

Spontaneous Therapeutic Art-Making as a Resilient Response to Trauma:

A Heuristic, Retrospective Study

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Abstract

Some people spontaneously discover how to use art-making to process and transform the meaning of traumatic experiences, without having been exposed to art therapy. This seems to suggest that a natural process may exist for doing this. Although there is awareness by the art therapy profession that this phenomenon exists, there is as yet little understanding of how it works and how it can be discovered and facilitated with clients. This study used the heuristic method to retrospectively analyze artworks at several points in the researcher's art-making history, in order to discover the factors that led her to use art-making to process and transform the meaning of her experiences with child sexual abuse. Artworks made before the researcher began a conscious recovery process, after beginning recovery but before exposure to art therapy, after exposure to art therapy but before beginning to be trained as an art therapist, and after beginning graduate study in art therapy were examined and described in detail in the study. Both analytical and creative methods of immersion were used to study the artworks. Four factors were identified that facilitated beginning a spontaneous therapeutic art-making process: interest in making art with personal content, support for making art with personal content, blocked trauma, and empathetic witnessing. Seven other factors were identified that led to the continuation and deepening of the process: training in art-making skills, creating artwork addressing the trauma, sense of control over the process, limited or no directives, combination of expressive and controlled art-making processes,

conscious recovery process, and therapeutic supports in place. In addition, a longer and deeper process of therapeutic art-making, in which the initial period of spontaneous therapeutic art-making was only a part, was found and described. Also found and described were five spontaneous discoveries of art therapy directives and/or concepts before exposure to them in art therapy or art therapy training, and seven examples of art processes and/or products performing roles usually performed by therapists in verbal psychotherapy. This is a pilot study intended to spark further research into therapeutic art-making that occurs outside of formal art therapy, as well as art-making as a possible protective factor that increases resilience in survivors of childhood trauma. It is hoped that the study's findings will aid in the development of art therapy approaches for survivors of trauma, and that the study's methodology will be adapted by other researchers conducting heuristic, retrospective studies in art therapy.