



# Art Therapy-Based Curriculum for Autistic Adolescents

Supporting life skills through creative expression and engagement

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PennWest University, 2025





# Purpose statement

The purpose of this research is to develop an art therapy-based curriculum to support life skill development for autistic adolescents.



# Justification

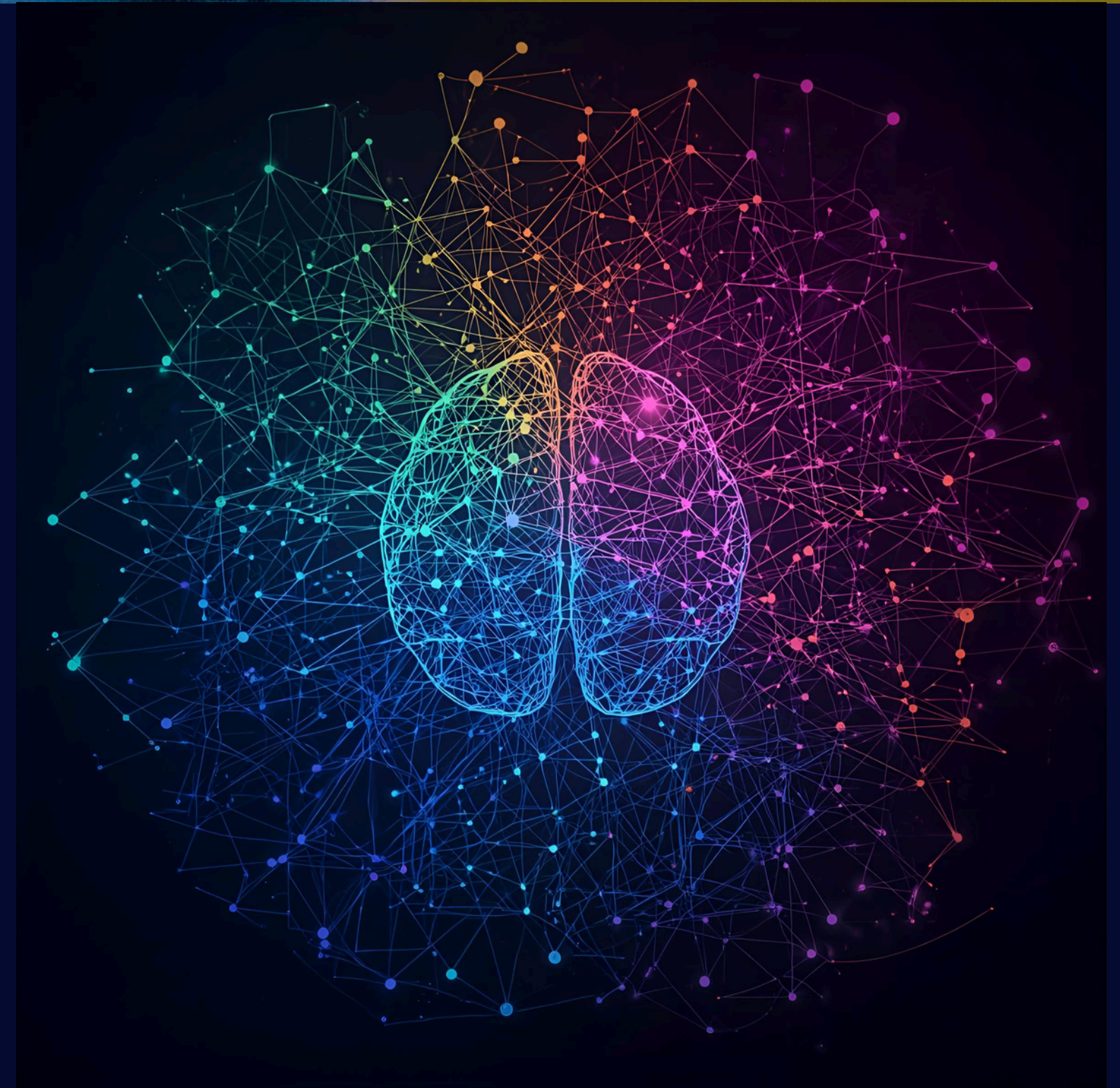
- Increased rates of Autism
- Disparities in ASD diagnoses and services
- Gaps in supporting life skill development for autistic adolescents within educational settings.
- Adolescence is a time of significant physical and mental growth.
- Need to prevent autistic adolescents from feeling pressured to conform to neurotypical expectations.
- Need to prioritize the respect and celebration of neurodivergent voices





# Terms

- **Identity-First Language**
- **Differentiated Instruction**
- **Metaphorical Approaches**








# Literature Review

## Theoretical Framework

A combination of principles from:

- **Social Emotional Learning**
    - Teaching, modeling, and practicing social and emotional competencies can lead to positive student outcomes, which are crucial for success in both school and life.
  - **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**
    - Combining CBT with other theories will enhance addressing emotional and cognitive aspects of autism with what works well and creates a more comprehensive curriculum that can be flexible and tailored to individual needs.
  - **Strengths-based Positive Psychology**
    - Supported environments that utilize strengths-based approaches to intervention and encouragement can potentially lead to positive outcomes for autistic adolescents, offering a social model solution.
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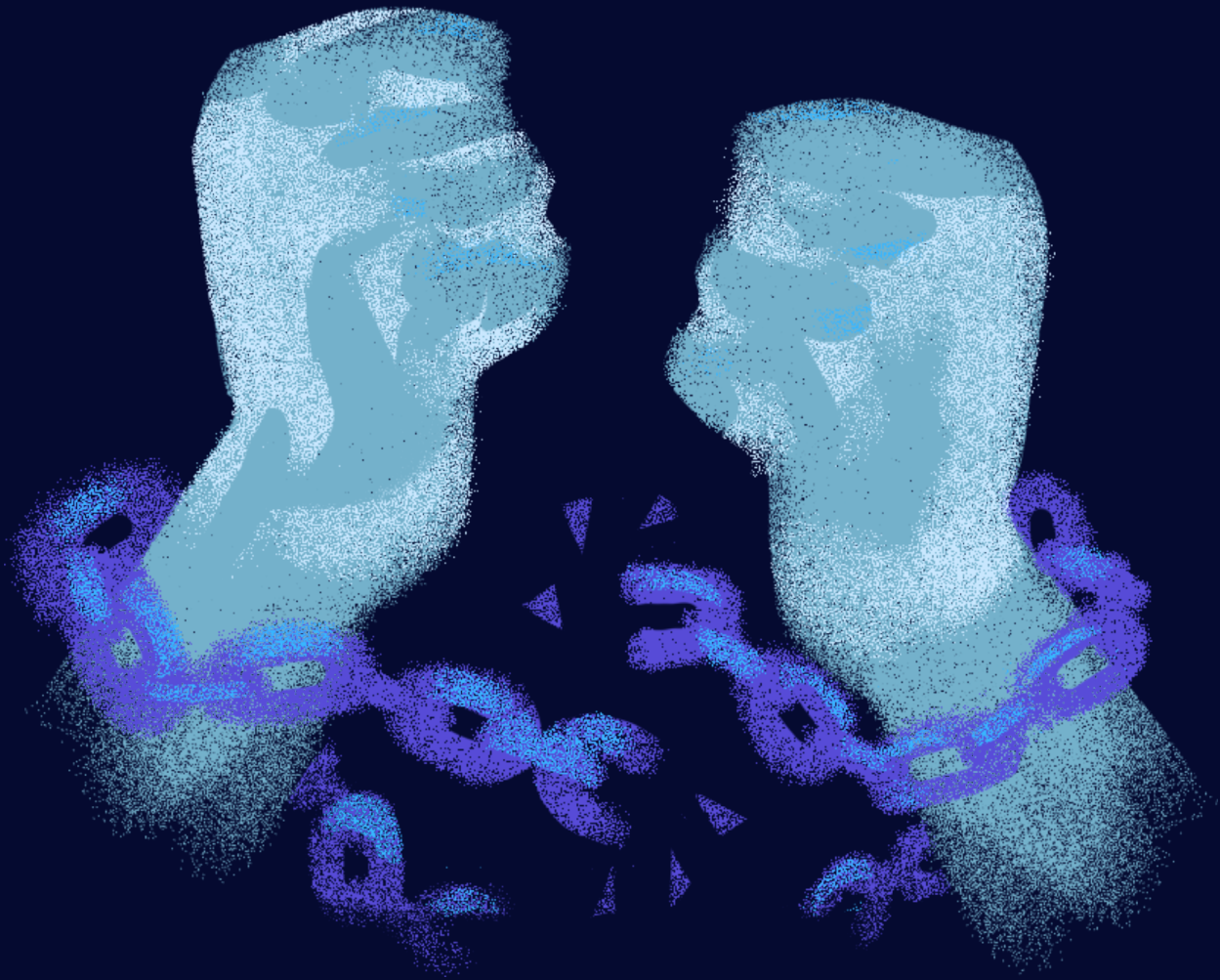
# Literature Review

