

What are the healing powers of art therapy? I have used art as part of my own therapeutic process and found it uniquely beneficial. How does this process of *making* facilitate mental health and what are the limitations?

I spoke with local art therapists, and from these conversations developed an elementary grasp on what their profession looks like. From their teachings and through extensive research, I found something that resonated with me, the reason why art therapy feels so good. While traditional talk therapy necessitates a person's ability to verbally express their emotions, art therapy allows one to visually portray and access emotions that might be impossible or difficult for individuals to articulate verbally. Thus, art therapy creates new opportunities for treatment for patients who are too young or too traumatized for traditional modalities.

This mural depicts the relationship between emotional openness and the costs associated from withholding them. The dark houses show the discussion and/or avoidance of one's emotions, and the color represents the freedom following the honest acknowledgement of our emotional truths.

Millie

Art therapy and my future

Millie



What are the healing powers of art therapy? This paper addresses my personal future plan with art therapy, what art therapy is, how it heals, some concerns about working in the field, and why I chose this for my Final Project. I have done extensive research and spoken with registered and non-registered therapists. I chose this topic because I have a passion for art and helping others, which translates quite well into art therapy.

INTRODUCTION

When I was in seventh grade I helped out the kindergarten class every single day at two o'clock, then in eighth grade I followed that same group into first. I loved working with them, I loved watching their little faces and helping them learn life lessons and grow up over the course of two years. At the end of my eighth grade year, I learned about this thing called 'art therapy' for children-my parents casually mentioned it one day after I told them yet again how cute my little first graders were. I had no idea what that term meant; the word 'therapy' I usually associated with two people talking in a chair. How could art play a part in that? Regardless of my little knowledge, I loved this idea right away because it had something to do with art, and whenever that was the case, I was immediately interested.

My entire life I've been told that hardly any artists can realistically make a living making art. As far back as I can remember, that's what I've been told, and it's been a nagging thought in the back of my mind every time I think up grand plans for my future as an artist. Once my parents told me about child art therapy, I had to know more. I found a general understanding, which was basically that a career in this would mean showing children how to mess around with art to feel better.

After about a month of being totally obsessed, I put the idea aside because I didn't have enough art supplies to try art therapy for myself. I had a few dried bottles of my sister's old paint that I could scrap the remaining wet bits out to use, but it was hardly enough to use for anything but small, detailed paintings. Ninth grade came around and I was excited to start at a school with a huge art department filled with enough supplies that I could use as much as I wanted.

As a freshman I took as many art classes as I could, which began with "The Fundamentals of Art". It was a great class, and I got to learn more about techniques and mediums, but the class was hard for me because all of my work seemed too stiff. Not until the end of that year did I start to feel more comfortable, and that started with my murals class. I painted two large murals, one with large amounts of finger painting, and one completely done with hands. I loved this technique, I loved to work with the raw paint and have direct contact with my picture. It felt like I was building an image, rather than *painting* one. It also felt good, good to work loosely with paints and not force a certain look into my art. I found that when I was painting I wasn't particularly focused on anything, nothing that was stressing me out or making me feel badly, I was merely lost in the paint. The drama of school and homework didn't seem as important or trying. I noticed that after the class ended, I felt a little lighter, almost like the feeling when given a back massage, or taking off a heavy backpack at the end of a long hike.

My sophomore year of high school was very rough for me. I dealt with severely depressed friends whose feelings translated to me. I felt trapped by all the darkness around me, suffocated by the surrounding depression. Throughout the year I felt like I needed an escape, something to take my mind away, somewhere to go. I was searching for that light feeling I got from the murals, the light and unconcerned feeling. I knew it had helped me before with regular school drama, but I think I was trying too hard to get it back, and so I couldn't find it. I took a sculpture class and got nearly the same feeling as I did from finger painting, but I was still too stiff, too worried about my final piece looking exactly how I pictured it. Even though I had planned my sculpture and the current paintings I was working on, to reflect on my mood, I wanted them to "look right" at the end. For instance, I made a 3D piano keyboard out of cardboard and a miniature grand piano to sit on top of the keys. Everything was black and white except for the miniature because I wanted it to signify that the color was happiness(music) trying

to get through darkness(black and white). My intention was to get some of what I was feeling into my work, but in the end it looked too stiff, not the angry mess I meant for it to be.



