continual fight-or-flight response with little reflection as they used time to eat, prepare for the next call, and rest (Malchiodi, 2012b; O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017). In the repetition of emergency response, firefighters may have suffered from compassion fatigue, formed poor coping skills of compartmentalizing (Ifrach & Miller, 2016), exalted superhuman roles (Varnel et al., 2007) and suppressed stress and pressure (Naff, 2014).
Consequently, work stressors in the fire service stemmed from Repeated Exposure to Trauma (RET). Continual exposure could initiate post-traumatic stress symptoms (Jahnke, Walker, Haddock, & Murphy, 2015). Further, responders can develop several mental health diagnoses including: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Depression, Anxiety, (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013; Lansing, Amen, Hanks, & Rudy, 2005; Varnel et al., 2007) Sleep Disorders, and Substance Use Disorder (Varvel et al., 2007; Naff, 2014).

Alarmingly, firefighters have experienced high occurrences of suicide as a “fire department is three times more likely to experience a suicide than a line-of-duty death” according to The National Fallen FireFighters Foundation (NFFF) (2014). Suicide data has been limited but the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (FFBHA) collected voluntary reports of 132 first responder suicides in 2016. FFBHA estimated only 40% of firefighter suicides were reported (Venteicher, 2017). In a study of 4,022 Emergency Management Services (EMS) workers, data indicated 86% of respondents faced critical stress; 37% of workers had considered suicide; and 6.6% attempted a suicide (Newland, Barber, Rose, & Young, 2015).

The exposure to hazardous materials, lack of sleep, and increased stress contributed to the firefighter belief that they may only live until the age of 55 years old (O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017). After facing the dangers, responders have reintegrated into their home lives. Long and stressful shifts required the firefighter to catch up on sleep or to cope by distancing or internalizing anger (Cowlishaw, Evans, & McLennan, 2010; IAFF, 2017, December 26). Transition time was needed to catch up on missed family events or to deal with problematic family issues.
To support the needs of a firefighter’s occupation, spouses often assumed added responsibilities to maintain the family’s lifestyle while their firefighter was away at work. Firefighters have worked long shifts stretching over several days, worked over-time hours and second jobs, and had long commutes to a distant station. Fire service schedules have not aligned with traditional American job hours. Firefighters have missed holidays, special events, and daily family rituals due to this inconsistency. Upon return, spouses often desired to reconnect immediately (IAFF, 2017, December 26).

Further, spouses have sacrificed their own emotional needs to be supportive of their spouse, especially after hard days at work. Spouses sensed the tension often experiencing “ambiguous loss” as their firefighter was tangibly present, but emotionally not there (Regehr, Dimitropoulos, Bright, George, & Henderson, 2005). Boss (2007) defined ambiguous loss as “a loss that remains unclear” (p. 105). When a spouse did not know why their firefighter was not psychologically present, the spouse has found ways to cope with the uncertainty (Boss, 2007).

Given the lower salary for these public servants, firefighters worked second jobs or spouses worked full-time jobs. The couple’s separation necessitated a balancing act to manage the household. Spouses felt like a single parent as they supported their children’s needs as “life goes on” while the firefighter was away.

Though spouses were proud of their firefighters’ work they harbored latent guilt over their unmet needs. Further, spouses exhibited anxiety or worry about safety of their firefighter from workplace hazards and risks. Additionally, spouses were isolated as their firefighter can be: gone for days at a time, spent their off-time with their firefighter family or released stress by overusing alcohol or other drugs off-duty (O’Neill &
Rothbard, 2017; IAFF, 2017, December 26). Firefighter spouses did not have time to nurture independent relationships and have relied mostly on their family members for assistance.

Spouses needed ways to reduce stressors related to their unique way of living in the fire service. Ng, Boey, Mok, Leung and Chan’s (2016) research integrated a body-mind-spirit intervention to promote a healthy balance of the different aspects of an individual’s psychological, physical, and spiritual wholeness to reduce stress. Spouses benefitted by exploring stressors through an art therapy and body-mind-spirit intervention alongside other firefighter spouses. Art interventions provided spouses with necessary self-care practices to improve general well-being, expression of feelings, and coping tools.

**Research Questions**

Can a Body-Mind-Spirit art therapy (BMS-AT) intervention reduce stress in firefighter spouses? The researcher adapted Ng et al.’s (2016) holistic intervention using art therapy interventions to focus on body, mind, and spirit. By focusing on an individual’s whole well-being, participants gained awareness and coping tools to reduce stress (Ng et al., 2016).

**Basic Assumptions**

Adapted from Ng et al. (2016), a Body-Mind-Spirit Art Therapy (BMS-AT) intervention helped firefighter spouses to reduce stress experienced in supporting their firefighter’s lifestyle.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to assess a 90-minute BMS-AT intervention
conducted for four weekly sessions to reduce stress with firefighter spouse participants as measured by a pre-test/post-test survey, participant interviews, art therapist reflective artmaking, and possible feedback from a community art show in a fire station.

**Hypothesis**

The researcher hypothesized that firefighter spouses who participated in this research study experienced stress reduction benefits from a BMS-AT intervention.

**Definition of Terms**

**Compassion fatigue.** Ifrach & Miller (2016) defined this term as the selfless giving by caregivers which consequently sacrificed their own self-care and resulted in burnout. This term was traditionally used for health care workers in medical settings but aptly described the exhaustion, apathy, and dissociation experienced by firefighters helping individuals in a tense emergency response in the field. Other comparative terms included “secondary trauma” and “vicarious trauma” (Jahnke et al., 2015).

**Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.** Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder distinguished the multifaceted nature of repeated trauma events through distinct changes in personality, distortion of self and relationships, and vulnerability to continued harm from others (Herman, 1992).

**Cumulative stress.** Cumulative stress encompassed the multiple traumatic events that firefighters experience. The layers of these reoccurring traumas drove negative coping styles and psychological tension (Jahnke et al., 2015).

**Metaverbal.** Moon (2003) defined metaverbal as “beyond words” (p. 13). Verbalized words truncate meaning. Further, words often become labels which may have several interpretations. Symbolic images can reveal multiple meanings (Moon, 2003).
**Post-traumatic stress symptomatology (PTSS).** The term PTSS derived its symptoms from PTSD including: sleep difficulties, flashbacks/disturbing dreams, actions of avoidance, and negative outlook on life (Jahnke et al., 2015).

**Repeated Exposure to Trauma (RET).** Jahnke et al. (2015) ascribed the term Repeated Exposure to Trauma (RET) to articulate the unique experience of firefighter work. RET included the accumulation of numerous trauma experiences. Jahnke et al. (2015) recommended aligning firefighter diagnoses with post-traumatic stress symptomology (PTSS) to focus on the nature of continual trauma exposures experienced by firefighters.

**Responsive Art.** Moon (1999) defined responsive art as “a process that involves the artist-therapist in creating artworks as a form of therapeutic intervention” (p. 78). The method entailed creating artwork to reflect on the relationship of the art therapist and client. Artmaking invited exploration and revealed additional insight from the therapeutic experience.

**Stress and Work-Family Balance.** Stress is a natural fight-or-flight response that can help with focused concentration, protection from harm, and motivation for success. However, functioning with continual stress over time can lead to decline in an individual’s well-being. Ferguson, Carlson, Kacmar, and Halbesleben (2016) defined work-family balance as a shared goal agreed upon between partners on role expectations between work and family life.

**Justification of Study**

This research study identified an art therapy intervention to reduce lifestyle stress. Further, this study advanced the field of art therapy by adding an outcome study to
demonstrate effectiveness of a BMS-AT intervention. In correspondence with a IAFF Behavioral Health Specialist, L. Kosc (personal communication, February 9, 2018) noted the fire service has high demand for supportive behavioral health services. This research can support efforts by the newly formed International Association of Firefighters Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery (International Association of Excellence for Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery, 2018). Fire service leadership can use new interventions to raise awareness of fire service work-family issues.

Through my experience as a firefighter spouse for over 17 years, I helped other firefighter spouses by using art therapy. As an informal leader, I was more approachable by lessening the stigma and being relatable through my shared understanding. My intention was to design the body-mind-spirit art therapy intervention for stress reduction in firefighter spouses.
Chapter II

**Literature Review**

This literature review included an overview of potential fire service occupational stressors which adversely impact spouses’ stress. A review of firefighter occupational stressors and coping methods were discussed to demonstrate the spillover effect into the family life for spouses. Further, a comparison with military spouse lifestyles supported similar stressors to fire service life. Last, rationale for stress reduction focus, as well as, theoretical body-mind-spirit approaches were discussed to demonstrate basis for creating a body-mind-spirit intervention to reduce spousal stressors.