- **Understanding Core Characteristics of Autism**
  - Challenges Faced by Autistic Individuals
  - Challenges in the Educational Setting
  - Strengths for Autistic Individuals
- **Neurodivergence**
- **Adolescents**
- **Autism Traits Often Targeted in Therapy**





# Literature Review



## Traditional Treatments

- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Various other Interventions

The primary objective of autism research, whether intentional or not, is to make autistic individuals conform to neurotypical standards

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- **Art Therapy for Autistic Individuals**
  - Metaphorical Approaches
- **Art Education and Art Therapy Strategies**



# Methodology

- Seeks to foster essential life skills, promote self-determination, and increase self-esteem in autistic adolescents.
- Interventions focus on addressing the needs of autistic adolescents and providing support as they acquire and master new skills.



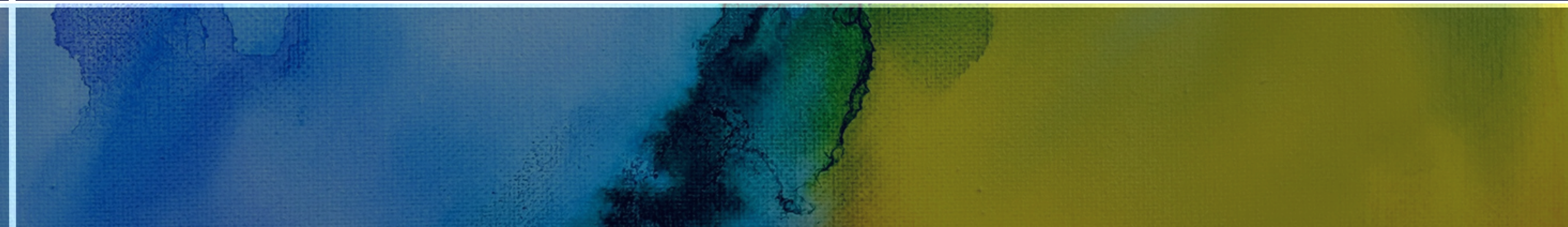
- **Target Audience**

- **Curricular Structure:**

- Driven by three key theoretical approaches
- Neurodiversity-affirming approaches
- incorporates insights from art therapists and mental health professionals

- **Curricular Outline:**

- Six tailored art therapy intervention topics
- 40-minute sessions
  - Structured format
  - Opening check-ins
  - Interventions and goals
  - Guided discussions and check-outs or assessments
  - Flexible





# Curriculum Layout

## Topic 1: Your Voice Matters-Goal Forming

**Number of Sessions per topic:** Varied

**Approx. Time:** 40 mins

**Theme/Activity:** Building Rapport/ Visual Representation College

### Objective(s)/Goals

#### Goals:

- Begin establishing trust and understanding between the therapist and group members, to enhance communication and collaboration.
- Understand their unique experiences, validating their perspectives, and creating a comfortable environment.

#### Objectives:

- Through creative collaboration, participants practice communication and cooperation with peers.
- To represent their identities, group members will create a visual collage.

### Materials & Media

#### OPENING WARM UP

- Large roll of paper or 18x24 sheet of paper
- crayons

#### MAIN INTERVENTION RECOMMENDED:

- 12x18 construction paper-various colors
- Colored Pencils
- Glue
- Scissors
- white drawing paper (if the client wants to draw images to add)
- Gallon size ziplock bags-to store any small materials collected or cut

#### MAIN INTERVENTION OPTIONAL:

- Written prompts worksheet-one for each client to be able to cut out (Supplemental 2)
- Markers
- Stickers
- Adaptive scissors
- precut prompts/images
- Stickers-Variou
- Visual Images that relate to written prompts

### Introduction

#### [5 mins] Check-in

- Welcome, expectations, introductions

#### [10 mins] Group Hands

- Opening Prompt: "We acknowledge that every individual is equal in this space, and we commit to listening to and respecting each other's voices. To achieve this, we will collaborate to set group norms. The first step to doing this is for us to take turns tracing around our hands with crayon allowing for each one to overlap, this is our way of agreeing to our norms." (note: if a client can not trace hand they can leave their mark on the paper another way)
- Therapist starts it off by tracing hand, then each member after. Allow each client to pick their own color and where they would like to put the hand on paper.



# Emotional Check-in

## Objective(s)/Goals

### Goals:

- Identify and express feelings

### Objective:

- Enhance self-awareness, improve emotional regulation, and foster self-acceptance.

