

parenting matters

art therapy



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By Sharon A. Stirling, MA, CAGS, LRC

Art therapy is a highly effective technique that facilitates growth and change in people. Art therapy does not require art ability in the traditional sense. In fact, if an individual is an accomplished artist, he or she may be asked to use his or her non-dominant hand.

Art therapy is a communication vehicle less amenable to our conscious control. Unexpected issues arise which can lead to valuable insights.

A wide variety of art therapies exist. These variations may include drawing or using clay or paint. Also, it is important to let the client explain the work rather than have the therapist try to interpret. However, the therapist may draw inferences about the work for the process of determining a client's inner state. Art therapists question in a neutral way – “what is this green object?” rather than “is that a snake?”

When interacting with the client in trying to bring forth processing, the therapist might ask open-ended questions like, “what mood does this suggest to you?” rather than saying, “it looks bleak doesn't it?” Lastly, confidentiality is extended to the art product. The goal is the process NOT the creation of the product.

The use of art therapy is versatile



enough to be used with groups. Traditional psychotherapy has been thought of as “talking therapy”, primarily using the auditory sensory modality for interacting with the client. Yet, sensory modalities—dance and movement, music therapy, therapy using photography, various forms of art therapy—have been developed around our primary senses: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting. Reportedly, 50 percent of our cerebral cortex is devoted to visual functions. It is more effective to learn by using more than one sensory modality. This concept lies in the body of research called dualcoding. The effectiveness of working memory is enhanced with a dual-mode presentation of material rather than a single mode. In the therapeutic process, we want our clients to remember prior insights, facts, feelings, and thoughts in order to build towards a state of healing and healthier functioning.

Another type of art therapy is interactive art therapy. These exercises are highly structured as opposed to free-style creating. An example of a more structured exercise might be to have a client create a list of goals, then draw a brick wall and write on each brick the barriers that prevent the success in achieving the goals.

Art therapy can be used for a variety of different clients with differing issues. Since, the 1950's, art therapy has been

used with children with disabilities. This modality is particularly effective with clients that have limited verbal skills. Art therapy can lessen anxiety and client resistance to psychotherapy. It can help children process a traumatic event. Children may lack the words to process the trauma.

Art is a form of expression which can help discharge the negative effects of a traumatic event- a divorce, death, or any loss. For adolescents, it can soften the brittle attitude towards seeing a counselor and make therapy approachable and fun.

Art therapy is a very important part of the treatment of client's with eating disorders. Most of the literature seems to point to this modality as particularly helpful to this population because of some unique factors. Evidence suggests that art therapy with an anorexic client fosters expression in verbal psychotherapy and provides a neutral space that is tangible and has concrete boundaries. This approach may be particularly valuable to the anorexic client who often has difficulties in recognizing their own boundaries, both physical and psychological.

People with addictive problems often use verbalization to cover up denial and therefore it is not authentic communication. Whereas, art therapy is truthful and always communicates. With art production, there is visual content

which is conscious and other material which is unconscious. It is in the use of the page, or area enclosed, it is the colors used, the vigor of application, size and location of the items in the work. It not only resides in the description of what the picture portrays, but in the meaning of the whole production.

There is strong evidence that art used in therapy tends to accelerate client's progress.

The value of art therapy cannot be overstated. In some ways, the process of creating can be, in itself, therapeutic. Art therapy has a rich history and has been used with diverse populations over time with little contraindications.

Sharon Stirling has a private practice on Lexington where she sees children and adults individually, as well as in groups. She holds a Masters Degree in Psychotherapy and has gone on to complete two additional years of study to earn a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies in Mental Health Counseling. In addition, Ms. Stirling has extensive university training and certification in Eating Disorders.

She has successfully used art and other creative therapies with a variety of clients and she also integrates her 12 lb dog into some therapy sessions. Ms. Stirling has a 25 year old son. She can be reached at Lexington Health Collaborative (781)862-0898 Ext. 1.



ParentingMatters columns are not intended as a substitute for therapy. If your child is experiencing problems, seek help from your pediatrician or a child psychologist or psychiatrist.

resource guide

HUMAN SERVICES DEPT.

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Charlotte Rodgers, Rn, Ma

Director Of Human Services

Emily Lavine, LICSW

Asst. Director Of Human Services

781-861-0194

Laurie Henry, LICSW

Asst. Director Of Youth Services

781-861-2742

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781-862-1212

Christina Demambro:

Family Services Detective

Tammy Duffy

School And Community Resource Officer- Elementary/middle School

781-862-1212

Jim Rettman

School And Community Resource Officer- High School

781-862-1212

LEXINGTON FIRE DEPT

Main #: 781-862-0272

Tim Johnson

Juvenile Firesetter Caseworker/ screener

781-862-0272

LEXINGTON RECREATION DEPT

781-862-0500

LexPRESS:

Gail Wagner

781-861-1210

LEXINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS:

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Linda Chase

Director Of Student Services

781-861-2580 X 231

Les Eggleston

Director Of Guidance

781-861-2320 X 1561

Julie Fenn

Substance Abuse Prevention Specialist

781-861-2320 X 6080

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(781)860-0570

DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN & FAMILIES

ARLINGTON OFFICE

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