

Session VIB

Fresh Expressions: Art Therapy Interventions

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Art and expressive therapies offer restorative potential for allowing patients and clients to process emotion and bring meaning to their experiences. Non-verbal approaches focus on drawing out primal emotions and creativity in a patient to achieve therapeutic goals in those who may have limited vocabulary or skills to communicate deep-seated issues. This provides a safe outlet for expressing thoughts and emotions to successfully facilitate recovery from psychological distress.

Although art therapy is gaining respect and a higher profile, misperceptions persist. It is not, for example, mainly for children. Art therapy can be valuable for patients of all ages and with a wide variety of complaints, including learning disabilities, substance abuse, and depression. Nor do patients need any particular talent or experience — it's the process, the act of creation, not the end product, that's beneficial. And art therapy has a growing scientific foundation. Several journals regularly publish studies bolstering the field's validity. One favorable scientific avenue is the work of leading researchers in the field of trauma and memory. Such research points to the importance of the hippocampus, the part of the brain that links the memory of an experience with the time and location that the event occurred. During prolonged or severe stress, the functioning of the hippocampus can be suppressed. If this happens, the memories of the trauma may be stored instead on preverbal, sensorimotor, and perceptual levels, without any context in time or space.

To access those memories, the art therapist removes the need for words. By drawing, painting or sculpting, the victim can express the trauma nonverbally and metaphorically, even if the person has no explicit memory of it. Moreover, expressing memories nonverbally, which is a right-brain activity, may later allow the person to recall it explicitly and talk about it, which is a left-brain activity. This integration of the two hemispheres, as well as the connection between mind and body that occurs during the act of making art, can repair the fragmentation that often follows trauma.

Remember these above all!

Breaks through verbal defenses

Process vs. Product!!

Art-making puts people in the moment

Art tells the truth

Accesses pre-verbal experiences

Avoid interpretation! Artist is the expert