## Materials & Media

### RECOMMENDED:

- Drawing paper-4x4
- Colored Pencils
- Markers
- Small Sketchbook (this can be optional)

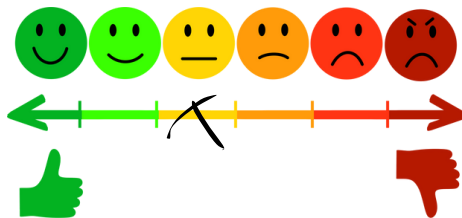
### OPTIONAL:

- Tempera paint sticks
- Crayons
- Watercolors
- Emotion check in-sheet (Supplemental 1)
- post-its
- Chart paper

## Quick Response: Feelings Check-In for Better Communication

**Feelings Check-In**

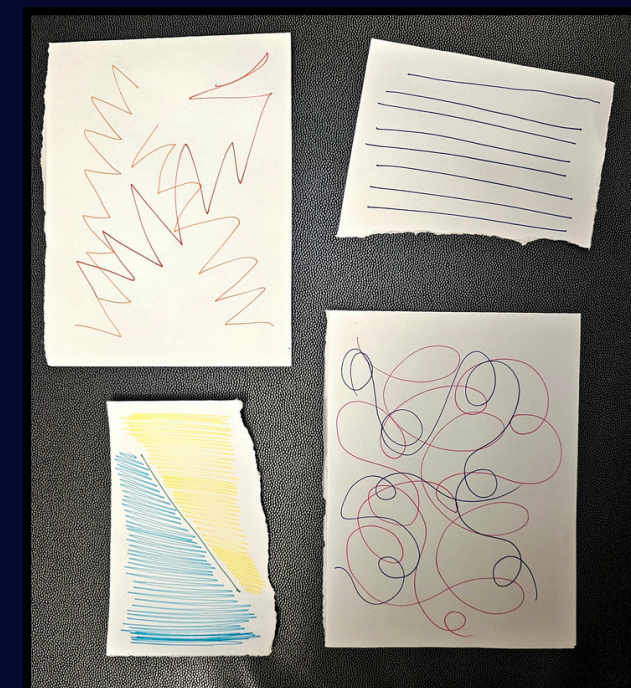
Mark on the line below what you are feeling right now...



I feel this way because ...  
I am stressed and didn't sleep well.

Something that might help me today is...  
Taking breaks once in a while.

## Colors and Lines



## Post-it note check-in







# Topic 1

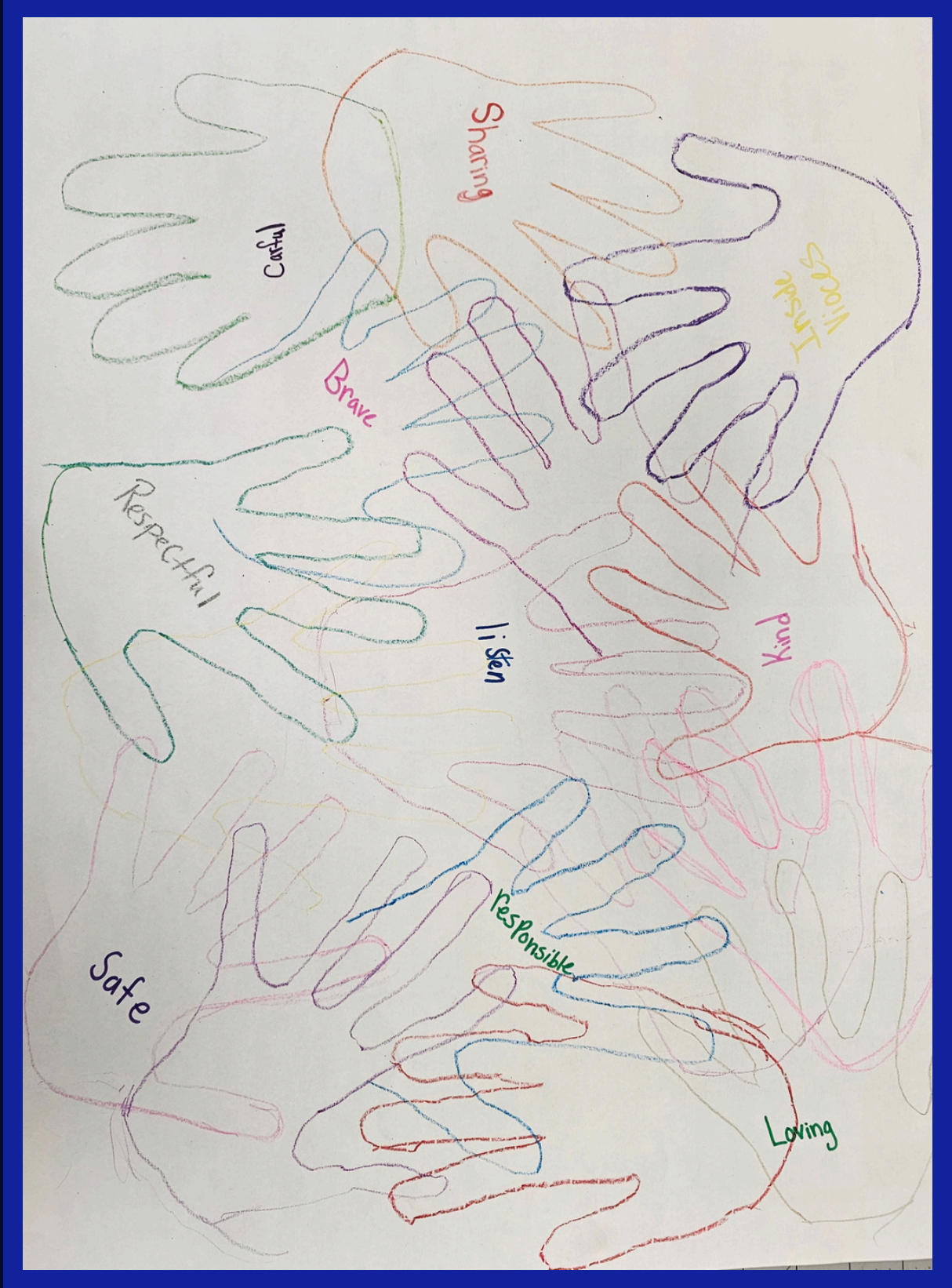
## Your Voice Matters-Goal Forming

### Objective(s)/Goals

- Goals:**
- Begin establishing trust and understanding between the therapist and group members, to enhance communication and collaboration.
  - Understand their unique experiences, validating their perspectives, and creating a comfortable environment.
- Objectives:**
- Through creative collaboration, participants practice communication and cooperation with peers.
  - To represent their identities, group members will create a visual collage.

