

## Examining Expressive Art Therapies

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### **Abstract**

*Expressive Art Therapy is an unconventional therapeutic technique that can help individuals to heal emotionally. Music, art, and creative writing can help clients to re-align their emotions and bring forth healing within themselves. Music brings people together and may evoke different emotions in each person. Art represents the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of all people by using imagery rather than words. Finally, creative writing lets intrusive thoughts out of the mind and releases them onto paper. When clients reconnect their heads and their hearts, positive emotional changes can begin in their lives.*

In a world full of hopelessness, darkness, and despair, many people are falling victim to a great disconnect between their heads and their hearts. They are concerned with making ends meet, rather than minds. They struggle from paycheck to paycheck with little time to find themselves, little time for family, and little time to de-pressurize. Adults carry around hurt, frustrations, and deep pain, often stemming from childhood, without any way to release it. Their paths continue along a dark, lonely road, and they see no way off the path into a more peaceful and meaningful way of life. Between running from activity to activity with their children and working all hours just to pay the bills, adults have become tired and even exhausted. At their breaking points, some individuals will seek counselling to try to make sense of and manage these issues. One therapeutic method is expressive therapy, or art from the heart. Expressive therapy can include all forms of artistic works from music, to drawing and painting, to writing about emotional experiences.

Expressive therapy is a unconventional form of therapy and, therefore, is not as commonly used as some traditional methods. Expressive therapy is a humanistic approach (Seiser & Wastell, 2002), centering people as experts on their own lives (Morgan, 2007). As with any therapeutic method, the “client’s readiness for change has significant impact on success” (Gold et al., 2007, p. 584). Expressive therapy assumes that people have positive characteristics, even in times of need, such as skills, beliefs, values, and abilities (Morgan, 2007). This method incorporates a variety of alternatives for clients to express their feelings in addition to talking to the clinician.

### **Music**

Music has power. It has existed from the beginning of time, growing and changing throughout history. From the moment a human is conceived, he or she begins life and movement following the most beautiful musical interlude – the mother’s heartbeat. This constant rhythm becomes comfort for the baby as he or she grows and develops in a safe environment. Music is all around and within each person, and each person responds to the emotional tone of music in his or her own way. Music influences our feelings about ourselves and about others, and “makes us feel stronger, gives us more endurance, and enhances coordination” (Batt-Rawden & DeNora, 2005, p. 291). Music can create a more relaxed mood and can help reduce stress, or it can change a mood in an instant to a feeling of being scared. Music can be used without formal music knowledge or experience, and is a non-evasive and painless technique (Cheek et al., 2003; Batt-Rawden & DeNora). Music has been valued throughout time and across all cultures and, with the aid of technology, can be accessed any time, any place, anywhere. It has the power to cross generations and bring people together.

One benefit of music therapy is that music can be a form of communication that is expressive and nonverbal, allowing people to “express feelings that may not be definable by words” (Cheek et al., 2003, p. 206). Through an individual’s reaction to the music, he or she is taught different methods to explore feelings that have been either overlooked or cut off for whatever reason. Music encompasses our whole body, so feelings that have been blocked or forgotten may be aroused and the ability to deal with these feelings becomes possible. Because music can influence an individual’s mindset, it can help to make a client feel more comfortable in a therapeutic situation and create an atmosphere wherein the client may be willing to disclose issues more readily.

A second benefit of music therapy is the results that it has on the social interactions of the client. Often, clients coming to therapy have difficulties building and sustaining relationships, low self-esteem and self-confidence, and problems with social behaviour. Music therapy allows these clients to “reconfigure the body/mind in ways that distances it from the physical trapping” (Batt-Rawden & DeNora, 2005, p. 292). Through music therapy in a group setting, clients have reduced feelings of isolation, and are able to connect with colleagues through social bonding, increased coping skills, and opportunities to express negative emotions through nonverbal behaviours (Gold et al., 2007). Clients can build upon their relationships during therapy sessions and use these skills in their daily lives.

Another benefit of music therapy is the self-care that can be learned through this expressive technique. Self-care in this context includes, but is not limited to, the choices that a person makes to enhance or improve his or her emotional health. Tuning into psychological needs and allowing oneself to express emotions and feelings will result in healthy self-care. Schools and homes have created environments wherein creativity has become very limited and even squelched. Less and less time is spent in self-expression through the eyes of the heart. Individual characters are influenced by words, which are not always positive, and by actions of rejection at times. Clients can learn positive ways to express their emotions and learn better tools to deal with everyday negativity that may enter into their lives.

To assist clients in reconnecting with themselves, various techniques are used within the music therapy practice. Music techniques can be used to help process emotions and experiences by listening to the sounds and the words of relevant pieces, with the goal of working to gain an understanding of these emotions. Some therapists include improvisation of music, which is either sung or played on an instrument. The clients are free to make the sounds that they are feeling and to experiment with a variety of sounds to express emotions. Sometimes, the client will work with a partner and improvise a song or sound. Other times, a client will listen to recorded songs and work on emotions that emerge through the music.

