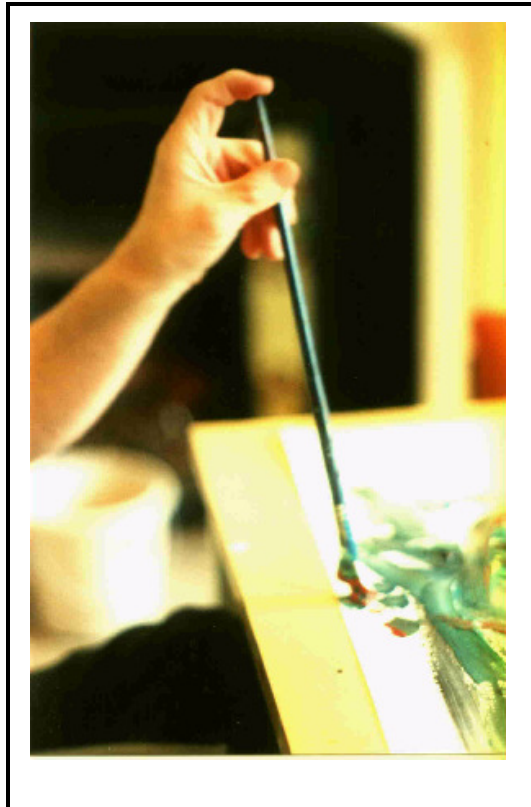


## Why Art Psychotherapy Makes Sense.



The workshop you have taken part in today is intended to have helped you to 'teach yourself' a few key things about Art Therapy/ Art Psychotherapy works. In particular, you'll hopefully have had some experience of how unique any persons images are, how this is linked with issues of identity and self esteem, how images are natural springboards for stories and conversations, how images are a different kind of language to words, and how what they 'mean' is a conversation, not a fixed 'thing'. This handout is intended to give you a reminder of these factors, and to give further information, evidence, ideas and contacts.

### **Art Psychotherapy is based on these principles:**

- Developmentally, image 'language' comes before verbal language. Play, metaphoric and symbolic thinking seem to be universal human behaviours, and have a powerful adaptive advantage as problem solving strategies.

- Art making helps people to tell their stories, express themselves, contain feelings, improve self esteem, and find new solutions to old problems, in other words to improve the 'Autobiographical Competence' and 'Affective Processing' identified by Holmes as the aims of psychotherapy. Making images means going between being very involved with them and standing back. This can help people find new ways of dealing with feelings. Therapeutic art making develops and models emotional regulation.
- Art Psychotherapy is part of a spectrum of opportunities making links between art and health. No one owns the creative part of human nature. But there are real skills involved in maximising these benefits where there is deep distress or disturbance. Art Therapists are trained to do this. Art Therapy Training is two years full time postgraduate level. Most courses now award an MA, M.Phil., or MSc. Arts Therapies trainings are virtually the only health service professional training not financially supported by the DoH or Workforce Confederations.
- Pictures don't have a set 'meaning' that therapists secretly or openly 'interpret'. Pictures are really helpful parts of conversations, often seen as a three way conversation between client, image and therapist, from which meaning emerges. One of the beauties of images is that they can 'mean' many things simultaneously. Working with this improves cognitive fluidity, and often brings into question negative core beliefs.
- These factors work best when there is a helping relationship with someone who is: experienced in art making, (nearly all art psychotherapists were artists first), aware of its psychological and emotional implications, and understands therapeutic relationships.
- Art making can go very deep, and at times be distressing. This particularly likely where trauma is part of the picture. It is much easier to open distress and disturbance up with art making than it is to know how to stay with and resolve it.
- Many people have had very unpleasant and humiliating experiences around making art, often at school. Reintroducing adults to art making is a skill in itself. It is regular feature of Art Therapy that clients surprise themselves with what they can do, given the right kind of safe and supportive environments and relationships.
- Art making can also be some of the best fun you can have.
- Art making as therapy can be a safe place to practice taking risks and making mistakes, learning new skills, tolerating anxiety and 'not knowing', engaging the imagination, and see things from different perspectives. It often produces spontaneous 're framing'.
- Art Psychotherapy is often a 'referral of last resort'. Art Psychotherapists frequently succeed in engaging effectively with some of the most 'difficult' clients in the services.

