

Essence & Praxis
in the
Art Therapy Studio

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Chapter 7:

The Creative Process

Creativity is any act, idea or product that changes an existing domain or transforms an existing domain into a new one. (Csikszentmihaly, 1997, p. 28)

Art Therapy is based on the belief that the creative process is healing and life enhancing. A fundamental premise is that developing creativity and fostering creative ability is integral to the development of a strong sense of self. Individuals will grow and develop a creative, strong sense of self in an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance and positive regard. A creative attitude to life allows one to approach the world in a positive and pro-active manner. The creative process is integral to our health – to finding new solutions to old problems.

The intention in Art Therapy is to rekindle the individual's healing or growth process. The focus is, generally speaking, to re-examine the areas of conflict or difficulty, to explore the relationship between the real and the imagined and to bring more consciousness and positive feelings to the artist/client. The art enables the therapist and the client to witness the client's position and process. With the use of art making in the creative process the therapeutic control of the process stays in the client's hands.

Csikszentmihaly (1996) writes about the importance of creativity:

Creativity is so fascinating is that when we are involved in it, we feel that we are living more fully than during the rest of life. The excitement of the artist at the easel or the scientist in the lab comes close to the ideal fulfillment we all hope to get from life, and so rarely do. Perhaps only

sex, sports, music and religious ecstasy- even when these experiences remain fleeting and leave no trace - provide as profound a sense of being part of an entity greater than ourselves. But creativity also leaves an outcome that adds to the richness and complexity of the future. (p. 2)

Creativity is about perception and the expression and manifestation of it, being awake to all of one's sensory input. The word inspiration originally meant a breath of divinity or transfusion from the soul of the gods. Why are some people more inspired than others? In the ancient definition they were considered more deserving - but it is important to remember that to deserve they were prepared for the experience, which is something we can all practice.

You always have to choose what to paint and what not to paint, what colour to use, and what not to use. We include and exclude from our vision and our view. We can discover things by analogy or by anomaly - what is there, and what is not there.

Blocks to Creativity

Some of the enemies of creativity are: insecurity, fear of failure or criticism, laziness, conceit, tensions and hyper activity, lack of faith in oneself.

Inertia

Sometimes it is difficult to get started to begin to create – there may be a lack of energy or motivation. Energy may be being spent in conflicts, inhibitions or maintaining defenses. It requires effort and activity to move out of inertia and doing things like taking out old work to finish, or starting with a scribble or rhythmic drawing can help. The use of pre-art activities or free writing can help. Inertia – requires the physical act of creating and it is through doing and making that ideas and creativity will return to the individual. Simply thinking about what to do or make will not change anything.

Choice of a subject can be hard – making choices, learning how to make decisions. The urge to discard an unfinished picture should be addressed because the difficulties encountered will re-emerge in the next one and if you work it through in the present you will know what

to do next time. It is important to watch how you chose, and observe what motivates you.

Fear

Fear can affect the ability and urge to create. Some of the potential fears are: the fear of being seen or revealing negative aspects of self, fear of being inadequate in skill or expression.

Pride

Pride can function as an inhibitor in different ways: the individual may feel superior or inferior. He or she may have become conceited or grandiose from excessive praise and may have lost his or her balance. Pride related to inferiority may lead to constant dissatisfaction with accomplishments – there is a fixed ideal of perfection. It is important to emphasize that it is through practice and trial and error that the artist grows. Understanding the laws of growth as applied to creative art can help an individual explore issues of the ego in new ways:

Spontaneous Creativity

A general underlying premise of all the expressive art therapies is that there is a relationship of reversal between spontaneity and anxiety. Specifically speaking, to the extent you are anxious, you are not spontaneous; to the degree you are spontaneous, you are not anxious. Anxiety is a fundamental underlying issue in most individuals seeking therapy. In Art Therapy there is the opportunity to reverse these feelings by helping the individual develop spontaneity through a focus on the creative process.

Creative preparation

Creative preparation is a receptive state, a resting, and a taking in, a reflecting time. Creative work is an active state of giving out, releasing, expressing. The simplest form of rhythm is repetition, as when your breath expands and contracts. Breathe out to energize the cells; then breathe in to let your lungs fill with air.

Creativity includes a sensory process with an exploration of matter. Creativity requires a time of discovery; not to be interrupted, to allow concentration, to allow connection between the self and the universe. There is always a balance of opposites: near and far - to find a sense of space, dark and light - to build form, warm and cold colours - to

intensify the values, movement in and out of the picture - to create living form. Balance and understanding is required to create a large tree and a tiny leaf.

There are conditions more favourable to creative work:

- The external environment: space and light; materials ready with care and well arranged
- The internal conditions: a quiet repose, concentration, enjoyment or pleasure of the work.

The Creative Process as it pertains to Art Making in Therapy

There are a number of aspects intrinsic to the art making process of expression and objectification, which may be directly observed in the therapeutic interaction. These include:

Choices

There are concrete choices presented all the time: paper or clay, paint or pens, this colour or that colour, this brush or that brush, and so on. How do we make those choices? What do the choices signify? For some individuals the presentation of the opportunity of choice may be the first experience of having this power of choice in their lives. The individual has the opportunity to choose or not to choose, to do or not to do. Taking control of one's own creative process can be the first step towards a more general empowerment of the individual in his or her social circumstances.

