

Art Therapy: Reconnecting with the Creative Self

by Jen Vivian, BFA, MA

The questions I get the most when I tell people that I am an art therapist is “What is that?”, sometimes followed by “...are you a therapist for artists?” and inevitably “I am no good at art, I can’t even draw a straight line..” or a barrage of other negative self talk. This speaks to a person’s core belief about their ability to express themselves using art. In this article, my goal is to explain a little about what art therapy is, what art therapy isn’t and how creative expression can be used to help promote overall wellness.

What is art therapy? Art Psychotherapy and Art as therapy

Art Psychotherapy

The Canadian Association of Creative Arts Therapists define art therapy in the following way: “Art therapy combines the creative process and psychotherapy, facilitating self-exploration and understanding. Using imagery, colour and shape as part of this creative therapeutic process, thoughts and feelings can be expressed that would otherwise be difficult to articulate.” (<http://www.canadianarttherapy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/CATA-ACAT-Fact-Sheet-1.pdf>)

The role of the art therapist in art psychotherapy is to demonstrate how art materials work and to act as a guide for the client to start to explore and understand their own personal imagery and ways of using creative expression. This can allow for the client to work on deeper, possibly unconscious issues through the use of metaphor. Usually the art therapist works in a non-directive way, but occasionally art directives may be given. This type of art psychotherapy would generally take place in a setting where there would be privacy for the client/clients to allow for confidentiality and for the full immersion into the art psychotherapy process. Art psychotherapy should always only be facilitated by a trained art therapist.

Art psychotherapy is particularly useful for clients who:

- have experienced trauma or are experiencing PTSD
- have experienced abuse
- are children who are experiencing difficulties at home or in foster care

- are experiencing depression or anxiety
- are experiencing behavior or emotional issues
- are undergoing prolonged medical treatment
- have experienced loss or are coping with grief

Art as therapy

Art therapy that does not take a psychodynamic approach is sometimes referred to as art as therapy. This approach to art therapy focuses more on the therapeutic value of the act of creative expression itself. Meaning that the very act of expressing oneself through creative art materials may help improve emotional, physical, spiritual and mental well being. Again, the art therapist may act as a guide, demonstrating how to use art materials. In general, more directive art making approaches are used that the art therapist has determined would be beneficial for the client.

Art as therapy is particularly useful for clients who:

- have been diagnosed with Alzheimers or dementia
- experience depression, anxiety and panic attacks
- are on the Autism spectrum
- are looking for a pain management tool
- have a diagnosis of ADHD
- are looking for stress reduction and wellness techniques for self-care

Again, art as therapy should be facilitated by a trained art therapist who has knowledge of the best materials and techniques for each client’s needs.

Art therapy may be offered to individuals, groups or to a wider community through an open studio. There are as many different approaches to art therapy as there are art therapists and the key if you are interested in seeing an art therapist for your own healing, is to find one whose approach resonates with you. It is through the therapeutic relationship and creative expression that you set yourself up for therapeutic success.

What materials are used?

Art therapists present a wide variety of materials which people may use. These

can include: markers, pencils, charcoal, color pencils, pastels, paint (watercolor, acrylic), plasticine, playdough, clay, pipecleaners, beads, fabric, paper, tissue paper, recyclables and puppets and toys. An art therapist may choose different materials depending on who they are working with. For example, an art therapist who works mainly with children may have more toys than an art therapist who works with soldiers who are dealing with PTSD.

What art therapy is not.

Most adults with whom I have worked can recall a moment in their childhood when their artistic skill was valued or devalued by a respected adult. The effects of the devaluing of a child’s creative expression through art can have lasting detrimental effects. Most notably, turning a person off creative expression through art materials well into their adult life. The danger with this is that it deprives them an outlet for self expression, self care and healing that could and should be a valuable life skill. Instead, all too often, there is an emphasis on artistic ability at a young age, rather than an emphasis on artistic expression. Art therapy **never focuses on artistic ability**, but rather, on the process of creating, of using creative play and experimentation to explore areas of oneself that may otherwise remain hidden.

Art therapists **do not interpret** the meaning of a clients artwork. The meaning behind the creative expression is for the client to explore, and this meaning may change over time. Clients are often encouraged to look back at past artworks to explore meanings that may have been overlooked immediately after the artwork was complete.

Art therapy **does not focus on the art product** but rather on the process of art making as a therapeutic tool for wellness and growth.

How creative expression can be used to help promote overall wellness?

To fully experience the benefits of art therapy, it is recommended to see a trained art therapist who has a background in both art making and psychology. There are three institutions in Canada where

art therapists are trained: The Vancouver Art Therapy Institute, The Toronto Art therapy Institute, St. Stephens College and Concordia University. The Canadian Art Therapy Association is the regulatory body for art therapists in Canada who has outlined the code of ethics for art therapists nationwide. You can find the code of ethics as well as a list of art therapists by region on their website: <http://www.canadianarttherapy.org/>

Many art therapists also belong to the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association as well as the Nova Scotia College of Counselling Therapists here in Nova Scotia.

Creative expression may still be used to promote overall wellness outside of art therapy. I believe that the very act of dedicating some time to creative play and expression has many benefits. These may include reducing stress, improving self esteem and self-exploration.

Here are some of my suggested guidelines to benefit from art making at home:

- **Have a dedicated space for art-making, it could be the kitchen table, or a sketchbook or any place where you feel comfortable and inspired.**
- **Use materials that you enjoy. The dollar store is a great source for some quick art materials. Make sure to choose materials that you get excited about.**
- **Pay attention to your inner voice. Try to silence your inner critic and approach making art in a non-judgemental way. It is a time for creative play.**
- **Spend some time (even 5 minutes) reflecting on the art that you created when you are finished.**
- **Have fun!**

Jen Vivian is a trained art therapist who completed her Master of Arts degree in Creative Art Therapy at Concordia University in Montreal in 2013. Jen lives and works in Cape Breton. Jen is a member of the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association and the Canadian Art Therapy Association.



For previous The Well Teacher articles, go to www.nstu.ca

Click on ► Communications ► NSTU Publications ► The Teacher ► The Well Teacher