**Firefighter Occupational Stressors**

Occupational stressors in the fire service have overflowed into personal home life affecting relationships with spouses (O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017). The firefighter occupation was tense and continually topped reports of the most stressful jobs in the United States (The most stressful jobs of 2018, 2018, January 11; O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017). With advancements in safety, firefighters fought very few fires, in fact, 3.8% of total calls in 2015 were fire-related; yet, 64% of total responses were for medical aid (National Fire Protection Association, 2018, May). Further, call counts had increased for natural disasters, terrorist events, and mass shootings. Emergency calls were unpredictable in timing, number, and nature and placed a firefighter in continual fight-or-flight response with little reflection as they used time to eat, prepare for next call, and rest (Malchiodi, 2012b).

**Firefighter Coping Methods**

In this predominantly male culture, it was reported emotion expression was not
typically supported, so many firefighters remained detached as a coping mechanism (O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017; IAFF, 2017, December 26). For instance, Collison’s (1988) (as cited in O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017) research noted men working in a factory setting used black humor to fit into their work culture. Further, masculine dominance drove members of the fire service to not seek help, suppress emotions, or choose risky behaviors such as binge drinking, smoking, and other dangerous activities (O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017). Jahnke (2015, June 1) found the families of female firefighters were adversely impacted by higher rates of divorce, consequently, demonstrated the stressful impacts to family life. Further, Jahnke (2015, June 1) noted more research was needed for female firefighters due to small sample sizes. Consequently, the negative coping strategies from fire service work can negatively impact spouses and families in home life.

**Spousal Challenges in Supporting Fire Service Work**

According to the Regehr et al. (2005) qualitative study, many pressures in supporting the firefighter’s line of work has challenged spouses’ work-family balance. In research conducted by O’Neill and Rothbard (2017), 89% of firefighter units expressed conflicts with work-family life. To exalt their firefighter’s profession, spouses often overlooked their own needs to support the bigger cause. Spouses often provided the “glue” in reconnecting the firefighter back to family life by folding the unique family structure including nuclear, intergenerational, and blended families with diverse experiences of divorce, death, and other life events (Bowles et al., 2015).

According to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) (n.d.), firefighters have worked an average 53-hour week. While their firefighter was on duty, spouses experienced worry or anxiety on contemplating their responder’s exposure to risks or
hazards on the job (Regehr et al., 2005; O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017). When purchasing life insurance for the firefighter, the spouse came face-to-face with this risk by tangibly seeing the higher premium cost. Further, Line of Duty Death (LODD) was a real concern as most spouses have thought, “What would I do if this happened to me or another member of the department?” Additionally, spouses avoided the issue altogether and never talked through their firefighter’s needs and wishes in the event of death (247commitment.com, n.d.).

After a long shift, spouses felt ambivalent as they were happy to see their partner, but experienced distance on their return home. Often, spouses witnessed anger or withdrawal when their firefighter has been burdened by continual trauma on shift (Regehr et al., 2005; O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017; Cowlishaw et al., 2010). Regehr et al. (2005) described this encounter as “ambiguous loss,” for the firefighter was physically there but emotional unresponsive. Without any words expressed, spouses sensed when their partner may have witnessed trauma and gave them time to relax (Regehr et al., 2005; Cowlishaw et al., 2010). Spouses experienced anticipatory stress as they may not disclose their needs to help their firefighter recover from a stressful shift.

In times of separation combined with long shifts, spouses become isolated. Exasperating this problem, Varvel et al. (2007) stated firefighters spent more time with their fire family off-duty or taking on union duties, thereby splitting valuable family time. In families with both partners working, communication about family happenings was significantly reduced and strained. Some spouses worked as nurses or worked in a helping field and listened and empathized (O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017), but experienced similar Repeated Exposure to Trauma (RET) (O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017; Jahnke et al.,
2015). Due to the complexity of experiencing multiple traumas, spouses and firefighters experienced elevated issues with personality and relating to others as found with Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Herman, 1992).

To help spouses better learn about fire service work, Kirschman (2004) noted that firefighter families may benefit by attending training exercises to learn about the safety in preparing for risks on calls. Further, years of service for firefighters provided unique challenges with new recruits having experienced trauma situations for the first time; mid-career firefighters completed additional training and teaching tasks; and near/post-retirement firefighters come to grips with the close of a life-long career.

Military Spousal Findings

The firefighter and military spouse have both experienced separation from their spouse. While they honored their spouses’ occupations, firefighter and military spouses supported the occupational demands from the home front. Renshaw, Rodrigues, and Jones’s (2008) research study of 49 military couples deployed in Iraq found spouses experienced the most distress when their perception of the soldier’s symptoms was greater than the problems reported by the soldier. Further, marital dissatisfaction was not only related to the severity of combat exposure, but in combination with the spouse’s perceptions of controllability of the situation (Renshaw et al., 2008). A study by Gorman, Blow, Ames, and Reed (2011) (as cited in Kees & Rosenblum, 2015) noted service members and spouses experienced similar levels of mental health levels with spousal rates at “21% . . . with depression, 13% with posttraumatic stress, and 27% hazardous alcohol use” (p. 222). Implications from military spouses indicated a need to understand spouses’ cognitive response to their firefighter’s trauma exposure and to hold awareness
of psychological distress. Like military deployment, spouses also experienced intermittent separation from their firefighters while on duty.

**Diversity of Firefighters**

Even though the stations, trucks, and gear look similar, the firefighters working the apparatus have many individual differences which were clearly known amongst their peers and families. For instance, Kirschman (2004) rightly pointed out everyone comes with a myriad of experiences, personalities, and histories and this diversity also applied to the spouses and families behind each first responder. For instance, there was a myth that firefighter marriages had a higher divorce rate than other occupations. In a study of 349 veteran firefighters in Tulsa, Oklahoma, 46% had been divorced, which was below the national average. Further, the study also reported 55% of firefighters felt their service had a positive impact on their marriages (Kirschman, 2004).

Jahnke et al. (2015, June 1) emphasized looking at gender differences in marriage rates, as male firefighters had lower rates and female firefighters had higher rates of divorce. Jahnke et al. (2015, June 1) concluded male firefighters may have high resiliency with female firefighters experiencing more stress with their families. Further firefighter wives could have more support from the fire service (Kirschman, 2004). Research for firefighter spouses did not assume pathology, but rather supported diversity of experience and tapped into the positive views of fire service life. No two crews, firefighters, or firefighter spouses were alike.

**Rationale for Stress Reduction Focus for Firefighter Spouses**

Much research was focused on firefighter mental health support and interventions identifying ways to improve social support (Varvel et al., 2007). Spouses were often
categorized into this “social support” role. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) (NIMH, n.d.) acknowledged that stress affects everyone and served as a survival tool; however, chronic stress lowered an individual’s immunity and other functions and manifested as headaches, sadness, irritability, anger, and sleeplessness (NIMH, n.d.). In a study comparing military and non-military couples, the researchers established both couple types experienced stress. However, the source of stress differed but both couple types held the same bodily manifestation of stress (Frisby, Byrnes, Mansson, Booth-Butterfield, & Birmingham, 2011). Further, NIMH (n.d.) purported coping strategies including recognizing symptoms, mind and body work, social connection, and prioritizing goals. Therefore, new interventions could be targeted to the unique stressors of firefighter spouses.

**Description and Diagnosis of Spousal Stress**

Firefighters have worked in an ever-changing environment and their day was defined by someone else’s “worse day” (Jahnke et al., 2015). Spouses shouldered this stress because the firefighter performed work under an adrenaline high but came down off this rush, bringing home this reality after the shift. As seen in spouses of military veterans with PTSD, symptomology for spouses evolved into psychological distress, posttraumatic stress, depression, anxiety, marital conflict, and adjustment issues (Renshaw et al., 2008; Kees & Rosenblum, 2015).

