

Benefits of Art Therapy for Adult Survivors of Sexual Abuse

by Christine Hennig

1. *Gaining Access to Traumatic Memories and Encouraging Disclosure:*

- Since art therapy is a visual and sensory modality, it can help clients access traumatic material stored in implicit memory, a sensory, body-based form of memory that is not the same as conscious, narrative memory (what we usually think of as “memory”). Sound- and body-based approaches can also be used to access material in implicit memory, but are also more likely to overwhelm clients. Art-making provides a certain amount of distance and control, and thus provides a sense of containment for clients (Johnson, 1987; Lev-Weisel, 1998).
- Art expression can help clients who suffer from *alexithymia*, a trauma-related condition that involves an inability to express feelings in words; and can create a safe “transitional space” that can encourage clients to disclose traumatic memories (Johnson, 1987).
- Art-making can be a safe way for clients with Dissociative Identity Disorder to “tell” their memories, bypassing the usual switching of alter personalities that may happen when they attempt to report their memories verbally (Frye, 1990).
- Neurological researchers are speculating that a possible cause for PTSD may be the exclusion of traumatic memories from explicit memory storage, and that art may provide a bridge between implicit and explicit memory (Malchiodi, 2003).
- A research study found art therapy useful in uncovering unconscious material, generating a finished product that can provide further therapeutic material to work with, and providing a non-verbal way for clients to “speak” about the abuse (Meekums, 1999).

2. *Dealing with Developmental Issues:*

- Art therapy can provide mirroring, psychological distance, and containment for clients who are working on mastering missed developmental stages (Robbins, 2001).
- Recent brain research in attachment theory links problems with affective regulation with disturbed attachments with caregivers in early childhood; as well as linking affective regulation tasks with the right brain, which is organized non-verbally. This points to a special role for non-verbal treatment modalities such as art therapy (Malchiodi, 2003).

3. Reconnecting with Others Through Sharing One's Artistic Expressions with Others:

- Creative arts expression is a superior way to communicate the devastating effects of trauma and abuse, since it can trigger feelings of empathy in an audience, whereas straightforward reporting in words can hide as much as it reveals, since much of the horror of victimization is “beyond words” (Laub & Podell, 1995).
- Trauma destroys the inner sense of an “other,” that is, an inner sense of connection with others, and creative arts expression can reestablish that sense of connection (Laub & Podell, 1995).
- Public display or performance of creative arts products can help reconnect survivors to society, as well as providing a sense of empowerment (Johnson, 1987).

4. Other Benefits Found in Research Studies and Case Reports:

- Increased catharsis, cohesion, and insight in group therapy (Waller, 1992).
- Raised self-esteem (Anderson, 1995; Brooke, 1995, 1997).
- Reduced symptom severity and interpersonal difficulties, and increased health potential (Korlin, Nyback & Goldberg, 2000).
- Reduced frequency and severity of nightmares (Morgan & Johnson, 1995).
- Contained and provided distance from overwhelming affect (Bowers, 1992; Meekums, 1999).
- Self-reports of art therapy positively impacting survivors' recoveries (Anderson, 1995).
- Reduced symptoms of depression (Howard, 1990).
- Improved self-soothing abilities (Estep, 1995).
- Provided a visual means of ongoing assessment of therapeutic progress (Glaister & McGuiness, 1992).
- Increased integration of thinking and feeling (Serrano, 1989).
- Provided an effective way to work on control issues (Levens, 1994).

5. Reports of the Healing Power of Art-Making by Adult Survivors Who Are Artists:

- A female painter with a sexual abuse history experienced a therapeutic breakthrough when she started incorporating healing themes into her paintings and discussing them with her therapist (Lijtmaer, 2002).
- Artist Jane Orleman has publicly displayed paintings that explicitly depict sexual abuse at the hands of her father, despite some negative critical reception, and has written a book about the therapeutic benefits she gained from doing the paintings (Marstine, 2002).
- Painter and art therapist Francie Lyshak-Stelzer (1999) created a series of paintings documenting her healing process from child sexual abuse, which she later published in a book, along with a simple narrative of the story of her abuse and healing process.
- Louise Wisechild (1991) edited an entire book of articles by incest survivor artists, writers, and musicians proclaiming the benefits of using their creativity to heal.

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Author's Note: This handout is based upon *Art Therapy for Survivors of Sexual Abuse: A Literature Review and Suggestions for Treatment*, a paper I wrote in 2003 for my Clinical Art Therapy II class.

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