Music pieces can be chosen to reflect attainable self-images and those that seem do-able for the clients. Selections can be chosen to set a mood or to re-create an event that needs to be addressed. Music therapy can be seen as “the catalyst for self-help and self-extension” (Batt-Rawden & DeNora, 2005, p. 300). The clients learn that different music styles can be used at any time to understand a feeling or emotion, and they learn to recognize these emotions and reconnect with themselves before the emotions become problematic. Batt-Rawden and DeNora (2005) explained,

The fact that music is both a symbolic medium and a physical medium, like the body, with pulse, rhythm, and degrees of tension (such as pitch), is a bonus, since music, unlike literature or plastic arts, may speak directly to and so entrain bodily processes. (p. 299)

Thus, through the engagement of music, our bodies, inside and out, can be brought together and aligned once emotions have been released and healed.

## **Art**

In addition to music, art, through drawing, painting and colouring, can aid in healing. The healing process through art “involves the cultivation and release of the creative spirit” (McNiff, 2004, p. 5). Ganim and Fox (1999) reported that “within all of us is a silent language that reveals the truth of our thoughts, feelings and emotions far more fluently than words. That language is imagery” (p. 1). Ganim and Fox noted the importance of using art to “reduce stress, release anger, resolve conflicts, get in touch with feelings, and give a voice to your soul” (cover). This technique involves first setting an intention for the activity, which is a guide to let the body know that there is a purpose going on. A focus is placed on “body-centered awareness” (Ganim & Fox, p. 25) because the client is instructed to take a few deep breaths and envision breathing in light and exhaling colour. Then the mind is drawn to an area of the body that senses hurt or pain or joy or any other emotion. The feeling or sensation then becomes transformed into an image in the mind, and the final step of the technique is to draw the image. The drawing, painting or colouring can be something recognizable or can be abstract, whatever the heart is seeing.

After the image is completed, it can then be processed. The clinician guides the client through eight questions to gain an understanding of the image. The clinician asks how the drawing makes the client feel, what the drawing tells the client about how he or she feels emotionally, how the colours make the client feel, if there is anything disturbing about the image, what the client likes best about the image, what he or she has learned from the drawing about his or her feelings, whether the emotions are related to a particular current issue or concern, and, finally, whether knowing what the client feels about the issue helps him or her to deal with it (Ganim & Fox, 1999). Through answering these questions, the client is able to create a visual perspective on certain issues or concerns that he or she may not have had the right words to express or explain, or even been aware of, and to process the feelings that are attached to it.

## **Creative Writing**

An alternative technique within the expressive therapy method is creative writing. Hunt (2003) found that a focus on experience through expressive writing is beneficial for many clients. Hunt demonstrated a decrease in relapse and recurrence of depression by reducing the impact of negative intrusive thoughts when clients were involved with creative writing. Creating an understanding of an individual's identity can be attained through writing of a story, a poem, a document, a certificate, or handbook. As a story unfolds, the writer seeks to make events meaningful. In order to make this connection, the writer must engage with the text and release emotions. Having a written document visual for referral leads to further exploration of alternative stories and allows the client to build upon and follow what has been written down. Although there may be hesitation upon beginning to write, the clinician can be helpful to the client in finding words that start the story flowing.

## **Conclusion**

These expressive therapy methods have been proven to help individuals to reconnect within themselves. Lusebrink (2004) explained that through the art therapy process, the visual expression of the client is revealed by means of varying levels of complexity. The client may begin to express an emotion or situation one way, but a deeper, hidden emotion may be revealed by listening to his or her heart. The client is taught how to keep the focus of this therapeutic process in the right-side of the brain, the hemisphere that processes visual-spatial information, visual imagery, and visual memory. The client learns to turn down the left-brain analytical and sequential functions, and turn up the right-brain visual-spatial and expressive functions. Artistic activities involve “different motor, somatosensory, visual, emotional, and cognitive aspects of information processing” (Lusebrink, p. 125). Often, these are the

processing aspects that have been denied throughout an individual's life because of societal beliefs and values.

One therapist in Canada, Marie-Jose Dhaese (2001-2008), treats people with symptoms such as anxiety, depression, fears, and sleeping problems. Her approach takes into consideration the physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual needs of the client. By carefully choosing a variety of media for the clients, she helps to "bring into the open the behaviours and blocked feelings that have interfered with healthy emotional growth" (Dhaese). Her clients are helped to deal with past experiences and are taught positive coping skills, which they can then apply to their everyday lives.

Expressive therapy, or art from the heart, is limited in its frequency of use because of its "touchy-feely" nature. However, certain individuals will benefit from its various techniques more than they will from traditional therapeutic techniques. As the journey of life becomes more complicated and more people find themselves struggling with relationships, finances and jobs, people may be more willing to turn to expressive therapy in order to heal from the events of the past and grow within a rewarding and fulfilling life. The particular technique is not as important as the bigger picture of "doing what works" to release the emotional baggage that is carried from day to day. Once this burden is released, the world changes through the connection that the individual has created within himself or herself. In actuality, the limitations of art from the heart can be expunged through a drive to understand oneself and a desire to reconnect the mind with the body.

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