Since I've been at Oxbow, I've had all the resources to play with the idea of art therapy again. It started with this realization: when I'm in a terrible mood and need to feel better, I'll get a big piece of paper and as much paint as I can find, and, using hands or sometimes a big brush, I'll throw color on my paper and just work with texture and paint and feel so much looser after -- that is art therapy. Having open studios now with lots of large canvas and paint to work with, I've experimented with my realization and found it be helpful every time. I've found that the actual process of making art, the act of using paint with my hands or a brush and being free with my movements, *feels* good, and thus the end product is more satisfying.

When you use "talk therapy", it targets the intellectual part of the brain, and while that is helpful for discussing and explaining feelings, it does contribute to the divide between thoughts and feelings; "We can talk about our feelings instead of feeling them." However, when you use the right side of the brain, as you do in art therapy, you move away the need to explain, and instead, feel more deeply, "creating something uses the body and naturally evokes how we feel in our bodies."

The actual definition of art therapy is "a form of psychotherapy involving the encouragement of free self-expression through painting, drawing, or modeling, used as a remedial activity or an aid to diagnosis." I love this definition because it includes my passion of art with my newfound interest of healing mentally hurt people, which I discovered my sophomore year after trying to help my friends.

To tie in another factor that led to my interest in this career, is traveling and helping those in dire need. There's a large difference between helping children in a safe country and helping those in conflict zones. Though both are real problems, I feel that the more serious issues are those in developing countries. Growing up watching National Geographic documentaries on poor countries who don't have enough water has made me aware of those situations, and I've always wanted to help. Now, I find that being an art therapist in a developing country, working with children in conflict zones, being *in* the field, is an actual profession, and one that appeals greatly to me.

PROCESS

Art therapy is the perfect way to express myself and feel *good* while doing so. I tried many methods in my sophomore year to feel better, and now I realize that this is the most helpful; it's easy, allows me to be creative, and helps me to embrace the emotions I'm feeling, instead of just dealing with them. Once I acknowledge them, I then understand them, and finally

move past them. Art therapy is also a way I can help others heal, by teaching them what I have learned through this research and personal experience. I just have to teach them the same technique I learned. Even better, I can make an art career out of it. I started with online research, looking for therapists to contact in Napa for first-hand interviews. I also searched for therapists in Africa since many of their countries are in conflict or developing. I also found inspiration from the piece Brenna made, an alum of OS34 piece. She also focused her inquiry on the ideas of art as her Final Project, and watching her video was very helpful because I could see her spin on art therapy. My main sources were Brenna, various online sites such as eatingdisorderhope.com, [The Mantle](http://TheMantle.com), and arttherapyblog.com. The one art therapist I made contact with from Napa is Lila Braidia.

RESEARCH

What is art therapy? As I mentioned earlier, it is a form of psychotherapy using art to heal. Do I want to pursue this as a career, what age do I want to work with, how does it heal, what is the method, what area would I work in, do I need a degree, and what's it like? A lot of these questions I wanted answered by actual therapists, but some I found online, for instance I would need a master's degree, and a certification is usually preferred. I found a non-profit organization called The Red Pencil, which works internationally with children and families who have experienced trauma, and they have outposts in Africa, where I would potentially want to work. Since I love little kids, my targeted age to work with would be 4-8 year olds.

I reached out to three art therapists in Napa. The last therapist I found, named Lila Braidia responded to my inquiry; she was exactly who I was looking for: a therapist who was at least registered as in art, who was willing to speak with me, and who worked with children. Eventually I arranged to meet with the two to interview them both independently. We planned out meeting times for the week before break. One I would meet in person, another I would call on the phone.

