

LIVING AIDS



Creative Thinking

ART THERAPY IS SOMETHING THAT CAN BENEFIT EVERYONE'S HEALTH BY HELPING THEM REDISCOVER THEMSELVES, AS LEADING PRACTITIONER MALCOLM LEARMONTH EXPLAINS...

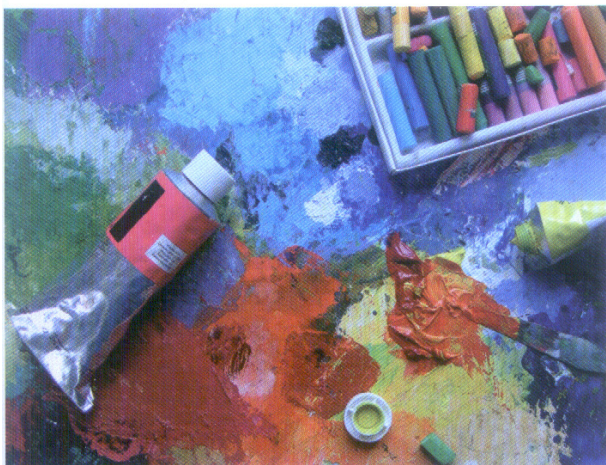
Art therapy is a method that works to alleviate psychological and emotional distress by using our instinct to create. To most of us, 'art' seems like a special thing that 'artists' do. But you only have to watch a child's natural and spontaneous use of art materials to express, explore and think aloud to see how instinctive it really is. Unfortunately, however, most of us have been taught, sometimes cruelly, that we aren't artists.

No special ability, or disability, is required to benefit from art therapy. Creativity can provide a welcome distraction, from pain for example, but imagination is more than just an escape: it's a big part of how we solve problems. Emotions can be powerfully expressed and powerfully contained by art work. Through art work, feelings can be seen, thought about and imagined differently.

Art therapists work with individuals and groups across a huge range of needs, from the simple health benefits of improving self esteem and creativity, to helping with deeper and more complex mental health problems like depression. The therapist's in depth knowledge of art making

and of psychology work together in art therapy to improve mental health, and ease distress.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that 'mental health' is something that applies to all of us. Incidence of depression, for instance, are high and rising: there is evidence that the economic cost of this approaches that of unemployment, on top of the human cost of desperate unhappiness. Even the most fulfilled life cannot avoid the losses, bereavements and anxieties that can affect any of us and art therapy really can help. One service user has reported: "I don't feel a prisoner of my depression any more. I can't tell you how much that means. I'd rather die than go through another dark time like the last one. But this has given me a new way of being...shown me a different way of coping with being me." Another user has testified, "I've had profound and lasting benefits from this work". (These views about the experience of the arts therapies are from clients at The Creative Therapies Service, Exeter, from interviews conducted by Sarah Bennet. 'When words are not enough', MSc research, University of Exeter School of Psychology, December 2001.)



Good relationships

Part of what gets these results is the therapist's training in making relationships with people. Therapeutic relationships are the key to effective psychological therapy, and this is recognised by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). Art therapists aim to work with people and not their labels. And because we are working with the creative and imaginative aspects of a person, as well the hurt and pain that often emerge through these mediums, art therapists can take advantage of their natural capabilities for expression and growth through art to help aid their patients.

At the moment there are over 1500 HPC registered art therapists in the UK, working in the NHS, the voluntary sector, Social Services, hospices, education and independently. Art therapy is recognised and regulated by the Health Professions Council, and qualified art therapists must have completed dual trainings both as artists and as psychotherapists. In addition, they are required to work within a code of practice and to maintain their levels of training to ensure a high standard of service is maintained.

A Personal Experience

Kathleen tells how creative therapy changed her life for the better..

By the time I arrived at art therapy I was at the point where I really felt like joining my dead mother. I'd had different kinds of help before, but trying to talk about what was going on in my life was not easy. Often there were weeks between appointments, and then it wasn't the same person. I remember cold plain rooms: not easy places to talk to a stranger. There was no consistency.

When I arrived at the Creative Therapies Service, it was different straight away. I felt like I was away from my life. It helped that it is in an old Gothic house with some wonderful trees around it. There was an old piano in the entrance. It felt welcoming.

The art room was full of pots of paint and brushes. The rooms and the building were so different from the institutional white rooms that they were a sort of therapy in themselves.

