

Making sense of diabetes through art: Exploring emotional expression and adaptation in adolescents living with type 1 diabetes

Stephanie Savona Ventura

Adolescents living with Type 1 Diabetes Mellitus (T1DM) are required to navigate complex emotional, developmental, and identity-related challenges alongside the daily demands of illness management. While verbal methods remain central to psychological assessment and research, they may not fully capture the nuanced and embodied nature of adolescents' lived experiences. This study explores the use of artistic representation as a medium through which adolescents with T1DM express, reflect upon, and communicate their experiences of living with a chronic condition. Seventeen adolescents diagnosed with T1DM were invited to create an artwork representing their personal experience of the condition, followed by a narrative explanation of their drawing. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, analysis remained closely aligned with participants' own meanings, avoiding interpretative assumptions about the artwork itself. The findings highlight expressive art as a powerful facilitative process that supported emotional catharsis, reflection, and communication. Five key analytical categories emerged: (1) art-making as a cathartic emotional experience; (2) the use of colour to give form to emotions and lived experiences; (3) artistic representation as a reflective practice; (4) art as a means of communicating with others and fostering understanding; and (5) visual narratives of adaptation, growth, and acceptance. Participants depicted a wide emotional spectrum, including fear, sadness, anger, pride, resilience, and hope, while also illustrating the life-altering nature of diabetes, the importance of social support, and personal journeys toward self-acceptance. The visual outputs—ranging from monochrome depictions of isolation to vibrant symbols of growth and strength—offered insights that extended beyond verbal accounts alone. These findings suggest that incorporating art-based approaches within paediatric health psychology can enhance emotional expression, meaning-making, and relational understanding. Artistic methods may therefore represent a valuable adjunct to assessment and intervention when working with adolescents living with chronic illness.

Keywords: Type 1 Diabetes Mellitus; adolescents; chronic illness; art-based methods; emotional expression; constructivist grounded theory; illness experience; paediatric health psychology.

Stephanie Savona Ventura is a Health Psychology PhD candidate, lecturer at the University of Malta, and Health Psychologist at Mater Dei Hospital. Her work focuses on paediatric chronic illness, particularly adolescents and children living with Type 1 Diabetes, with a special interest in expressive art techniques to support emotional expression, coping, and psychological adjustment.