### Opening Intervention

### Building Rapport/Group Hands





# Topic 1

## Your Voice Matters-Goal Forming

### Objective(s)/Goals

#### Goals:

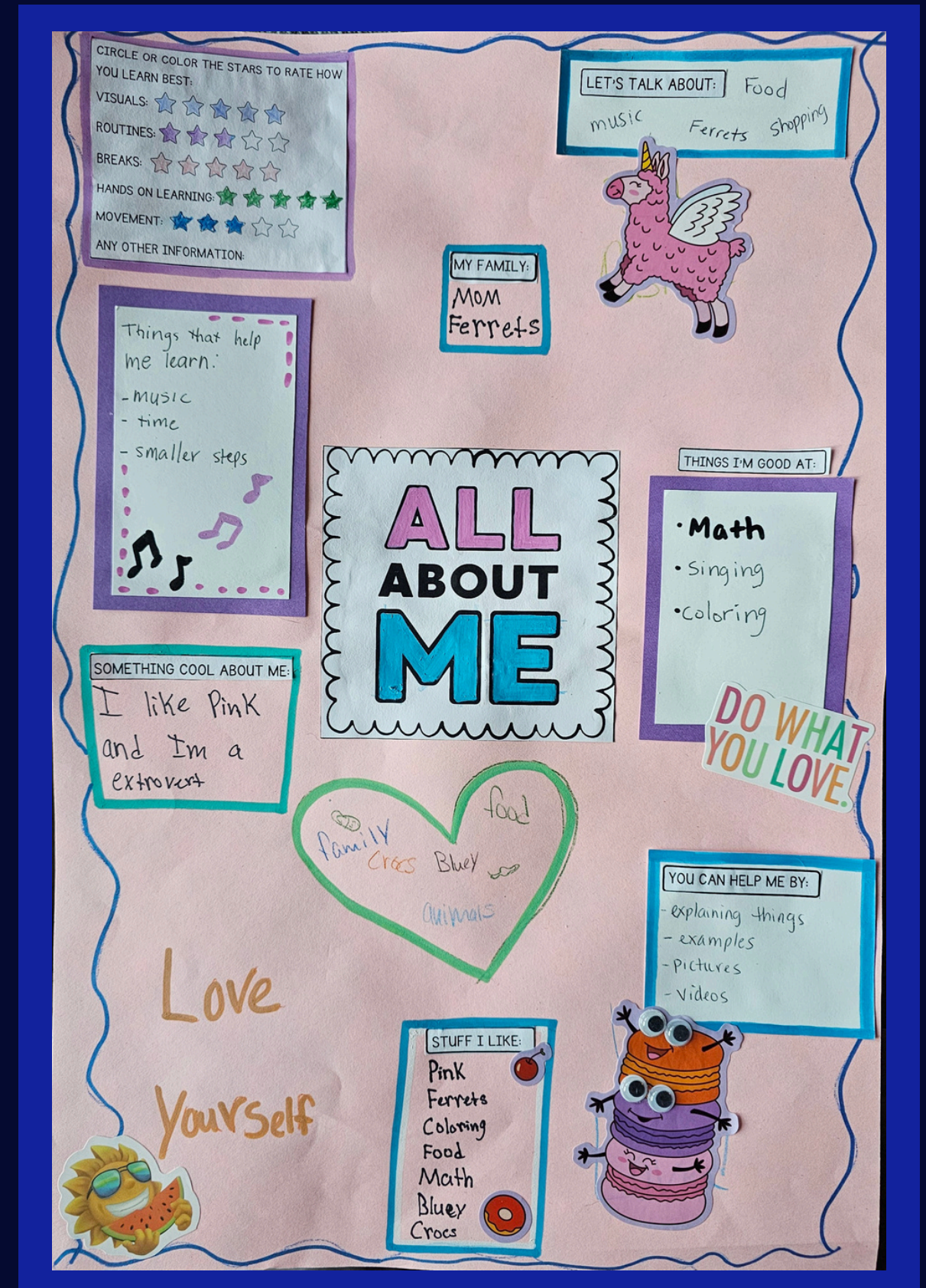
- Begin establishing trust and understanding between the therapist and group members, to enhance communication and collaboration.
- Understand their unique experiences, validating their perspectives, and creating a comfortable environment.

#### Objectives:

- Through creative collaboration, participants practice communication and cooperation with peers.
- To represent their identities, group members will create a visual collage.

### Intervention

Visual Representation College





# Topic 1

## Your Voice Matters-Goal Forming

### Objective(s)/Goals

- Goals:**
- Begin establishing trust and understanding between the therapist and group members, to enhance communication and collaboration.
  - Understand their unique experiences, validating their perspectives, and creating a comfortable environment.

- Objectives:**
- Through creative collaboration, participants practice communication and cooperation with peers.
  - To represent their identities, group members will create a visual collage.

### Intervention

### Goal Forming

### Identifying Goals

Goal Forming Brainstorm

Something you would like to change or not happy with?

I am always tired  
I get in trouble at school

Get better at drawing  
I want to learn to play the guitar

Something you would like to learn?

Learn or improve on  
What do you know about it now?  
What might need to change for you to learn what you don't know?  
What can you do to make this happen?  
What is your goal?

### Smart Goals

SMART GOALS			
	Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 3
<b>S</b> Specific What is my Goal?	I want to get better at drawing animals by practicing	I want to get more sleep so I am not so tired	
<b>M</b> Measurable How will I know when it is accomplished?	I will make 1 drawing of an animal every week and get feedback from my teacher or friend	I will go to bed at night and wake up in the morning at the same time each day	
<b>A</b> Achievable How can the goal be accomplished?	I will spend at least 30min 3 days a week to practice drawing animals using Youtube videos	I will set an alarm for the morning and make a schedule for bedtime	
<b>R</b> Relevant Does this seem worthwhile?	Getting better at drawing animals helps me be a better artist and I love animals	Because I am always tired at school and I want to not feel tired	
<b>T</b> Time bound When can I accomplish this goal?	I will be able to see my drawings get better in the next 3 months	I want to accomplish this goal in one month	

### Tracking Goal Progress

	Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 3
<b>S</b> Specific What is my Goal?	I will get better at drawing animals by practicing 1 drawing a week for 30mins using videos and getting feedback over the next 3 months	I will go to bed on night by 8:30pm wake up every morning at 7am by setting an alarm and making a schedule to go to bed on time	
<b>M</b> Measurable What progress have I made?	I created 6 drawings so far and I have gotten better at drawing animals	I have been getting up at the same time but not going to bed at the same time	
<b>A</b> Achievable Has this been accomplished?	no not yet	no	
<b>R</b> Relevant Is this still worthwhile?	yes	yes	
<b>T</b> Time bound Do I need more time?	no	yes	