When I met my art therapist I was offered a cup of tea by a man wearing pink baseball boots and gratefully not a suit in sight! It was clear that the entrance to the building was not a doctor's waiting room, and that this was not a doctor. That made it easier for me to talk, to sit quietly and remember things and, often, to express things that I couldn't have talked about before. I made a lot of pictures, and I learned a lot about myself.

There was so much that I didn't know about my own life. I was confused. I grew up in Barnados Homes, and had terrible experiences of loss, of abuse and of not having a story that made sense to me. I had lots of very tangled up feelings, lots of shame, lots of abusive relationships. Sometimes I was really distressed and unhappy.

I think that being disabled when I was growing up meant that I, and a lot of others,

were treated like 'things', not people. It left me feeling unconfident, self harming, drinking and vulnerable. Sometimes I felt trapped in a useless 'thing' - myself.

It has taken me a long time to get the confidence I have now. I can speak up for myself better now and work as a trainer on disability issues. The therapy has helped me to get my self-respect back. Through the words and pictures, and having someone to listen and help me to make sense of it all, I'm not ashamed any more. Sometimes feelings come up that are still hard to deal with, but I don't drink or harm myself or anyone else. I feel like I know who I am now, where I've been and where I've come from.

It was very hard for me to trust a therapist: I've had some really bad experiences of people who were supposed to look after me or 'help' in the past. I'm still easily angered by the 'Authorities'! Now I'm, ready to challenge them!

My therapist had to work quite hard at times. I'd get really angry and upset and not have the words to talk about why. It still happens sometimes, but that is where the paint really comes in. A lot of my paintings weren't pretty at all: this wasn't about 'art' or pretty pictures. It was about my life, about how it really was, and about how overwhelming my feelings could be.

Making art let me express myself fully. Working with an art psychotherapist helped me contain, make sense of my feelings, and to get my story back. I wish more people who experience the kinds of distress and disturbance that I did could get this help. I don't think the mental health needs of people with disabilities are taken seriously enough, and art therapy is one way that it could be.



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'I THINK IT'S REALLY IMPORTANT THAT THE POWERS THAT BE GET TO KNOW HOW GOOD THESE SORTS OF THERAPIES ARE FOR PEOPLE'

People who can benefit from art therapy come in all shapes, colours and sizes, with many different experiences, beliefs, hopes, fears, abilities and disabilities. People with a disability in particular often complain of being seen entirely in terms of their difference, as though they are their disability. Both art making and therapy can help build confidence and autonomy, resilience, and a sense of ourselves as valuable, resourceful, creative and choice-making individuals.

The first task of the art therapist is to help someone start making art, although often it's best to forget all about 'art' and all the associations the word has! Art therapy isn't like a watercolour class: there is no sense of having to be 'good at it', or that what is made will be compared and judged. Clay, paint and drawing materials are used much more spontaneously and playfully than in a 'class' situation. Once people have got confidence they are frequently astonished by what they make, not just because they are often powerful and moving images, but because of the stories that the pictures tell.

The art therapist's job isn't to find twenty clever things to say about what people make or say: it is more about having twenty interesting ways of starting a conversation with someone about how their image looks, what it says to them, what memories it holds, and what might happen next. In this way the pictures and words often build together to create a much stronger sense of our stories, reminding us who we are and how we got to be that way. In fact, the aims of psychotherapy have been summed up as achieving a story about our life that makes sense to us; being able to deal with how we feel about that story, however happy or sad it is, and to increase our sense of a meaningful life with choices.

Inner strength

In 20 years working as an art therapist, I am increasingly amazed, not by people's emotional and psychological vulnerability, even in the face of great suffering, but by their courage, resilience, adaptability and creativity, regardless of the label they feel they carry. It is sometimes almost magical how moments of creative insight can change lives. Recently I was working with a young woman with a profound eating disorder. She tended to think

in terms of unhelpfully rigid opposites: up or down, black or white, good or bad, fat or thin. One day I watched as she very thoughtfully painted the top of piece of paper deep black, then tentatively used white to allow greys to emerge below. Towards the bottom of the paper yellow tones appeared. It felt like watching a dawn come up. Eventually she said 'Maybe if I can stand the greys for long enough I do begin to get some colour'. What most onlookers would see on the paper would probably not look like much, but what I saw was someone working out a different way of understanding herself and her life in an astonishingly creative way.

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020 7686 4216 and the Health Professions Council (HPC) www.hpc-uk.org**

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