Part of the reality of working in the fire service was dealing with high levels of stress dictated by changing work demands. In a study of 70 firefighters, the use of regulatory choice flexibility, whereby a firefighter can flexibly choose from various strategies in response to a unique circumstance, reduced PTSD symptoms when
firefighters could creatively adapt to changing conditions (Levy-Gigi et al., 2016). The World Health Organization (1948) defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” From this holistic stance, the IAFF (2017, November 10) also stated firefighters should strengthen body, mind, and spirit to optimize occupational performance. Spouses can also benefit from holistic strategies tailored for response to the distinct stressors of balancing family with fire service work.

**Theoretical Approaches Supporting Body, Mind, Spirit**

To support a body, mind, and spirit approach, mindfulness, or bringing attention to the present moment on purpose (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), has been a historical practice in Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism and many more religions, as well as secular functions. These traditions have tapped into mindfulness practice for enlightenment, experiencing God, acceptance, observation of thoughts, and tapping into an individual’s soul (Rappaport, 2014).

In early development of psychotherapeutic practices, Freud purported maintaining attention while refraining from focusing on any one detail. Later, Buddhism gained interest with integration of its ideals of nature, freedom, happiness, and love (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Walsh, 2014). The 1960s and 1970s brought integration of humanistic and contemplative psychotherapies. In conjunction with these developments, creativity and mental growth was explored through the arts in Goodenough and Buck’s assessments; Lowenfeld’s child developmental drawing stages; Jung’s dream drawings, and Naumburg’s founding of “dynamically oriented art therapy” (Borowsky Junge, 2010). In
addition, the psychotherapeutic approaches of Contemplative, Client-Centered, Existential, and Art Therapy were incorporated into holistic practices.

**Client-Centered Therapy.** Developed by Carl Rogers, client-centered therapy exalted the client as a person (Raskin, Rogers, & Witty, 2014). From a holistic consideration of the full person, Goldstein’s theory of actualizing tendency signified a person was moving towards enhanced state of being (Raskin et al., 2014). From this approach, an art therapist did not provide direction but respected the individual’s freedom of choice. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) recommended that the therapist operate in the here-and-now, connecting the client to their current functioning. In this manner, a client accepted responsibility for one’s role in the obstacle and found creative ways to enact positive change.

In a group environment, participants were entrusted to find their own way and in this freedom; everyone created their own approach. Congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic attitude formed the cornerstone of the therapist approach. In these client-centered ways of working in therapy, a client had the right to own and made her own decisions (Raskin et al., 2014). Freedom of choice supported art therapeutic tasks, allowing clients to genuinely express what they most needed to release (Rubin, 2016).

**Contemplative Psychotherapy.** According to contemplative psychotherapy, the workings of the mind were imbalanced. In this limited state, it was difficult to recognize declining health because it was masked from awareness. When an individual was not operating at peak wellness, the person experienced suffering (Walsh, 2014). Through mind training techniques such as mindful meditation, individuals alleviated pain and achieved optimal well-being and maturity (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Walsh, 2014). Individuals
had the opportunity to test the validity of these assertions for oneself. By observing the stream of endless thoughts, individuals befriended this part of self. The goal was not interrupting or blocking thoughts but becoming its witness (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

**Existential Psychotherapy.** The spiritual component of the BMS-AT intervention was connected to Moon’s (2009) assertion that love works in tandem with life’s difficulties. The striving to overcome adversities in life nurtured meaning making rather than seeking superficial and fleeting desires of comfort. Frankl (1959) asserted man’s meaning was the primary force in a person’s life, the journey was unique, and these ideals and values were worth dying for. Since all humans shared the fate of an eventual death, personal spirituality connected persons to meaningful experiences. In this way, the freedom to act emerged liberating individuals from the anxieties associated with living: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (Moon, 2009; Yalom, 1989).

Yalom (1989) purported that everyday life problems such as stress, grief, backaches, tiredness and so forth, manifested as anxiety of living the human experience. Through artmaking, images helped individuals tap into mindfulness and rest into a cyclical process which Moon (2009) ascribed as “creative anxiety, expression, and awareness” (p. 11). From this existential approach, the art therapist made art alongside the group, held a safe space, and honored the struggle (Moon, 2009).

**Art Therapy.** In early days, Cane (1951) suggested using the modalities of movement, emotion, and thought in artmaking to achieve a spiritual revelation. The Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) became a structure for navigating these modalities through art materials into to help identify over/under-used functions for an individual (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978). At the Creative Level of the ETC, a person
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experienced Csikszentmihalyi’s (2008) concept of flow, as demonstrated when people were happiest when completely engaged in an activity. In recent studies, researchers have discovered mirror neuron structures within the brain which can mimic activities seen in the physical world (Buk, 2009). Buk (2009) purported client’s mirror neurons may be actively engaged during artmaking; viewing art together; and body language of the therapist may initiate left hemisphere to enable verbal communication. To address stress reduction, Kaimal, Ray, and Muniz’s (2016) study of 39 adults, 75% of individuals experienced a decrease in stress after 45 minutes of art making, as measured by cortisol levels taken before and after the art activity. Further, in Huet and Holttum’s (2016) study of 20 participants working in the health and social fields, members who participated in viewing art and artmaking reduced reported stress as art enabled playfulness, expression, and sharing about emotions that were difficult to put into words.

Mindfulness Practices

McNiff (2014) spoke of “small creative acts” as the most impactful means for generating a foundation for change. The act of mindfulness introduced an awareness of the small things. Kabat-Zinn (1994), founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) stated, mindfulness was “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p. 4). In this definition, Kabat-Zinn (1994) removed the notion of performance, but to revere work in the present moment. In essence, an individual can embrace feelings and thoughts gently, befriending repetitive internal talk.

Mindfulness and meditative practices have empirical evidence to support efficacy in stress reduction. In Tang et al.’s (2007) study of a short-term meditative practice, 40
participants showed significant improvements in stress response demonstrated by lower levels of cortisol and increased immunoreactivity as compared to the control group. Likewise, Ding et al. (2015) demonstrated 32 participants expanded problem solving capabilities after meditation training, which can enhance creative approaches to adverse situations. In lovingkindness meditation, the cultivation of compassion, a multifaceted awareness encompassed the body-mind-spirit, was often a by-product of mindfulness practice. Jazaieri et al. (2013) found significant improvements from a research study of 60 adults in a Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT) program. Firefighter spouses would benefit by improving their stress response by incorporating mindfulness-based coping strategies.

Coming from an emphasis on the body to inform both mind and spirit, the martial art practice of Aikido, translated as the path to a union with life-energy, was a form of mindfulness practice that sought to bring peace in conflict situations. Aikido has been added to Veterans Affairs (VA) programs to help veterans transition when exiting military service. Likewise, spouses make continual transitions from single parent to co-parenting roles to support the fire service work. To connect with body, spouses could embrace the holistic practices of Aikido, including mindfulness, compassion, and somatic exercises focused on social touch and grounding within an individual’s spiritual path. In Lothes, Hakan, and Mochrie (2015) study of 159 participants, (as cited in Lukoff & Strozzi-Heckler, 2017) the comparison of Aikido participants to non-Aikido participants found increased ratings on mindfulness and awareness measures, asserting Aikido improved mindfulness efficacy. Further, Aikido emphasized attentiveness to others through empathy (Lukoff & Strozzi-Heckler, 2017). These practices could enable spouses
to gain awareness for their familial changes and seek peaceful ways to ease the transitions.

**Body-Mind-Spirit Art Therapy Approach**

The BMS-AT approach was grounded in the idea that individuals are multifaceted and required integration of these entities for optimal well-being. Treatment addressed the physical, cognitive/mental, and spiritual facets of the individual. Eastern philosophies informed this integration through several concepts. The concept of yin-yang examined the light and dark aspects of life. Dynamic equilibrium supported change as a constant and aspects were in continual adjustment. Non-attachment embraced acceptance and acknowledgment of cognitions and emotions (Leung, Lai-wan, Ng, & Lee, 2009).

A group approach established a safe and contained environment to build trust and natural unfolding. Expression through the arts enabled a group to act as one entity or for an individual to feel connected to the whole. Emphasis was on freely creating an individual’s unique mark, allowing the image to evolve as no image is judged and no experience with art materials was necessary. The action of art making activated the here-and-now, so issues were freely expressed and acknowledged that words can create barriers to the process. Dance Movement Therapist Norma Canner purported the more the individual can integrate body, mind, and spirit, the more meaning an individual will have (BTI Films, 2017, March 1). Further, Canner (BTI Films, 2017, March 1) noted, “People cure themselves. A witness is what we need.” The foundation of the BMS-AT intervention was comprised of the concepts of Body, Mind, and Spirit.