# Topic 2

## Understanding Strengths

### Objective(s)/Goals

#### Goals:

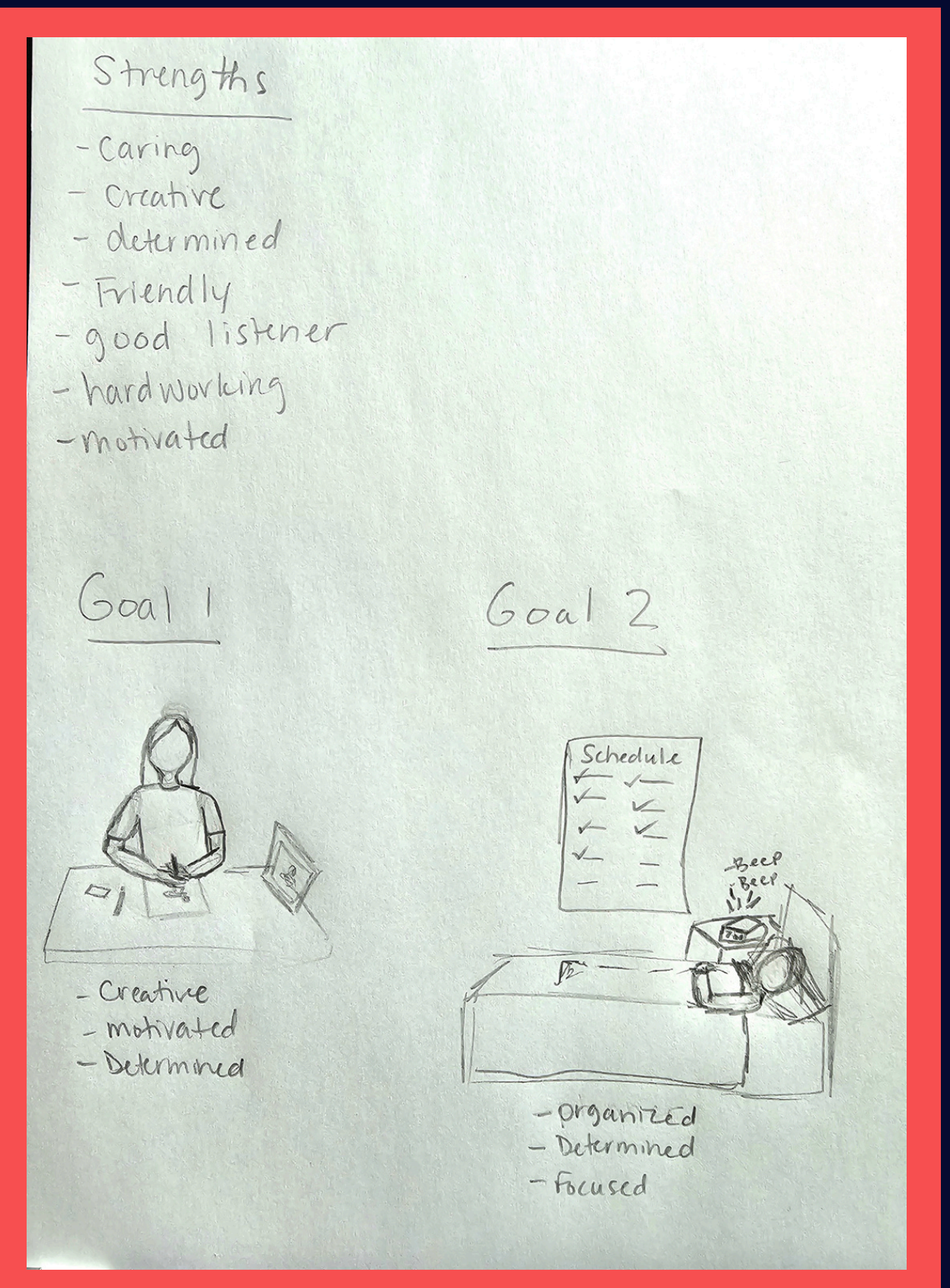
- To Identify individual strengths

#### Objectives:

- Increase overall self-esteem.
- Visualize and explore various aspects of their emotional life, personal values, and coping strategies.

### Intervention

#### Identifying Strengths





# Topic 2

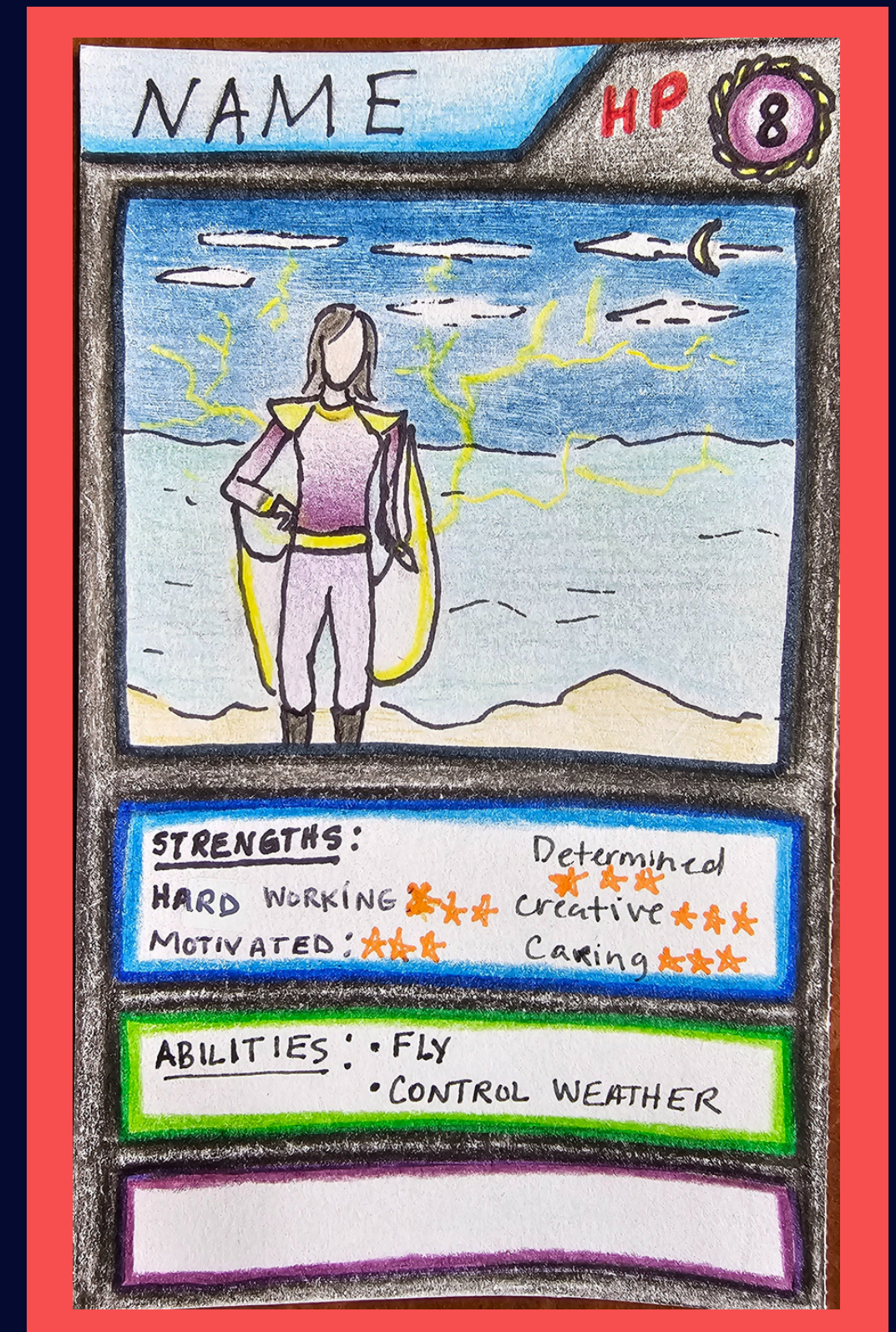
## Understanding Strengths

### Objective(s)/Goals

- Goals:
- To Identify individual strengths
- Objectives:
- Increase overall self-esteem.
  - Visualize and explore various aspects of their emotional life, personal values, and coping strategies.

