

PERSON-CENTERED EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY

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Expressive arts therapy uses the expressive arts—movement, art, music, writing, sound, and improvisation—in a supportive setting to facilitate growth and healing. It is a process of discovering ourselves through any art form that comes from an emotional depth.

Expressive art refers to using the emotional, intuitive aspect of ourselves in various media. We express inner feelings by creating outer forms. It is true, of course, that talking about our feelings is also an important way to express and discover ourselves, meaningfully. But in the therapeutic world based on humanistic principles, the words *expressive therapy* have been reserved for nonverbal and/or metaphoric expression. Humanistic expressive arts therapy differs from the analytic or medical model of art therapy, in which art is used to diagnose and treat people.

When using art as an expressive mode for self healing or therapeutic purposes, we are not concerned about the aesthetics or craftsmanship of the visual art, the grammar and style of the writing, or the harmonic flow of the song. We use the arts to let go, to express, and to release. Also, we gain insight by studying the sym-

bolic and metaphoric messages. Our art speaks back to us if we take the time to let those messages in. Although interesting and sometimes dramatic products emerge, we leave the aesthetics and the craft to those who wish to pursue the arts professionally. Of course, some of us get so involved in the arts as self-expression that we later choose to pursue the skills of a particular art form. Many artist-therapists shift from focusing on their therapist lives to their lives as artists. Also many artists understand the healing aspects of the creative process and become artist-therapists.

Using the creative process for deep inner healing has further steps when we work with clients. Expressive arts therapists are aware that involving the mind, the body, and the emotions brings forth the client's intuitive, imaginative abilities as well as logical, linear thought. Since emotional states are seldom logical, the use of imagery and nonverbal modes allows the client an alternative path for self-exploration and communication. This process is a powerful integrative force.

Traditionally, psychotherapy is a verbal form of therapy, and the verbal process will always be important. However, I find I can rapidly understand the world of the client when she expresses herself through images. Color, form, and symbols are languages that speak from the unconscious and have particular meaning for each indi-

vidual. As I listen to a client's explanation of her imagery, I poignantly see the world as she views it. Or she may use movement and gesture to show how she feels. As I witness her movement, I can understand her world through empathizing, kinesthetically.

The client's self-knowledge expands as her movement, art, writing, and sound provide clues for further exploration. Expressive art becomes a healing process as well as a new language that speaks to both the client and the therapist. These arts are potent media in which to discover, experience, and accept the unknown aspects of self. Verbal therapy focuses on emotional disturbances and inappropriate behavior. The expressive arts move the client into the world of emotions and add a further dimension. By incorporating the arts in psychotherapy the client is offered a pathway for using the free-spirited parts of herself. Therapy may include joyful, lively learning on many levels: the sensory, kinesthetic, conceptual, emotional, and mythic. Clients report that the expressive arts have helped them go beyond their problems to envisioning themselves constructively taking action in the world.

The person-centered aspect of expressive arts therapy describes the basic philosophy underlying my work. The person-centered approach developed by my father, Carl Rogers, emphasizes the therapist's role as being empathic, open, hon-



est, congruent, and caring as he or she listens in depth and facilitates the growth of the individual or group. This philosophy incorporates the belief that each individual has worth, dignity, and the capacity for self-direction. Carl Roger's philosophy is based on a trust in an inherent impulse toward growth in every individual. This very deep faith in the innate capacity of each person to reach toward his or her full potential is the foundation for my approach to expressive arts therapy.

Carl's research into the psychotherapeutic process revealed that when a client felt accepted and understood, healing occurred. It is a rare experience to feel

"Dancing In My Dreams," oil and acrylic on canvas.

accepted and understood when you are feeling fear, rage, grief, or jealousy. Yet it is this very acceptance and understanding which heals. As friends and therapists, we frequently think we must have an answer or give advice. However, a very basic truth is often overlooked. By genuinely hearing the depth of the emotional pain and respecting the individual's ability to find her own answer, we are giving her the greatest gift. Empathy and acceptance give the individual the opportunity to empower herself and discover her unique potential.

I am intrigued with what I call the Creative Connection—the enhancing interplay among movement, art, writing, and sound. Moving with awareness, for example, opens us to profound feelings which

can then be expressed in color, line, or form. When we write immediately after the movement and art, there is a free flow—sometimes poetry—that emerges. The creative connection stimulates self-exploration. It is like the unfolding petals of a lotus blossom on a summer day. In the warm, accepting environment, the petals begin to open to reveal the blossom's inner essence. As our feelings are tapped, they become a resource for further self-understanding and creativity. We gently allow ourselves to awaken to new possibilities. With each opening, we may deepen our experience. When we reach our inner core, we find our connection to all beings. We create to connect to our inner source and to reach out to the world and the universe.