**Body.** Canner (BTI Films, 2017, March 1) explained “the body has a memory” and memories can freely flow out through expressive arts, rather than automatically
responding with verbal reasoning. To explore the physical part of an individual’s being and connection to the whole person, Kabat-Zinn’s (2005) body scan meditation performed in the here-and-now brought awareness of bodily sensations without passing any judgment. When the mind wanders, the participant accepted this likely occurrence and simply refocused back to the breath. Individuals gained awareness of stressors and how the body communicated emotional pain through somatic experiences. Most important, the body scan process had no goal; in fact, the emphasis was simply to pay attention to the sensations (Baer, 2014). Hinz (2009) recommended to assign colors to the four core emotions (anger, fear, happiness, and sadness) and to color in parts of the body associated with these feelings (Hinz, 2009). Accordingly, sensations felt in the body were connected to positive and negative feelings. Leung et al. (2009) espoused the healing qualities of mind-body connection, which Dossey (1991) noted were bridged through meaning making. Exercises including breathing meditation, body scans, aromatherapy, yoga, mindfulness, and therapeutic massage brought calm, reconnected an individual to self and creator, and reestablished balance (Leung et al., 2009; Ng et al., 2016). Through these exercises, the physical body became unblocked allowing space for feelings to move freely to open consciousness (Leung et al., 2009).

**Mind.** Through cognitive restructuring, thoughts were normalized by viewing common responses as normal reactions to a stressful situation. Further, the individual realistically acknowledged the associated pain (Leung et al.; Ng et al., 2016). By honoring the pain, a person accepted the circumstance and took ownership even in the face of change and adversity. By gaining flexibility of the mind, an individual attained hope and strength (Leung et al., 2009).
**Spirit.** In a research study of 42 participants, Ng et al. (2016) found improvements in well-being after completion of a Body-Mind-Spirit workshop with significant improvements in nonattachment, hopefulness, mindfulness, and spiritual reflection. The notion of spirit was embraced by a way of being through flexibility and collaborations efforts. Further, Dossey (1991) claimed tapping into that which cannot be explained can help to rise above a person’s circumstance, pointing to a greater force working within. A mindfulness approach opened an individual to authentically connect to their own value system improving resiliency (Baer, 2014). To induce a “relaxation response,” Malchiodi (2012a) noted artmaking reduced stress by decreasing heart rate, blood pressure, and bodily tension (p. 399). In Ng et al.’s (2016) study, a self-portrait exercise explored positive aspects of oneself and was shared with two group members. Self-portraits were adaptable in all components of the ETC to meet an individual in their level of comfort with appropriate media (Hinz, 2009). Individuals experienced Moon’s (2009) *canvas mirror* to see the reality of oneself and existentially, find connection to a greater power. Getting to the heart of matters brought freedom and placed worries into proper life context, as Frankl (1959) ascribed suffering had transformative power; meaning making in the face of adversity bore witness to the triumph of humanity.

Utilizing mindfulness practices required participants to own the process as a daily practice beyond the BMS-AT weekly experiences. Further, concepts of mindfulness were *metaverbal*, beyond words, and were difficult to translate (Moon, 2003; Moon, 2009). From Buddhism and Daoism, the basic belief that change was constant and continual was embraced; for, the BMS-AT intervention mirrored the struggle of work-life balance. Working with art media can invite an individual to grapple with life stressors through an
integrative approach of body, mind, and spirit. Leung et al. (2009) purported a body-mind-spirit integration lifted individuals beyond the sole view of a bio-psycho-social being to embrace the spiritual, interconnected, and dialectic qualities that bring a deeper understanding and meaning to life.

**Summary of Literature Review**

The literature review identified the unique stressors experienced by spouses supporting their firefighters’ occupations. Spouses were burdened with an ambiguous loss, as they witnessed their firefighter’s withdrawal or lack of emotion after a stressful shift (Regehr et al., 2005). Spouses experienced conflict as they balanced life for extended periods of time while their firefighter was on duty (O’Neill and Rothbard (2017). To cope, spouses overlooked their own needs to put family first and become isolated and unsympathetic. Spouses can suffer depression, post traumatic personality stress, and issues with personality attributed to these maladaptive coping strategies (Kees & Rosenblum, 2015; Herman, 1992). The unique stressors for firefighter spouses validated the need of stress reduction strategies. A BMS-AT intervention addressed these stressors using art therapy, as art making exhibited lower cortisol levels in Kamal et al.’s (2016) and Huet and Holltum’s (2016) studies. Spouses can also attain improved stress response as demonstrated in mindfulness techniques in studies by Tang et al. (2007), Ding et al. (2015), and Jazaieri et al. (2013).
Chapter III

Methodology

Approvals were attained from the Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College Institutional Review Board and a private practice location prior to beginning this research study. During all sessions, the researcher, a graduate level art therapy student, was supervised by a board-certified art therapist (ATR-BC). The discussion for research methodology comprised participant requirements and recruitment, research design, instruments, data collection and analysis, validity and reliability, and research bias and ethical considerations.

Participants

Permission was obtained to recruit participants at the Command Officer Boot Camp 2018 at Pensacola Beach, Florida (C. Isakson, personal communication, February 22, 2018). Participants completed a sign-up form or contacted researcher to partake. Any participants with severe mental disorders or who were suicidal were excluded from the study and referred for assistance.

This study recruited three firefighter spouse participants from the Northwest Florida geographic area. The participants’ ages ranged from 35-64 years or older; all were female, and two identified as white and one identified as Asian. All were married to a firefighter with one participant married to a retired firefighter. All spouses had children. For employment, one spouse worked full-time, one spouse worked part-time, and one spouse was a stay-at-home mom. Two spouses attended all four sessions and one spouse attended one session.
All participants completed informed consent forms prior to participation. The informed consent indicated the study was concerned with art therapy methods in reducing stress for firefighter spouses; no participation was required; and participants had the right to withdraw from the study. Participants were given the option to take part in a potential art exhibition at a local fire station, but the researcher determined there were not enough participants to justify a community art show. To maintain confidentiality of the data, participants were informed of the researcher qualifications, theoretical approach, and risks and benefits of art therapy in a group setting. To adhere to the “Ethical Principles for Art Therapists” of the American Art Therapy Association (AATA) and American Counseling Association (ACA) 2014 Code of Ethics, the researcher built trust with participants by making them aware she was married to a firefighter (ACA, 2014; AATA 2013). To ensure confidentiality, the researcher discussed common ways confidentiality can be broken. Specifically, participants may break confidentiality if they share details learned from the group. The researcher recommended to only share what was learned, rather than the source of the experience (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2014; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Further, the researcher communicated mandated reporting requirements.

Research Design

The BMS-AT intervention encompassed four 90-minute sessions in a closed group setting for artmaking. The BMS-AT intervention incorporated four session goals including: Mind-Body Exploration, Attention to Self-Care, Recognizing Relationships, and Body-Mind-Spirit (BMS) Integration. An overview of the four-session interventions was included in Table 1.
### Table 1

**Overview of BMS-AT Intervention Sessions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Directives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1       | Mind-Body Exploration  | 5 min Chalkboard Check-In Ritual  
10 min Pre-BMSWBI, Demographics  
15 min Rapid Art Exploration  
30 min Mind-Body Art & Meditation  
30 min Group Reflection |
| 2       | Attention to Self-Care | 5 min Chalkboard Check-In Ritual  
15 min Mind-Body Triptych  
5 min Sitting Meditation  
30 min Breath Drawings  
30 min Group Reflection |
| 3       | Recognizing Relationships | 5 min Chalkboard Check-In Ritual  
5 min Lovingkindness Meditation  
20 min Relationships Genogram  
30 min Touch Drawings  
30 min Group Reflection |
| 4       | BMS Integration        | 5 min Chalkboard Check-In Ritual  
15 min Walking Meditation  
30 min Prayer Scrolls  
30 min Group Reflection  
10 min Post-BMSWBI |

In session 1, as spouses enter the space, they wrote a word or image to set their intention for the first group meeting. Next, spouses completed the BMSWBI pre-test and demographics questionnaire. The group continued with brief introductions between the leader and participants. Adapted from Peterson’s (2014) Mindful Exploration of Art
ART THERAPY FOR FIREFIGHTER SPOUSES

Materials (MEAM), spouses engaged in a rapid exploration of art materials from most structured (pencil) to most fluid materials (watercolors). The art therapist led the participants through a quick introduction to the art materials onto 4” x 6” pieces of paper. For instance, the use of oil pastels was demonstrated by the art therapist, and then participants were asked to move quickly to draw an image while mindfully noting any bodily sensations, thoughts or feelings they experience either verbally or by writing them down. For the mind-body art activity, spouses were asked to bring attention to their breath. The art therapist led the group in taking several breaths, inhaling in and exhaling out slowly. Next, mindfulness was reflected upon by choosing pre-cut circles to represent mind and body, and then tracing with a choice of color. Next, participants completed a brief body scan meditation. Then, they repeated the circle process by choosing two pre-cut circles to represent the mind and body, and then traced these with their choice of color onto the same image (Peterson, 2014). The session concluded with a group reflection.

