Healing Through Creating: Art Therapy

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HEALING THROUGH CREATING: ART THERAPY

By Joanne Rowley and Rachel Comisari

Most people cringe at the thought of having to draw or paint a picture. "I can’t draw" and, "I will never be able to express myself through art", are typically how many of us react when first confronted with the challenge.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the experiences of an art therapy group. It will specifically focus on the transformational processes witnessed where mental health clients moved from an initial resistance to an enthusiasm and desire to attend sessions.

Art as a therapy is increasingly being used in therapeutic communications and supplementing talking therapies (Uttley et al. 2015). The formalisation of art therapy in mental illness began to emerge during the middle of the 20th century. Practitioners noticed individuals suffering from a mental illness often expressed themselves in drawings and other artworks which progressed to the use of art as a healing strategy.

The art therapy program setting for this discussion is in a regional coastal town. Weekly art therapy groups were held and the program was open to people with a mental health issue. The group consisted of up to 20 clients, was semi-structured with minimal rules excluding safety considerations and offered lunch and refreshments.

Music was an integral part of the sessions and guitars were available for those who chose to express musically. Clients often moved between the art supplies and the musical instruments, in particular young men.

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Art therapy is a creative process of making art with an aim to express feelings, realise repressed emotions and develop personal growth. The unique opportunity that art therapy provides for non-verbal communication to occur, allows clients to express their feelings safely. The medium may assist people to cope better with stress, improve judgement and have healthy relationships. The therapy is considered by some to improve the mental illness recovery process (Caddy et al. 2012).

Art can assist clients, by offering an alternative focus. At times, clients can become entangled into their thoughts and have a preoccupation with their problem or mental state. Clients reported the art therapy sessions provided a purpose in their day and helped keep their mind occupied on something. We believe it is in breaking the cycle of boredom, lack of purpose and/or motivation that unlocks client’s ability and talents and supports them to explore and reflect on their mental health issues.

There is no single outcome for each client however we have witnessed the client benefits of participating in art therapy sessions. Benefits have included clients joining art galleries, entering their creations into art competitions, displaying their art, selling their art work, gifting their art, discussing their art or in some instances busking in the local mall. Art therapy can activate the courage to dare to try new processes.

The complexity of art therapy is known to be an integral part of the healing process, curing disease is one element and healing the client is another. The combination of art and treatment is signalling a new era in client care.

References