### Intervention

### Your Power Card





# Topic 2

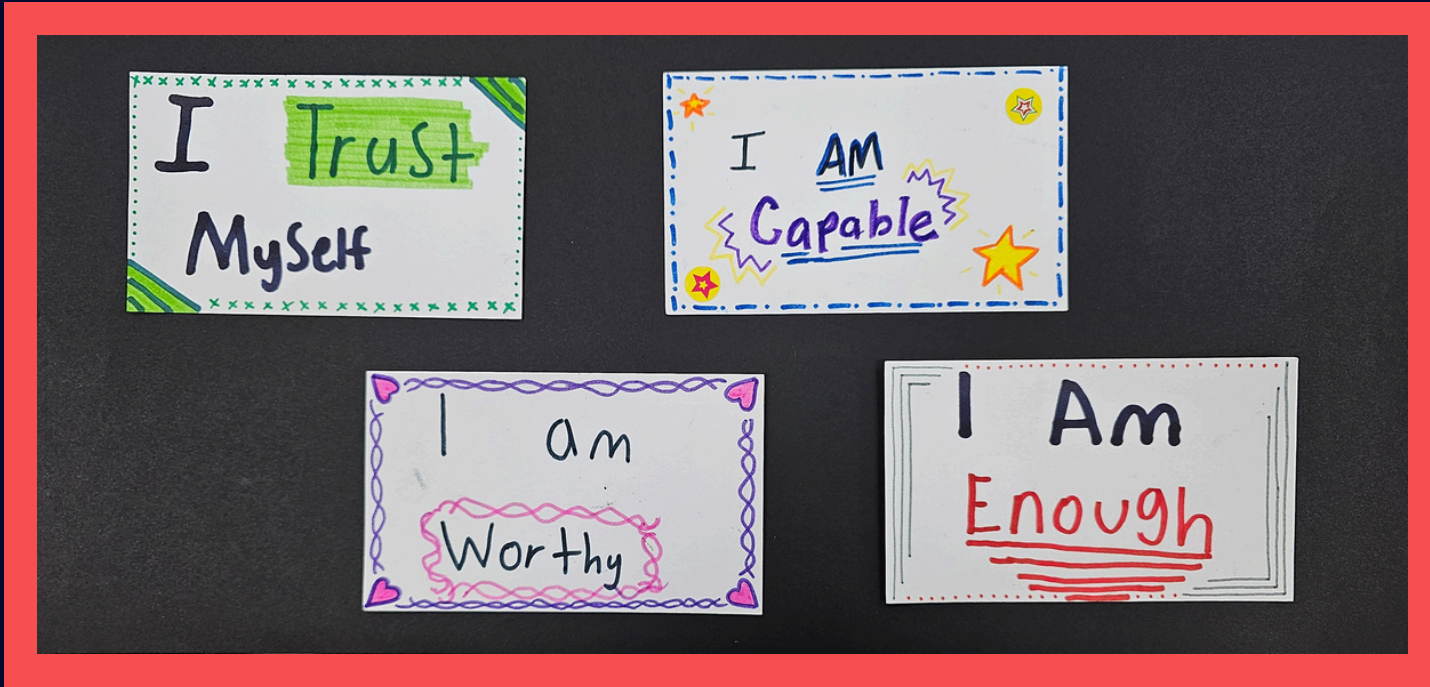
## Understanding Strengths

### Objective(s)/Goals

- Goals:
- To Identify individual strengths
- Objectives:
- Increase overall self-esteem.
  - Visualize and explore various aspects of their emotional life, personal values, and coping strategies.

### Intervention

### Positive Affirmations





# Topic 3

## Understanding Emotions

### Objective(s)/Goals

#### Goals:

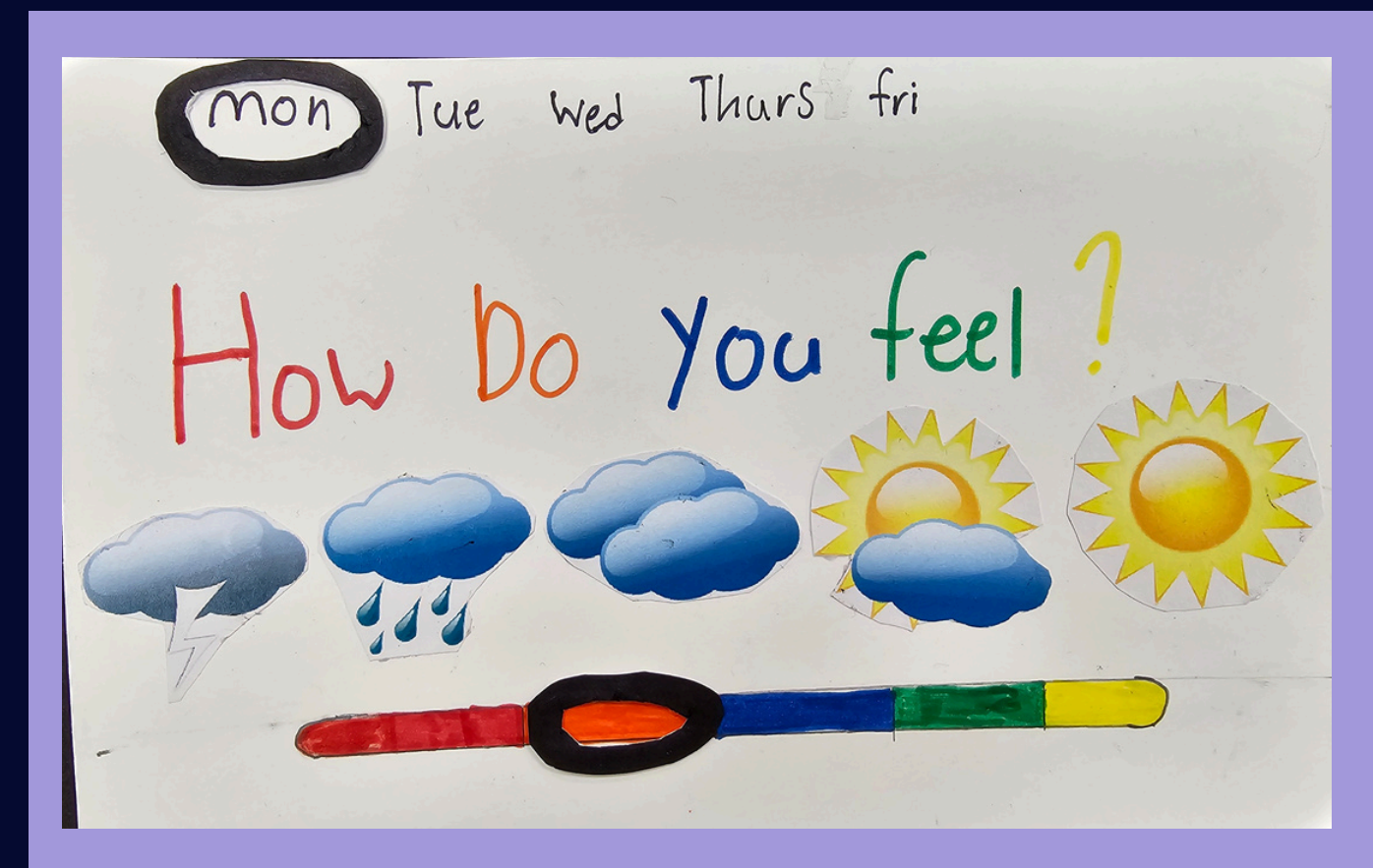
- Enhance emotional literacy through the use of emotion chart, to recognize and articulate emotions.