In session 2, spouses began with the chalkboard check-in ritual. Spouses completed a progressive mind-body triptych. A triptych was a series of three images intended to be viewed together (Peterson, 2014). In the first image, participants drew a body outline and used line and color to mark any bodily or emotional pains. In the next drawing, participants chose to move these symbolic markings to the next sheet of paper. In the final drawing, participants practiced self-care with the art materials. Spouses were invited to share their care interventions with each another and to write a “self-care prescription” about the last reflective image (Peterson, 2014). Next, the group participated in a sitting meditation with focus on the breath. With art materials, spouses
drew a representation of your breath from the meditation experience. As a group, members shared their experiences.

In session 3, spouses entered the space and completed the chalkboard check-in ritual. The group participated in a lovingkindness meditation to open compassion for oneself and others (Rappaport, 2014). Based on Isis’s (2014) expressive arts directive, the group focused on an intention to take ownership of relationship choices. Spouses were instructed to create a relationships genogram depicting females as circles and males as triangles. Placement of shapes were based on how significant the relationships were in your life. Pets could be included, as well as, a person who has deceased with a line or “x” drawn through the shape. Spouses discussed and then reflected on Isis’s (2014) questions: “Do you feel crowded or lonely?” and “If you could have it exactly the way you wanted it, what would it look like?” (p. 166). Next, the group created art based on an adaptation of Koff-Chapin’s (2018) Touch Drawing Technique. Spouses rolled block printing ink onto a substrate and gently laid white tissue paper over the ink. As gentle music played, the tissue paper “found” its placement and images emerged before their eyes. Participants used their fingers to push and create new images, progressively building a series of images. Group members completed the exercise with a reflective discussion on the experience.

In session 4, spouses completed their final chalkboard check-in. The group prepared for a walking meditation with instruction on ways to gain awareness for their movements and observations. The group walked in silence. Upon returning, the art therapist read this quote from poet Rilke: “But you take pleasure in the faces of those who know they thirst. You cherish those who grip you for survival” (Barrows & Macy,
2005, p. 71). Members were invited to write or draw what they most thirst for on to the strips of paper or fabric. Each prayer was rolled and secured with string and decorated. The group freely shared any reflections about their prayer scrolls. The post-BMSWBI inventory was completed.

The overall research design incorporated a qualitative approach with a self-assess inventory and qualitative arts-based research gathered from interviews and images (Leavy, 2015). Initially, the researcher participated in two fire department ride-alongs. Next, a pre-test/post-test inventory, the Body-Mind-Spirit Well-Being Inventory (BMSWBI) measured quantitative data with close-ended questions at the beginning of the first session and at the end of the final session. Inventory results from pre-test/post-test were compared for changes in the participants’ well-being. After the intervention was completed, the researcher asked for members who would like to participate in individual interviews. Two participants agreed to the interview conducted through open-ended questions. In addition, a discussion about the images created in the intervention and researcher response images related image and participant understandings from the research process. The potential community art show was not completed due to low attendance in the research.

Research Instruments

Fire Station Ride-Alongs. To learn more about fire service life in an authentic manner, the researcher completed fire station ride-alongs. A ride-along was possibly the closest an individual can get to the experience of being a firefighter on a typical shift. By witnessing the flow of a typical work shift, the researcher may understand other factors that impacted spouses as their firefighters return home. The researcher has attended a
day-long shift to participate in shift start, training, meals, exercise, and responding to calls to gather observational themes.

**Body-Mind-Spirit Well-Being Inventory.** The study utilized the BMSWBI, a 56-item self-report inventory that measured positive and negative aspects regarding holistic health (Ng, Yau, Chan, Chan, & Ho, 2005). Each item was measured on an 11-point or 10-point scale. The inventory was subdivided into four key areas: Physical Distress, Daily Functioning, Affect, and Spirituality. When scores were totaled, a higher BMSWBI result within the areas of Daily Functioning, Affect, and Spirituality indicated better overall well-being. Higher Physical Distress scores was indicative of regression. Overall, the inventory intended to measure a participants’ perception of their stress-level.

**Interviews.** Interviews were conducted using the Narrative Inquiry to reveal emerging themes from firefighter spouses’ lives (Leavy, 2015). Through storytelling, readers experienced a richer context and understanding of how firefighter couples create their unique family lives alongside the fire service. By seeing through the eyes of spouses with differing viewpoints, the spectrum of experience was witnessed and may have challenged stereotypical views of firefighter family life (Leavy, 2015; Kirschman, 2004). Interview questions were adapted from Leavy’s (2015) research questions as seen in Table 2. Participants were provided the final transcription to review and provided an opportunity to make any changes.
Table 2

*Firefighter Spouses’ Interview Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do you view your life story as a spouse in the fire service and how has the story evolved over time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What examples of creativity have you used in designing your family life around the fire service?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does your story point to your own resiliency?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does sharing your story with the researcher help with addressing stressors of supporting the fire service life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your story mirror stereotypes around your gender identity and family roles?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can researchers better attune and hear the unique perspectives of firefighter spouses?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant Art images.** Similar to story, art images visually communicated the expected and counter depictions of a firefighter spouse’s life. Notably, Lai and Nosek’s study (2013) (as cited in Leavy, 2015) aided individuals to question their own unconscious bias simply through the viewing of counter-stereotypical images. The researcher also integrated her response art from the research process.

**Potential Community Art Show.** Leavy (2015) wrote about art having a powerful way of attracting public interest. Depending on time allowance, the researcher planned to organize an exhibition at the end of the research process as a way for firefighter spouses to share their experience through their art. The art show could visually show the firefighter spouses’ unique point of view. The exhibition could bring awareness to these unseen heroes, spouses supporting the brave first responders after the shift has ended. Each participant would be given the option to participate in the exhibition or could decline with no penalty. Exhibition participants would be provided full details of the
exhibition details along with co-selecting image(s) for the show, discussing display options, and reviewing and signing the exhibition informed consent. The researcher would have provided an informal discussion of participant and community responses obtained at the event.

The community art show did not occur because there were only two participants. By displaying the images of only two participants, the body of images may not have accurately reflected the collective experience of a group of firefighter spouses. Most importantly, the anonymity of the spouses would be compromised since there was a low number of attendees. Focus could be unintentionally placed on the spouses rather than the viewing and response to the art. From an aspirational stance, the art show could garner much needed attention on how spouses support the roles of firefighters. The images could foster discussion on how to better communicate and support firefighter spouses.

**Data Collection**

The quantitative data was summarized by pre- and post-test tallies of the BMSWBI results. Data for all qualitative methods included interviews, researcher notes from interventions, and image assessments.

**Data Analysis**

Results from the pre-and post-BMSWBI were compared side-by-side to determine if participants experienced an increase in overall well-being after completing the BMS-AT intervention. The *in vivo* coding process was used to analyze the qualitative methods of the research study. With *in vivo* coding, snippets from the actual interviews and image assessment notes was viewed from a holistic view with phrases written into response poetry to determine emerging themes (Leavy, 2015; McNiff, 2015).
Validity and Reliability

The researcher’s method considered the reliability (consistency of results) and validity (the range of how the method measured what it is designed to measure). To determine the validity of the BMS-AT intervention, Ng et al.’s (2005) study of 674 Chinese adults, findings established the BMSWBI tool as an effective measure of the interconnectedness and health of multiple dimensions of well-being. When using the BMSWBI inventory, some weaknesses included the lack of research of this tool over time and the constraints of using self-report measures, as participants may embellish their scores (Ng et al., 2005).

