

Art Therapy

This is our first expressive medium. We have always represented our world graphically, in cave paintings, sculpture, clothing, decorations, tattoos.

Everything we choose e.g. clothes, bags, home decorations, furniture, gadgets: everything is an expression of our personal taste and therefore something important and unique about us. No two ordinary people choose exactly the same wardrobe!

Our first way of making sense of the world is through physical expression, with bricks, marks crayons and pens.

People like Winnicott (1971) have suggested that the role of creative expression is crucial to healthy normal development. Therapies have found art useful, especially in reshaping and rewriting people's hidden agendas (like TA's life scripts or Roger's conditions of worth).

Art therapy can be used to explore events and experiences too painful to talk about, in an unthreatening way.

It also diverts people away from intellectualising experience and gets straight to emotional levels.

Art therapy is a recognised speciality within therapy, with its own training and accreditation. It is used with all age and ability groups, with individuals and as part of a 'talking' therapy.

How to get it started:

Giving permission

'I have never been any good at art' or 'I can't draw to save my life' are statements heard frequently from people when they are introduced to the idea of making art in the context of group or individual work. Part of what is being communicated is that, for many people, their only personal experience of art-making goes back to school days and that experience was mostly humiliating, embarrassing or just plain boring. This of course excludes those for whom art remained from childhood a source of pleasure -usually the 'good at art'. Understanding clients' fear of humiliation and exposure is therefore a prerequisite for any group leader: with that understanding and knowledge in place, the facilitator can set about finding the best way to put people at ease and prepare them to engage with their natural creative abilities. This can be viewed as permission giving.

Permission giving occurs in two ways: someone giving permission to themselves and the group facilitator giving permission to the group. The group facilitator gives permission by:

- ② Creating space for participants to voice their anxieties.
- ② Explaining clearly that the approach to art-making in this group is very different from the way most of them experienced it in their school days. The following points should be stressed:
 - the focus of this group is to use art for self- expression
 - no judgement will be made about the work (it will not be marked out of ten!)
 - you give meaning to your own work

- there are many ways of making art (for example, abstract or figurative) - no one can tell you what your own work should look like.
- 🎨 Reminding participants that colours, textures, shapes and so on can be used to show feelings and moods.
- 🎨 Discussing briefly associations with colour - personal and shared.

A sense of safety/physical space

We will look at issues of boundaries in more detail below. In the context of permission giving, however, boundaries relate to creating time and space within which image-making is expected, accepted and respected. Give clear instructions about themes and the allotted time to work. Make sure there are adequate protective materials available so that people are not anxious about spillage.

Respect

Primarily it is in how the work is received that members' respect for their own creative output is generated. Time spent reflecting on and talking about the work also helps encourage members to do more.

Giving permission to yourself

When people feel their anxieties about working with art have been heard, and they are introduced to a way of working that is made accessible to them, they usually allow themselves to take the risk and see what happens!

Boundaries

The term 'boundaries' has many meanings in the context of art in groupwork: physical, mental and ethical. Some issues to do with boundaries are addressed by the way the group is structured starting and ending, and overall shared understanding of the purpose of the group.

Physical aspects

A space and time that are designated for the work and agreed by the institution, and rules about respect for others and not causing damage to them or their work should be established. Appropriate use of materials (whatever that is) may be defined. During certain group exercises, such as group painting, rules may be established to define what can or cannot be tolerated. Of course a group may choose to work without rules in order to explore the dynamics of power and control.

Confidentiality

(This issue is covered in more depth in the section on 'Whose work is it anyway?' on p31). Members may want to know who will be looking after the work, as well as who else will have access to it.

Internal boundaries/the clients

Images produced spontaneously, especially those dealing with emotive issues, can be overpowering. In my opinion there is no such thing as a non-threatening theme. We can never predict how something will be received. Working spontaneously can enable people to gain access to aspects of their unconscious selves. Disclosure should not be forced; rather the climate and culture of the group should enable members to take important steps when they are ready. We should acknowledge that a group member may be deeply stirred by their work but may not want to talk about it. For one-off training workshops, it may be necessary to raise the issue of disclosure at the start of the group.

Anxiety about self-exposure can limit active participation. One way to approach this is to tell group members that they have to take responsibility for the amount of themselves they expose, but also to remind them that they are likely to learn more from sharing of themselves.

The group leader

The more you work with images in groups the more aware you become of how powerful a medium it can be. Sometimes, unawares, you can find yourself haunted by images which resonate in you, for whatever reasons. It is very important to develop strategies for leaving the work behind. Good supervision helps to process much of this. What needs to be acknowledged is that any group will benefit from a facilitator who takes care of herself. This may be achieved by developing strategies and rituals for engaging and disengaging with the work for example, wearing particular clothing, or practising brief meditation before and after groups, or spending time with a co-leader to go over what has happened. Listen to feedback from group members. A good maxim is to 'practise what you preach' and use spontaneous image-making for your own personal 'inner development' and to keep your own creative juices flowing.

Avoid working out of your depth and acquire further specialist training as needed. This is definitely one of those careers where you can never learn too much! Evening classes and skills-based training sessions organized by local authorities can also prove invaluable.