#### Objectives:

- Identify and understand emotions to communicate them to others.

### Intervention

### Emotion Chart





# Topic 3

## Understanding Emotions

### Objective(s)/Goals

#### Goals:

- Enhance emotional literacy to recognize and articulate emotions.

#### Objectives:

- Identify and understand emotions to communicate them to others.

### Intervention

### Emotion Landscape





# Topic 4

## Anxiety Mediator

### Objective(s)/Goals

#### Goals:

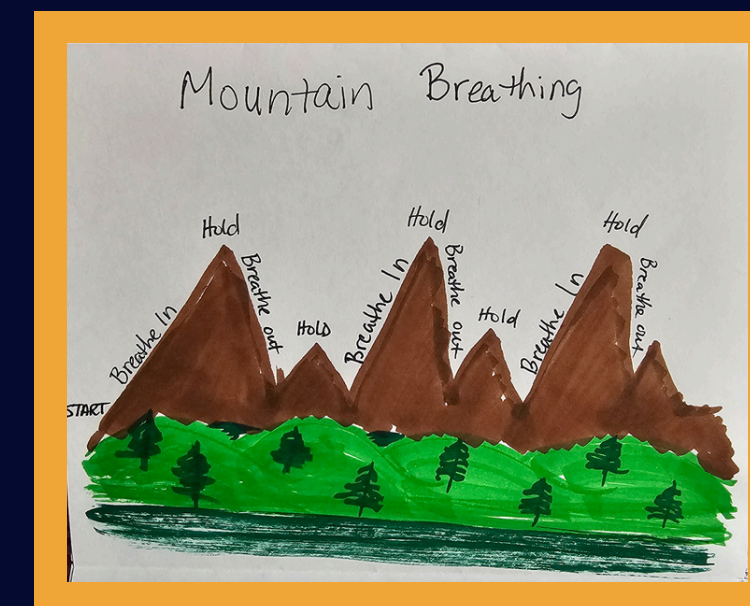
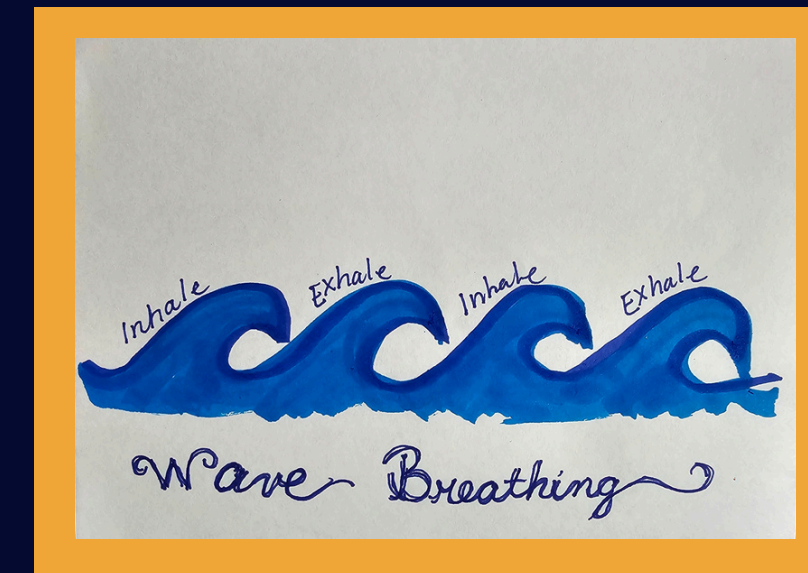
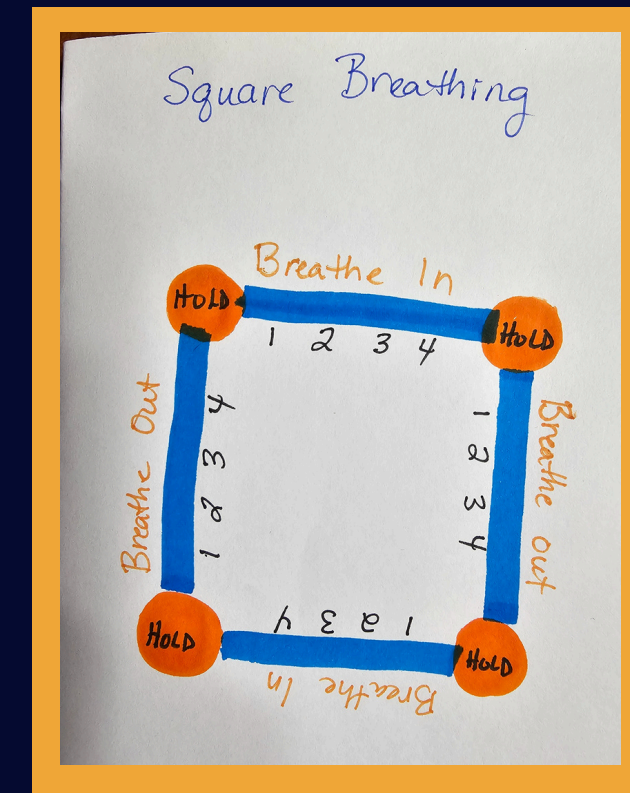
- Develop healthy coping strategies
- Reduce anxiety symptoms and manage worry

#### Objectives:

- Identify sensory triggers and communicate them to others.
- Identify and utilize at least 3 healthy coping mechanisms that are effective