Art-based approaches can add validity to the research by revealing aspects of the spouses’ lives that resonate authentically in the fire service. Utilizing images and verbal discourse provided a snapshot to capture spouses’ unique perspective through symbols. Images communicated the multifaceted nature of family life, revealing multiple meanings beyond a singular data measure. Further, the artmaking process invited participants to be co-researchers, allowing both researcher and participant to interact with each another in unique ways (Leavy, 2015).

There were limitations to methods and approaches in this research. In the interviews with the two participants, the smaller sample size may not correlate with findings from the quantitative inventory data. Further, integrating the quantitative BMSWBI findings with the qualitative findings of the interviews, and images may reveal unclear conclusions or themes or identify additional areas for study.
Ethical Implications

In accordance with the “Ethical Principles for Art Therapists” of the American Art Therapy Association (AATA) and American Counseling Association (ACA) 2014 Code of Ethics, participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time with no negative consequences (ACA, 2014; AATA 2013). Information from art therapy sessions remained confidential unless a participant met mandatory report requirements for his/her or other’s safety. Artwork created from this research study belongs to the participant and participants signed a Media Consent Form gave permission for use/no use of images. The researcher ensured all data and artwork were de-identified and securely stored for three years. A chief concern for participants was to make known that the researcher was married to a firefighter. The researcher upheld ethical standards of confidentiality as this was the cornerstone of the therapeutic relationship. This information was discussed with each participant prior to signing the informed consent.

Researcher Bias

After careful consideration, this researcher discovered several biases impacted the research study. Kirschman (2004) asserted there was a myriad of firefighter spouses with each responding creatively based on their life experience and circumstance. As a firefighter spouse, the researcher may make assumptions or project her own experiences onto the spouses in this study. To avoid the non-rational process of confirmation bias, whereby the researcher may assume the participants agree to all facets of the study (Knapp & VandeCreek, 2012), the researcher sought the ethical advice of a credentialed art therapist to uphold and protect rights of the research participants (AATA, 2013). Further, the researcher acknowledged her novice stance in practicing mindfulness
meditation and asserted to “practice what you preach” by integrating this practice during her final graduate year of study (Peterson, 2014). The researcher shared McNiff’s (2014) honest beginnings as an artist, experiencing the transformative nature of artmaking and witnessing its force in acting in the present moment.

Overall, the researcher created response art to process her experience by creating a *Fire Spirit Axe* (Figure 1). This sculpture was a visual reminder for the researcher to impart love for her clients. The banded colors represented aspects of the researcher’s cognition and emotions as she completed the research process. From the bottom of the axe handle to the base of the axe head, each color change in wrapped thread denoted: family support, love, anger, safety net, balance, love and pride for this research journey.

![Figure 1. Fire Spirit Axe. Response sculpture by Andrea Sutrick. Wool felt & thread.](image)
Chapter IV

Results

The data collected included two firefighter ride-along observations and reflection and data from four art therapy sessions with firefighter spouses. Information collected included: quantitative data from the pre- and post-session BMSWBI tests; qualitative data from spouse interviews, art images, and researcher response art. The community art show was not conducted and a discussion of rationale was provided. An analysis of the data indicated an overall reduction in perceived stress as measured by the Body-Mind-Spirit-Wellness Inventory with qualitative data revealing three overarching themes: reduction in stress, identifying common life stressors, and awareness and expression to the BMS-AT interventions.

Firefighter Ride-Alongs

The researcher completed two fire department ride-alongs for an eight-hour span of the shift with the Escambia County Fire Rescue in Pensacola, Florida and Fort Walton Beach Fire Department in Fort Walton Beach, Florida. In ride-alongs, a layperson can experience a typical firefighter day by responding with the crew to emergency calls, attending shift meetings and trainings, eating meals and attending to any other duties.

From the experience, the researcher identified common life stressors that impact firefighter spouse and family life. For instance, spouses were apart for days at a time, so communication became vital. A phone call between a firefighter and spouse abruptly ended to respond to emergencies or take care of duties, but life didn’t stop when the firefighter was at work. Since so many firefighters were also paramedics, they become the resident “doctor” for family members. For example, a firefighter during a ride-along
walked through an allergic reaction diagnosis over the phone and another dealt with a father being admitted into the hospital. Firefighters felt inadequate to help when they know stressors were happening at home while they were at work and spouses didn’t receive the needed support in handling crises. On a positive note, many families could visit their firefighter on duty so children can reconnect and see where their parent worked when they were away from home. Further, the researcher received a clearer picture of the strong camaraderie amongst firefighters during their shifts as they each knew all about each other’s family dynamics, life challenges, health, and more. With downtime between calls, firefighters had adequate time for bonding unlike a traditional American job.

From the ride-along experience, the researcher felt resonation and connection with all that was witnessed. The researcher responded by making art and writing reflective poetry to understand the intense bonds that can be formed in the fire service. After the first ride-along, the researcher made a response poem and image (Figure 2) called *Swirling S’s*:

```
Swirling S’s do I see
Smoke is arisin’ beyond the sea
Breaking its concentration
As the elements attest
To make this blaze be put to rest.

An amazing glory
The cavalry shows
Smolders the glows
Smoke dissipates
Giving rise to the parting skies.

A golden splendor
Shines right thru
Revealing this brave crew
First in beyond the dawn break
Swirling back my heart’s fate.
```
After the second ride-along, the researcher created a response poem and image (Figure 3) called *A Holistic Fire*:

Centered in the gut  
As the flames shoot up  
Marvel at the joy  
In the face of pains  
Call after call  
Or none at all  
Family reigns.

Fix anything  
Where seconds count  
First in and last out  
The strong, the brave  
In full efforts to save  
Circles of support  
Family reigns.

Loving this job  
Doing what is right  
Aligned with all  
Even through the night  
Loved ones support  
During days apart  
Family reigns.
The researcher viewed the “swirling S’s” as layers of smoke dissipating to reveal the strong bonds within the firefighter crew. In *A Holistic Fire*, the researcher recognized an image of a strong water tower symbolically holding water to put out life’s flames of pain. In reflection of the response art, spouses harbor worry over the danger of their firefighter’s jobs, but after working along with the crews the researcher gained tremendous respect for the training, elevating pride and trust in these firefighters working as a team. Kirschman (2004) noted that firefighter families may benefit by attending training exercises to learn about the safety in preparing for risks on calls.

**Participant Art Images**

From session 1, participants completed a Rapid Art Exploration (Peterson, 2014) and Mind-Body Art with Meditation. Participants enjoyed exploring many materials, but a participant noted it was hard to stop and move on to the next image, admitting perfectionist tendencies. At completion, the art therapist discussed the media qualities of structured to fluid. In the circles created in the Mind-Body Art, Peterson (2014) indicated that after meditation, circles will move closer. In this study, participants demonstrated
more connection between circles drawn after the mediation. Participants were surprised at how the art mirrored their current feelings (Figure 4). Spouses gained awareness of their stress levels and enjoyed the time set apart to reflect and de-stress from their daily life through artmaking.