After speaking with Napa therapist Lila Braidia, I learned some helpful information about art therapy first hand. She told me that young children take treatment best because they like playing with art, it's fun for them. Also, the trauma they experienced sometimes happened when they were so young that they're brains couldn't formulate they're feelings into words, thus art allows them to express their emotions non-verbally. Lila also said that teenagers in a group session don't want to outright talk about what's hurting them, and so art therapy lets them put their feelings in the session without directly saying them.

I reached out to the Red Pencil organization as well to try and talk with art therapists in the field, but never got a response.

Art therapy is most beneficial to young children because they are not yet able and/or comfortable to use words instead, as Lila Braidia and arttherapyblog.com informed me. However, anyone can benefit from this type of therapy, no matter the age or if you have a certified therapist to practice with. Some benefits are: improving social skills, improving mental, emotional, and even physical states, and in most if not all cases raises the quality of life for patients. In more serious cases, art therapy can reduce pain, anxiety, and tension. It can be beneficial to those who have mental disorders, severe or light emotional abuse, cancer, post traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), bipolar disorder, and a variety of other serious ailments.

An art therapist can help to express emotions that otherwise wouldn't be realized and/or understood. For instance, Lila Braidia gave me two exercises she uses in her sessions: "soul collage" and "house-tree-person". The former is simple; it's just using pictures from magazines

or papers or off the Internet and combining them. She uses these pictures for the patients to choose, and what they pick suggests what they're feeling. The latter is the very beginning step in a children's session, usually it's the first thing a therapist will do with a new patient. The counselor will ask the child to draw a house, a tree, and a person, and where each is in relation to another will help the therapist to understand how the child feels.

Art therapists can also help to process emotions and feelings being struggled with, and that's when healing begins. Art therapists help to guide the patient through creative expression, and then analyze the pieces made after a session so that both therapist and patient can understand what they're feeling, whether good or bad. In this way, the patient gets insightful conclusions about themselves that may lead to relief and overall better mental health.

CONCERNS

As I mentioned earlier, I have a great interest in working in a developing country with young children, however, there's a very large difference between being an art therapist in America and being one in a third world country. I have to ask myself, would I even be able to work in a conflict zone? I would work with kids who have never known peace or stability, whereas I have grown up in a healthy home, in a relatively safe country, and haven't experienced anything as drastic as they have. Could I be accepted into their culture, even? Would the people resent me for my stature, and would I appear 'high and mighty' to them, a gloating figure, opposed to a helping hand. Is it my right to place myself in their conflict and declare it my job to make them feel better? However, it's only a matter of opinion if it's my right to help or not, and in that regard I'm torn. No website or person I've reached out to has discussed the issue of clashing cultures and what that does to the patients. It must depend on how good the therapist is and how they treat and act towards their patients, but regardless of that there's still a gap, at least if I worked in a conflict zone.

The children I would help have experienced far worse things than I could imagine, they have dealt with issues such as war, sickness, abuse, death, etc. and I have seen nothing in comparison. Yes, I want to help them, but is it fair of me to? I think that if I were to become an art therapist working in conflict zones, I would face cultural clashes at first as family and patients got adjusted to me, but in time that would smooth over and I could properly do my job.

CONCLUSION

I didn't find a direct answer to my question - "What are the healing powers of art therapy?" The best answer is this: art therapy helps by allowing one to express themselves by actually *feeling* their emotions instead of avoiding or discussing them, thus exploring the true content behind their feelings/actions, which then leads to managing addictions, improving self-esteem, and moving past disorders.

I learned more about myself as well, starting from my sophomore year of high school. I pursued the feeling I got from finger painting murals and that led to personally finding an outlet through art which definitely improved my mental health. Because this made such a huge difference to me, I would like to share my experience with young children, hopefully healing them before they're old enough to be permanently be affected.

This research has allowed me to learn more about myself and my options for later careers. I now know what being an art therapist in America is like, and though I don't know what conflict zone jobs are like, I do know what I have to do to work in one, thanks to artinallofus.html. My next step in art therapy is getting my important unanswered questions

answered. Could I be accepted into the culture of a developing country enough to therapeutically help the children there?

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