

May 10, 2020

Express Your Heart

Expressive Art Therapy Techniques

Why use arts and crafts when we are working on serious stuff in therapy right? Well, I'm glad you asked. Allow me to paint the picture of Art healing through some quick facts and creative learning. Expressive arts include activities such as dancing, drawing, drama, creative writing, painting, poetry, making music, sculpting, and photography. As a Cognitive Behavioral Therapist who uses Expressive Art techniques with clients, I began to use "outside of the box" techniques when working with a room full of teenage boys at a mental health behavioral facility, whom mostly believed the only emotion they had to offer was anger. Now, imagine the room: We have the "too-cool-for-feelings," the "macho aggressors," the "emotionally drained," the victims of bullying and the "I'm not telling these people my business" guys, whom all struggle with mental diagnosis and/or substance use. Do you really think all of them were open to talking out loud and possibly let the next person know that he could be vulnerable or actually feel sad, that something in life happened that intimidated him, that if he did speak, he may start crying? Nope, because then the fear of judgement related to his idea of "manhood" is questioned just because he is human and has feelings. Out of desperation to have some therapeutic growth within the group of boys, and to reach them in a way they would understand that they have emotions preceding anger, I stopped talking, and we started creating!

"The use of art for healing and mastery is at least as old as the drawings on the walls of caves" (Aron-Rubin, 2005, p. 6). The first picture that the boys drew was the picture below:



I used the picture above as their first reference for personal freehand drawing. The boys listened to meditation music while they drew. During the process, each of them sat quietly in their own individual spaces, but without knowingly, was practicing group cohesion and meditation. Expressive arts have long been used with children to promote psychological health and social support. They offer children "A way to express their feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and memories in ways that words cannot" (Malchiodi, 2005, p. 9). The art experience alone bonded a group of people who all were so different, but only had one agenda; to take deep breaths and create. As I am certified in Mindfulness practices, I encourage client's to be mindful of the experience of expressive arts as it is a time to reflect and be aware of your emotions, but give themselves permission to release and not dwell. The process of restoration and healing is just as important as the process was to trauma.

Art and Brainwork: Although art is a human form of expression, specifically expressive art techniques has been shown to help adolescents increase self awareness and reduce anxiety and depression symptoms. When children participate in expressive arts, the parasympathetic system in their brain is alerted (Lane, 2005). This area of the brain impacts slower breaths, lower blood pressure, and the body becomes more relaxed. Then, the physiological symptoms, anxiety and hyperarousal, and fight-or-flight responses are altered due to them being related to stress. The brain develops, from the bottom up and from the inside out, which means different areas of the brain are impacted during trauma depending on the age of the child. The younger a child is during the trauma, the more necessary it is to stimulate specific neuropathways to the brain that promote healthy development (Lane, 2005).



Art and Healing Trauma: Trauma is often stored in our memories as images, sensations, and symbols(Perry, 2009). Think of trauma being stored as a form of art, which is why sometimes, talk therapy, especially for adolescents, is difficult to form experiences into words. Sometimes, those images are too painful to even visualize in our conscious minds. Art techniques will meet trauma where it exists in the brain to help improve awareness of experiences and create new art memories as a way of healing past and current pain.

Quick fact: For many children and adults imprisoned in German concentration camps during World War II, drawings and paintings were used to cope with the horrors they saw each day. Painting and poetry were a way for them to survive and cope.

Back to the group therapy experience with the boys. Of course, once the therapeutic drawing experience was completed, some of them wanted to see who's drawing looked better. Instead of making the experience a competition, I went to each of them individually to hear their thoughts and feelings related to their perception of imagery to avoid group processing. Starting off, I did individual processing to have them each become comfortable with being aware with their emotions and communicating their feelings.

Eventually, they were open to group processing, without judgement or feelings of inferiority, that they were doing art work and creative expression. Their experience of creative expression normalized their perceptions of pain or growth during each experience. We led up to activities such as yoga, music and song processing, drumming, role play, interactive games and prompt writing.

The moral is, art pushes our brain to connect and heal. The consistency of their new found coping skill became a part of their day they looked forward to. They even began to brag on how their unit's overall aggression began to decrease. Some of them began to use their feeling words when processing their art out loud in front of others, which allowed more emotional intelligence in their individual therapeutic goals. Expressive art skills art for the human race, not just those teen boys. Allow yourself to check out and create when feeling you have nothing else to give. Imagine, vision, draw, and create your outcome!

Daneshia Simmons, MS, NCC, CFTP
Registered Mental Health Counselor
Intern, IMH19215

(901) 283-5615

lifescapeinfoDS@protonmail.com



References

- Aron-Rubin, J. (2005). Child art therapy. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Lane, M. (2005). Creativity and spirituality in nursing: implementing art in healing. *Holistic Nursing Practice*, 19(3), 122-125.
- Perry, B. (2009). Examining child maltreatment through a neurodevelopmental lens: clinical applications of the neurosequential model of therapeutics. *Journal of Loss & Trauma*, 14(4), 240-255.