Some writers, artists, and musicians are already aware of the creative connection. If you are one of those, you may say, "of course, I always put on music and dance before I paint." Or, as a writer, you may go for a long walk before you sit at your desk. However, you are not alone if you are one of the many in our society who says, "I'm not creative." I hope this article entices you to try new experiences. You will surprise yourself.

I believe we are all capable of being profoundly, beautifully creative whether we use that creativity to relate to family or to paint a picture. The seeds of much of our creativity come from the unconscious and our feelings and intuition. The unconscious is our deep well. Most of us have put a lid over that well. Feelings can be constructively channeled into creative ventures: into dance, music, art, or writing. When our feelings are joyful, the art form uplifts. When our feelings are violent or wrathful, we can transform them into powerful art rather than venting them on the world. Such art helps us accept that aspect of ourselves. Self-acceptance is paramount to compassion for others.



I discovered personal healing for myself as I brought together my interests in psychotherapy, art, dancing, writing, and

music. Person-centered expressive therapy was born out of my personal integration of the arts and the philosophy I had inherited. Through experimentation I gained insight from my art journal. I doodled, let off steam or played with colors without concern for the outcome. Because I was unsure, at first, about introducing these methods to clients, I suggested they try it and then asked them for feedback. They said it was helpful. Their self-understanding rapidly increased and the communication between us improved immensely. The same was true as I introduced movement, sound, and free writing for self-expression. Clients and group participants reported a sense of "new beginnings" and freedom to be. One group member wrote: "I learned to play again,

how to let go of what I 'know'—my successes, achievements, and knowledge. I discovered the importance of being able to begin again." Another said: "It is much easier for me to deal with some heavy emotions through expressive play than through thinking and talking about it."

It became apparent that the creative connection process fostered integration. It is dearly stated by one client who said, "I discovered in exploring my feelings that I could break through inner barriers/structures that I set for myself by moving and dancing the emotions. To draw that feeling after the movement continued the process of unfolding."



Since not all psychologists agree with the principles embodied in expressive arts therapy, it seems important to state them clearly as the foundation of this process of healing and discovery:

- All people have an innate ability to be creative.

- The creative process is healing. The expressive product supplies important messages to the individual. However, it is the process of creation that is profoundly transformative.

- Personal growth and higher states of consciousness are achieved through self-awareness, self-understanding, and insight

- Self-awareness, understanding, and insight are achieved by delving into our emotions. The feelings of grief, anger, pain, fear, joy, and ecstasy are the tunnel through which we must pass to get to the other side—to self-awareness, understanding, and wholeness.

- Our feelings and emotions are an energy source. That energy can be channeled into the expressive arts to be released and transformed.

- The expressive arts—movement, art, writing, sounding, music, meditation, and imagery—lead us into the unconscious. This often allows us to express previously unknown facets of ourselves, thus bringing to light new information and awareness.

- Art modes interrelate in what I call

the Creative Connection. When we move, it affects how we write or paint. When we write or paint, it affects how we feel and think. The creative connection is a process that brings us to an inner core or essence which is our life energy.

- A connection exists between our life force—our inner core, or soul—and the essence of all beings.

- Therefore, as we journey inward to discover our essence or wholeness, we discover our relatedness to the outer world. The inner and outer become one.

- My approach to therapy is also based on a psychodynamic theory of individual and group process:

- Personal growth takes place in a safe, supportive environment

- A safe, supportive environment is created by having facilitators (teachers, therapists, group leaders, parents, colleagues) who are genuine, warm, empathic, open, honest, congruent, and caring.

- These qualities can be learned best by first being experienced.

- A client/therapist, teacher/student, parent/child, wife/husband, or intimate-partners relationship can be a place to experience these qualities.

- Personal integration of the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual occurs by taking time to reflect, critique, and evaluate these experiences.

- Our visual art is changed by our movement and body rhythm. It is also influenced when we meditate and become receptive, allowing intuition to be active. Likewise, our movement can be influenced by our visual art and writing, and so forth. All of the creative processes help us find our inner essence or source. And when we find that inner source, we tap into the universal energy source, or the collective unconscious, or the transcendental experience.

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This article is adapted from the first chapter of her forthcoming book, The Creative Connection: Expressive Arts as Healing (Science and Behavior Books).