### Intervention

### What Helps





# Topic 5 Future Self

## Objective(s)/Goals

### Goals:

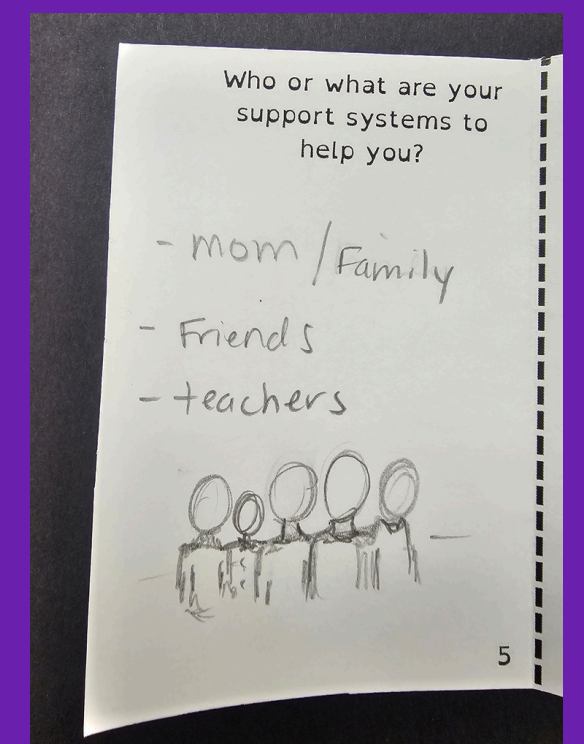
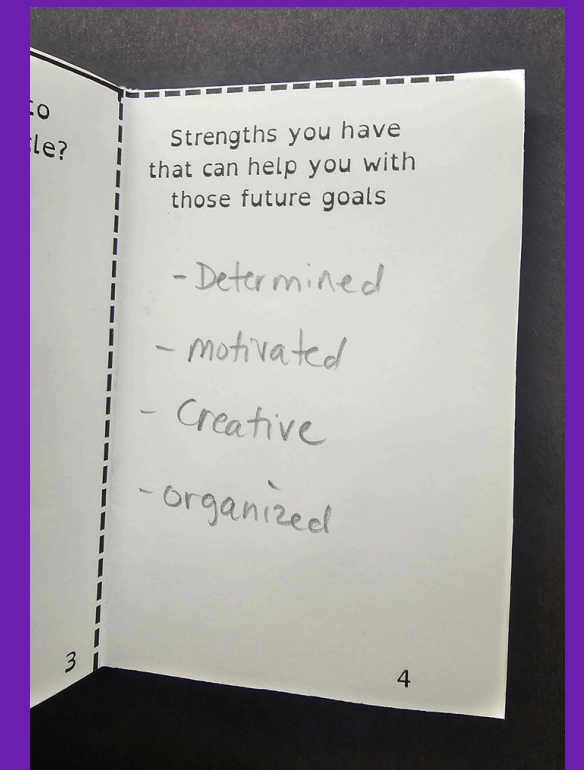
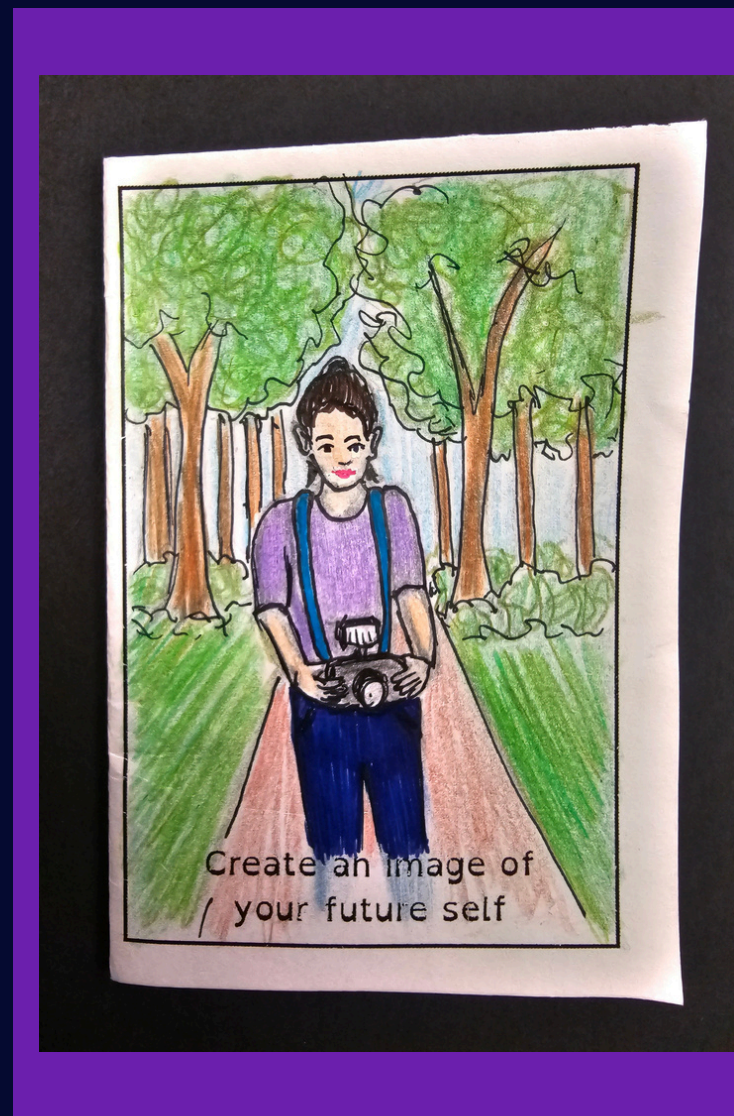
- Enhance self-awareness, improve emotional regulation, and foster a positive mindset.

### Objectives:

- Identify aspirations, develop actionable steps toward achieving them, and create a clearer vision of desired future.
- Foster positive emotions and reduce anxiety by visualizing success.

## Intervention

### Future Outlook: Manual





# Topic 6

## Personal Toolkit

### Objective(s)/Goals

#### Goals:

- Build resilience through focusing on strengths and coping strategies

#### Objectives:

- Utilize previous skills learned and apply them to future situations.

### Intervention

### Personal Toolkit








# Limitations & Future Research



- **Made for specific population**
    - Future could be adapting to meet the needs of others. Adapted for general ed population
    - Could be adapted for younger or older population
  - **Ideally written for a group**
    - better in group or individual
    - Future-What is a good number of clients?
  - **Resource guide for parents to support this curriculum**
  - **Could be adapted for shorter lengths of time**
  - **Theoretical**
    - has not been put into practice
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# Areas for Future Exploration

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- Important to continue to reinforce this to help this become a second nature/lean into it
- Making sure with in school or home this is also reinforced with other educators and parents.
- If in school-
  - IEP : can be brought into annual meeting in order to help client advocate
- Second part of curriculum
  - Personal metaphor
  - Social connections by building on existing strengths and interests
  - Building Community Awareness





# Final Thoughts

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- 21 years of working with adolescents in art education has given me the privilege of seeing where gaps are within my geographical area.
  - Over the years I have observed the changes in struggles with adolescents.
  - Mental health issues on the rise
  - IEP's on the rise
- This is only the beginning of what could have great potential.
- This curriculum is something that will change and adapt much like the adolescent population.
  - why flexibility is essential
  - needs to meet the needs of each individual





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Questions