- Image making can be unpredictable. Sometimes the images do what we want, and sometimes they do what they want! This helps to practice being all right with what can and can't change, as well as an ideal experiment in self acceptance.

### **SOME BACKGROUND.**

- Art Therapy has been developing for over 60 years. The term was coined by Adrian Hill in 1944. The terms 'Art Therapy' and 'Art Psychotherapy' are used interchangeably.
- Art Therapists are working with mental health, learning disability, palliative care, victims of torture, in schools, hospitals, prisons and the community. There are about 1500 State Registered Art Therapists in the UK at the moment.
- Art Therapy (along with Drama Therapy and Music Therapy) are the only approaches to psychotherapy that have legally based public protection built in: enforceable training standards, code of practice and ethics, and ongoing training and supervision for therapists. The Arts Therapies are regulated by the Health Professions Council. [www.hpc-uk.org](http://www.hpc-uk.org)
- Art Therapy originated in very much the same perception that the arts are good for health as the arts/ health movement active today. It developed into a particular, and different form of addressing mental health issues, because the artists who became art therapists felt the need to be more psychologically informed about the kinds of distress and disturbance that they were encountering, and turned to psychotherapy for models for this. Particularly important as Art Therapy evolved have been Jung, Winnicott, and Bowlby, amongst many others.
- Often the art work made in art therapy feels very private. Sometimes it feels good to share it. People, situations, and images are all unique. It is out of respect for this individuality, right to privacy, and sometimes vulnerability and distress, that Art Therapists have to work very sensitively with their painters about the differences between a private art, like a diary, and a public one, like a poem. This necessity, and the requirements of confidentiality, often makes Art Therapy seem 'invisible' compared to the bigger, brighter, more public aspects of arts/health projects.
- Art Therapy is very highly valued by service users. A recent 'Mind' survey of several thousand service users found that it was experienced as 'very useful' by over 80% of the people offered it. The Exeter research with this handout seems to confirm this. Research and evidence are being gathered apace. 'Handbook of Enquiry in the Arts Therapies: One River, Many Currents' (Helen Payne, Jessica Kingsley, 1993), sums up the evidence at that

point, and 'Art, Science and Art Therapy' (Frances Kaplan, Jessica Kingsley, 2000) also has useful evidence.

### **Service user views on art therapy.**

'I got so much benefit ..real lasting benefits that I've been able to carry on with on my own, like a new way of doing things and different methods of coping. I think I got more from it than I ever thought possible'

'I really feel that doing this has given me a lot more tools to deal with the things I need to deal with'.

'It's had a profound impact. I consider this to be the most successful thing that has happened to me in my mental health history. I've taken away what I did here and use it'.

'In the midst of what has been for me the shambolic mental health services, this has been my light'.

'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'.

'I think its really important that the powers that be get to know how good these sorts of therapies are for people'

These 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.

**For further information about Art Psychotherapy and a downloadable information pack, visit The British Association of Art Therapists website, [www. baat.org](http://www.baat.org)**

Malcolm Learmonth and Karen Huckvale are HPC registered Art Psychotherapists with, respectively, The Creative Therapies Service, and Child and Adolescent Services, Devon Partnership NHS Trust. They teach at Exeter and Plymouth Universities, and work together as 'Insider Art' offering Art Psychotherapy and training, supervision and consultancy across the Arts & Health field. They also organise the Exeter Arts and Therapies conferences.

[insiderart@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:insiderart@blueyonder.co.uk) [www.insiderart.org.uk](http://www.insiderart.org.uk)

**Insider Art, PO Box 272, St. Thomas, Exeter, EX2 9ZL. 01392 677258**