![Figure 4. Mind-Body images. Markers, pastels.](image)

From session 2, participants completed a Mind-Body Triptych and Breath Drawings (Peterson, 2014). As participants drew the outline of their bodies, conversation percolated naturally. Spouses acknowledged prior injuries; handling stress after their firefighter experienced the loss of a child on shift; and the complexities of family life with school beginning this week. Breath drawings became a natural expression of their internal breaths after completing a breathing meditation (Figure 5). Participants freely shared about their life stressors in balancing family life with fire service schedules. Spouses also discussed coping strategies for when their firefighter returns home from a “bad day” on shift.
From session 3, participants completed a Lovingkindness Meditation, Relationships Genogram (Isis, 2014), and Touch Drawings (Koff-Chopin, 2018). From the genogram drawings, participants brought up notions of family secrets and the interconnectedness of families and began to recognize how familial experiences could be passed down from generation to generation. As the group progressed to the touch drawings, participants began to fully immerse in artmaking. The media was experimental and provided an element of surprise as participants began to familiarize how the colors mixed and patterns would arise from their finger strokes on the tissue paper. As a narrative, a spouse recognized her various life stages as puzzle pieces and felt a sense of confidence looking back on her life. Another spouse desired a different outcome, hoping to add light and color to a palette that became saturated with black. Her progression of images demonstrated a small rainbow area of color with the final image having a white symbolic shape the group named, *Butterfly Shark* (Figure 6). Both participants witnessed a warm-up; love for experimenting, and pride in reflecting on the created images. Spouses gained awareness of familial relationships and recognized life patterns.
From session 4, participants completed a Walking Meditation and Prayer Scrolls. Participants appreciated this new vision for mindfully walking by marveling at nature at their own pace and choosing items that speaks to them. Spouses were immersed in the task with some discussion on the beauty and rarity of items found. A spouse recognized her glued pine seeds resembled a backbone and she stated that she “needed to stand up for things.” Another participant stated the process was less about “[being] pretty, as it’s more personal with no deadlines and a time to relax” (Figure 7). Spouses gained awareness for different aspects of themselves from physical, mental, and spiritual viewpoints.
Body-Mind-Spirit Wellness Inventory

For the comparison of the pre- and post-Body-Mind-Spirit-Wellness Inventory (BMSWI) scores, two participants completed the instrument before beginning the research and after the sessions concluded. The BMSWI indicated an overall reduction in stress. One participant attended only the second session and did not return for future sessions due to schedule conflicts. BMSWI participant findings were included in Table 3. Overall, participant one experienced strong growth in the Spirituality realm with declines in remaining areas. Participant two experienced growth in Daily Functioning and Affect with regression in Physical Distress. Participant two did not fill out a response for the Spirituality aspect in session 1 as she most likely skipped the inventory page; therefore, the research did not provide a comparison for the Spirituality area. For specific measures, a high result in the Physical Distress inventory would indicate higher perceived stress; whereas, high results in Daily Functioning, Affect, and Spirituality would indicate a lower perception of stress (Ng et al., 2005). Both participants experienced an increase in the Physical Distress area indicating a higher perceived stress level. Further, both participants indicated contradictory experiences in the Daily Functioning and Affect
realms, with one participant experiencing more stress and the second participant indicating a reduction in stress.

Overall measures for both participants indicated a reduction in overall perceived stress after completing the four BMS-AT sessions. The BMSWI identified increases in overall well-being scores. The areas of Physical Distress and Daily Functioning demonstrated declines. The areas of Affect and Spirituality indicated significant increases from the two participants. From responses after art making experientials, firefighter spouses stated feeling relaxed and experienced less stress during artmaking.

Table 3

*BMSWI Participant Scores n=3*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post-Test</th>
<th>Point Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1  2  3</td>
<td>1  2  3</td>
<td>1  2  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Distress</td>
<td>6  0  38</td>
<td>8  6 —</td>
<td>+2  +6 —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Functioning</td>
<td>76 69 53</td>
<td>72 78 —</td>
<td>—  — —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect</td>
<td>67 5 —  12</td>
<td>66 34 —</td>
<td>—  —  +29 —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>51 — 41</td>
<td>64 66 —</td>
<td>+13 n/a —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>201 77</td>
<td>120   210 184</td>
<td>+10  +44 —</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. The small sample size in this study does not provide sufficient power to indicate a statistical finding for the overall population studied. — No reported information.*

**Interviews**

One week after the final session, interviews with two participants were conducted using the Narrative Inquiry to reveal the theme of common life stressors (Leavy, 2015). Reflecting upon family life in the fire service, spouses acknowledged stressors and frustrations. Recognizing the job’s dangers, a respondent stated, “[I] didn’t know exactly
what he does… and [now] knowing more helps put me at ease.” After a difficult shift, a spouse stated, “When things were going on, I can tell, but I won’t ask.” Challenging shifts made home life “difficult because it impacts the whole family… Some things are not dinner conversation; so many things are left unsaid.” A spouse noted that often her firefighter husband would be at work when things would happen at home and she had to figure things out on her own.

Interviews also revealed the theme of awareness as spouses identified creative approaches in supporting their spouse’s fire service schedule. One spouse would bring dinner and go by the station to visit with the kids, especially on weekends or down days to hang out between fire calls. As a teacher, a participant noted that it was easier to handle all the holidays since she was always off work to be with their children. For child care, another participant stated her mother-in-law provided child care on days where they both had to work. Recently, the station adopted a new schedule moving from 24-hours on/48-hours off to 48-hours on/96-hours off. A participant noted this schedule provided more down time so her spouse could rest and get more done while at home. In the old 24-hours on/48-hours off schedule, a firefighter was either going to work, at work, or returning from work on any given day. All in all, firefighter spouses cited flexibility and simply “just mak[ing] it work” as their approach to balancing the fire service work with family life.

After this BMS-AT experiential, interview questions showed how spouses lived independent lives. Notably, firefighter spouse pragmatism upheld their resiliency. Spouses noted a need for autonomy; “To juggle all that, you can’t run to them every time something comes up.” Spouses developed their own interests when their firefighter was
away. A spouse remarked that she learned, “I don’t back down” in proclaiming her needs. Spouses asserted that lots of communication helps as, “even though we are worried about them, we do know they’ve got to do their job.”

In sharing their stories with the researcher, the spouses freely expressed differing viewpoints. A spouse felt it was awkward sharing because “we [participant and researcher] know each other and know each other’s spouses.” She felt it was easier to share with work friends that were separate from the situation. The other spouse felt that it was great to have someone to talk to about what they were doing [artmaking], which made the subject matter more interesting. However, both spouses agreed having an art therapist that was familiar with the lifestyle in the fire service can help because “you’ve been there” and “feel comfortable talking with somebody who has experience and can understand what they’re going through.”

Finally, spouses spoke about stereotypical narratives they observe in the fire service. A participant stated the view that many spouses have lots of babies. She had always worked full-time and felt like an outsider because she couldn’t relate to being at home. Another participant noted the idea of the wife doing the cooking and cleaning. She stated that doesn’t happen so much anymore as firefighters do the same cooking and cleaning at work and home. Further, a spouse spoke about physical qualifications of female firefighters. Her view supported, “as long as they [female firefighters] can do the job… as it goes both ways.”

**Researcher Response Art**

To reflect on experiences with the data, the researcher created response art throughout the research process to identify emerging themes. Response art enabled the art
therapist to process the client interaction, as a form of a dialogue (Moon, 1999; Moon, 2002). Images revealed latent meanings and provided clarity about the therapeutic relationship.

After session one of the BMS-AT intervention, Mind-Body Exploration, the researcher created a response image in three phases (Figure 8). First phase was drawing a precise tree image, embracing the need for perfection. Second phase, the researcher added color with water-soluble crayons to begin to release emotions; for, the researcher experienced anxiety as she desired participants to have a positive experience. In the third phase, the researcher used a brush with water to blend the under-drawing and began to feel a rushing calm of peace that came over, informing her to be mindful of each participant’s unique experience and to trust the process in art therapy (McNiff, 2011). Similar to the participants, the researcher recognized the theme of expression, as the researcher and participants needed the support of other firefighter spouses within this safe space to explore feelings.

Figure 8. Progressive tree series. Response drawings by Andrea Sutrick. Water-soluble crayons.

In response to the second session in which clients focused on self-care, the researcher adapted an intervention by Stangline (2018) and dropped dots of glue to fall
naturally on paper (Figure 9). The researcher witnessed how individuals in a group added cohesion as conversations overlap and patterns emerge. However, as the glue dries, it became hard to see these patterns. To bring back the richness of emotions expressed in this session, (and after glue dried), scribbles of oil pastel were added by streaking outwards with fingers. The researcher observed how supportive the spouses were to each other. The spouses were also insightful about their own needs and recognized their own gaps to self-care.

Figure 9. Glue progression. Response image by Andrea Sutrick. Glue & oil pastels.

