

'Creative Thinking.' Malcolm Learmonth/ Kathleen Gibson.

An overview of Art Therapy, written for 'Disability Products News' and published February 2007. Reproduced by kind permission, and downloaded from insiderart.org.uk

Art therapy is a method working with psychological and emotional distress by using the 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 what a natural thing it really is. Unfortunately 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, for example, from pain. But imagination is more than just an escape: it's a big part of how we solve problems. Feelings can be powerfully expressed, and powerfully contained, by art work. Through art work, feelings can be seen, thought about and imagined differently.

As a psychological therapy art therapy has all the advantages of a 'talking cure', with the added benefits of art making. It is recognised and regulated by the Health Professions Council. (Registered art therapists can be found on the HPC website <http://www.hpc-uk.org>). Art therapists must have completed dual trainings as artists and as psychotherapists, work within a code of practice, and maintain their levels of training.

There are over 1500 HPC registered art therapists in the UK, working in the NHS, the voluntary sector, Social Services, hospices, education and independently. (The British Association of Art Therapists web site is a good place to find out more. <http://www.baat.org>).

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. In depth knowledge of art

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

‘Mental Health’ applies to all of us. Incidence of depression for instance is 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. Yet even the most fulfilled life cannot avoid the losses, bereavements and anxieties that can affect the mental health of any of us. And art therapy really can help:

‘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’.

‘There have been enormous changes in how I cope nowI don’t think realistically I could have hoped for much more from it’.

‘I’ve had profound and lasting benefits from this work’.

‘I think it’s really important that the powers that be get to know how good these sorts of therapies are for people’

(These service user 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.)

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 seem to be particularly good at working with **people** and not their **labels**. And because we are working with the creative and imaginative aspects of a person, as well as the hurt or troubled ones, art therapists are working with natural capacities for expression and growth.

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People come in all shapes, colours and sizes, with all sorts of experiences, beliefs, cultures, hopes, fears, abilities and disabilities. People with disabilities of all kinds 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.

Often the first task of the art therapist is to help someone start making 'art.' Often it's best to forget all about 'art'! 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 having 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, about what it says to them, about what memories it holds, about what might happen next....

In this way the pictures and words often build together into a much stronger sense of our **stories**: about who we are, and how we got to be that way. The aims of psychotherapy have been summed up as achieving a story about our life that makes sense to us, and being able to deal with how we feel about that story, however happy or sad, or usually mixed, it is. To have a sense of a meaningful life, with choices.

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 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**

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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 you would see on the paper would not look like much: just some colours. But what I saw was someone working out a different way of understanding herself and her life in an astonishingly creative way.

About the Author.

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A Service User View of Art Therapy
Kathleen Gibson:

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. Trying to talk about what was going on in my life was not easy. Often there was weeks between appointments, and then it wasn't the same person. I remember cold plain rooms: not easy places to talk to a stranger if you are being beaten or cutting yourself. 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 on 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 themselves.

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When I met my art therapist I was offered a cup of tea by a man wearing pink baseball boots and not a suit! 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, of children's homes, 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 want to challenge them though!

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.

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Making art let me express and 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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