In the researcher’s response to session three of the BMS-AT intervention, Recognizing Relationships, a rainbow of watercolors was painted to capture flow (Figure 10). Then abruptly, salt was sprinkled on the image and allowed to sit for ten minutes. The researcher saw a cluster of butterflies emerging out of a fog, a mystery, a cloud. The researcher pondered if God’s presence was there. The image was rotated and revealed a sea turtle diving down, seeking light for its nesting season but going in the wrong direction. From the safety of this group’s shared experience in the fire service, perhaps moving to the darkness helped each other find their light. The BMS-AT intervention provided a safe space for expression and exploration with others.
In the fourth session of the BMS-AT intervention, Body-Mind-Spirit Integration, the researcher began to have a flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) as she created “Seeds of Love” (Figure 11). An unspoken vibration from this activity seemed to culminate as intense focus and simultaneous release of energy filled the room. The total of four spouses (including researcher) that met in this group series were represented as the seed pods pointing to the heart-shaped leaf. The space was walled by nature materials providing a structured “nest” to hold the artmaking space. The researcher reflected on feeling honored to witness the group’s journey and courage to be vulnerable. The artmaking series became a way of imparting knowledge, sharing amongst fellow spouses, and artmaking in a personal way to “bear the gift” of art therapy (Levine, 1992). Building an authentic relationship with the spouses permitted play with art materials and reduced anxieties in making “perfect” art.
Figure 11. Seeds of Love. Response image by Andrea Sutrick. Nature collage.

In my reflection on the firefighter spouse interviews, Rockwell’s image of Rosie the Riveter (Brookeman, 2003, January 01) inspired a researcher response image (Figure 12) and poem, Red Hot Rosie:

Oh Riveting Rosie  
Just making it work  
Independent in action  
But soft in the heart  
Juggling all that comes  
As a balancing art  
Empowered, yet equal  
May spouses impart.

The poem in response to the BMS-AT intervention revealed the independent nature of firefighter spouses, allowing spouses to share their common experiences in supporting the fire service life. Artmaking provided safe reflective distance for participants to engage with images to gain awareness and expression, while reducing stress.
Figure 12. Red Hot Rosie. Response art by Andrea Sutrick. Water-soluble crayons.

Summary of Results

Overall, this research study analyzed quantitative data from the pre- and post-session Body-Mind-Spirit Well-Being Inventory which indicated an overall reduction of stress for participants. From an arts-based approach, research themes were gathered from qualitative data including: firefighter ride-alongs, art images, researcher response art, and spouse interviews. An analysis of the data indicated three overarching themes: reduction in stress, identifying common life stressors, and increased awareness and expression. Firefighter ride-along observations supported common life stressors as spouses managed families independently while their firefighters were away at work. Using BMS-AT interventions, participants recognized coping methods through awareness of stress levels, bonding with others while artmaking, and prioritizing life goals. Participants benefitted by receiving social support, relaxation in artmaking process, and free expression that supported the stress reduction purpose of the BMS-AT approach.
Chapter V

Discussion

As hypothesized, the research measured overall positive changes in firefighter spouse well-being in comparison of the BMSWBI pre- and post-tests, but this finding cannot be conclusive due to the small sample size. Findings from the qualitative data of the BMS-AT research study provided more support for stress reduction, as spouses responded to artmaking revealing common themes from their life including: reduced stress, common life stressors, and awareness and expression. In support of literature review findings, spouses shared about common stressors that firefighters can bring into family life such as vicarious trauma, alternate work schedules, and work-life balance issues. Artmaking with the BMS-AT intervention provided a safe space for spouses to explore their stress levels and share about their struggles with other spouses. Through the combination of body-mind-spirit and art therapy practices, spouses learned coping methods to relieve daily stress with meditation, to explore internal sensations with art making, and to reveal needed messages for healing through imagery.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the literature was reviewed for how firefighter occupational stressors can create additional stress for the spouse. O’Neil and Rothbard (2017) noted how fire service stress can impact home life. In the interventions, spouses grappled with the inherent danger from their firefighters’ job while creatively maintaining family life while assuming full-time employment and leaning heavily on extended family for help.

The research study demonstrated the vicarious trauma and emotion suppression experienced in fire service family life (O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017; IAFF, 2017, December
26; Jahnke et al., 2015). One spouse noted certain discussions were not “dinner conversation” with many emotionally charged events left unspoken. Spouses shared about this distancing from their firefighters, supporting this encounter as an ambiguous loss (Regehr et al., 2015; Cowlishaw et al., 2010).

The study findings identified ways to explore stressors in a safe, contained environment with other spouses. Like the stress reduction findings from Kaimal et al. (2016) and Huet and Holttum’s artmaking studies, the Body-Mind-Spirit Art Therapy intervention provided spouses a way to relax and reduce stress. Spouses shared about their own creative approaches to the erratic work schedule in the fire service. Further, drawings from the BMS-AT intervention enabled participants to view their bodily stress as supported by Frisby et al.’s (2011) notion that stress can manifest in itself within the body. Similar to Tang et al.’s (2007) and Ding et al.’s (2015) research on mindfulness, a meditation and a mindful approach in the intervention enhanced experimentation and invited a nonjudgmental view of images.

The study revealed potential coping strategies that spouses can use to reduce lifestyle stress. The BMS-AT intervention helped spouses to embrace Levy-Gigi et al.’s (2016) idea of regulatory choice flexibility, whereby spouses learned new ways of creatively responding to ever-changing fire work schedules through a holistic body-mind-spirit approach (Ng et al, 2016). In congruence with the NIMH’s (n.d.) recommendations for stress reduction, the BMS-AT intervention imparted coping strategies to bring awareness of symptoms through mind and body art directives experienced alongside other spouses. By sharing with other firefighter spouses, participants gained empathy by listening to one another’s stories and find peaceful ways to handle family challenges as
demonstrated in Lukoff & Strozzi-Heckler’s (2017) study of increased mindfulness in Aikido practice. Further, images enabled spouses to reflect on one’s notion of self. By connecting to spirituality and values, spouses recognized their own life patterns to focus on deeper meaning and purpose (Ng et al., 2016).

**Limitations**

Since this study recruited firefighter spouses on a volunteer basis, the research did not account for a balanced population to account for gender, age, and cultural considerations. Another key limitation was the allotted time for session length and frequency of sessions. Meditation practice often required more time, mindfulness interventions incorporated a time break before the last session; and the last session was longer in duration.

Availability of firefighter spouses was another area of concern. Even with the researcher’s connections as a firefighter spouse, recruiting was difficult for many reasons. First, firefighters can work a variety of shift schedules making it difficult to coordinate, as spouses with children often need to be home on days when their firefighter is at work. Also, the research was conducted during the start of a new school year when children and parents were adjusting to new schedules. When recruiting from fire conferences, this researcher was unaware that most spouse attendees were not local to the area, so they could not participate in a local on-site research study. To remedy, the researcher suggested grouping spouses by similar fire schedules, offering classes in many local geographic locations, offering childcare, or moving the sessions to a weekend retreat or at a different time of year.
Recommendations and Future Studies

The researcher recommended a larger sample size for evaluation. Also, session length can be extended or intervention could be conducted as a weekend retreat. A daily practice of mindfulness between sessions can be added for group sharing. Artmaking series was created with the intention of building upon learnings from week to week; however, psychoeducation and benefits were experienced in one session. Further, the BMSWBI could be measured at each session for the effectiveness of each art therapy intervention. The community art show could be integrated in studies with more participants, as a larger sample size would help focus the attention on the art expressions rather than the creators. To capture more detailed data, research could further explore the impact of integrating unique firefighter spouse occupational schedules such as shift work, traditional work schedules, and other first responder schedules (paramedic, police, or dispatch). The firefighter population could be researched based on full-time, volunteer, or wild-fire firefighters to measure the unique needs of these specialized fire positions and its effects on spouse relationships and family.

Conclusion

Research identified a need to reduce stress for firefighter spouses through a Body-Mind-Spirit Art Therapy intervention. Within the fire service lifestyle, spouses independently manage family life while their firefighter was on duty for several days. Spouses may work full-time jobs with their firefighters working a second job to augment income. Spouses can become isolated and frustrated at supporting their firefighter’s job. Spouses may harbor guilt about their desires as they consider the intensity of trauma faced by their firefighter. Compassion fatigue can set in and spouses may become
burned-out in being supportive. From this qualitative study, the Body-Mind-Spirit Art Therapy (BMS-AT) intervention provided participants a reduction in stress, identified common life stressors, and increased awareness and expression (Ng et al., 2016). Artmaking within a safe space enabled spouses the freedom to self-express, to be witnessed by others, and to share creative ways to approach fire service life.
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ART THERAPY FOR FIREFIGHTER SPOUSES


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