Problem Solving

The opportunity to make choices and solve problems in the art making process itself is a basic premise of the art as therapy approach.

Expression/Translation/Transformation

Feelings, memories, fantasies or experiences, which are difficult to articulate verbally, can often be more easily and evocatively expressed in the art making process. They become subsequently transformed through the creative process of symbol formation. The opportunity to visualize the pain and see it as outside of one self facilitates the movement to translate the inner experience and articulate it in the therapeutic and interpretive dialogue. Art making is intrinsically more sensual and bodily oriented than ordinary speech and thus one may bypass the more obvious forms of speech censorship, which we all employ. A very real expression of rage will be transformed and can become symbolic as it is expressed in the art.

Transitional Object

Artistic expression can serve as a transitional stage to further development. The development of the transitional object and the

ability to symbolize or make substitution for the real thing is basic to a child's stages of development.

Impulses

Also in the art, various impulses kept out of awareness appear and want to be dealt with. Aggression is a predominant affect, which is often repressed and which finds a safe release in the creative process.

Inner Conflicts

Bringing to light specific issues can be like finding a sunken treasure. The therapist is in a position to facilitate this process of recovery and help the individual understand how symptoms or personality traits are derived from attempts to cope with external stresses and internal conflicts.

Access to the Unconscious

The art provides an opportunity for accessing the unconscious and concretely visualizing the inner conflicts. Through the artwork and the verbal associations one finds evidence of the unconscious and the roots of the present emotional state. The art approach to therapy tends to bring unconscious memories into consciousness and this can enable one to fill in the emotional gaps in one's life. In art there is more direct access to unconscious and metaphor; images and repressed feelings have a tendency to emerge despite our best attempts to defend against them.

A man training to become an addictions counselor tried several times during an art therapy workshop to elude his own personal material. His first picture was an escape fantasy of sailing away in a boat. On the shore there was a cabin with a blackened window upstairs. In dialogue as we looked at the art he realized that he had depicted the cabin where he had witnessed his sister's abuse as a child. The next day he thought he would just make a clay candleholder because he did not want to explore intense personal feelings. During the closing circle, he suddenly brought forth his clay work. The candleholder had the word "insight" inscribed. He said that he had realized that it meant that he wanted to hold a candle up, to light up all the dark places where abuse has occurred and bring insight to himself and others. It was a very powerful moment when he saw how he had moved through the week from wanting to escape to wanting to see and understand.

Special note: The essentially metaphoric nature of the art therapy approach in treatment is one of the most significant therapeutic aspects that makes art therapy such a natural and familiar process in healing for native people. The native culture, language and spirituality are so eloquent in the concrete and natural use of metaphor that applying it to art in therapy can be very profound.

Spontaneous Art Therapy & Directive Art Therapy

The spontaneous or non-directive art therapy approach is an empowering process for the client and is a client-centered approach. The client chooses what to create, what materials to use, what issues to address in session. The art therapist, who uses a spontaneous approach, holds the view that the unconscious is at work in the creative process and that the issues will be revealed regardless of what is created or not created. A blank piece of paper may be very significant and eloquent in its silence. This approach views any part of the process or product created in the art therapy session as a springboard for the therapeutic dialogue. It requires more from the therapist in terms of spontaneity, trust and belief in the art therapy process and belief in the essential healing work as being the responsibility of the client.

In a directive approach the therapist assumes more control and structures the session by suggesting a topic or issue to be expressed in the art. Suggestions could be: draw your family, draw your favourite fairy tale, or draw something you are angry about. This last direction was part of a planned activity in a boy's social skills and self esteem group that I co-facilitated shortly after graduation. This was one of the first times I had witnessed a directive activity as my own art therapy training had focused on the spontaneous approach. Well - we got angry pictures all right! We also got five disclosures of sexual abuse in a group of six, and tremendous emotional reactions. This approach clearly can be very effective but a support system must be in place. With this example it is interesting to note that the counselors at this agency had been using these kinds of directives prior to my involvement but they had viewed the art as a cathartic release of emotion. However, with an art therapist looking at the images and listening to the boys' descriptions, there came a much deeper understanding of their experiences and inner dynamics, thus the disclosures.

There are different precautions that one must be aware of in using this kind of approach. Because one has taken control in the session then one is also responsible for closing down or resolving issues with the client by the end of the session. With children one needs to be careful and limit certain art materials as they can become over stimulating, for example clay or the use of lots of water with the clay.

A client-centered approach allows the client to set the tempo for therapy. Therefore, if the client is in charge of the choice of art, they are more likely to only go as far or as deep as they feel ready. There is also what one might call a client-centered open-ended directive approach in which open-ended suggestions or possibilities of issues to explore emerge directly out of dialogue with the client. For example if you are talking about a particular issue you could suggest that they might want to try and express it in the art. The open-ended manner also leaves them the choice of whether to explore the suggestion or not. Another ground rule for beginning art therapists is to not introduce any activity until you have experienced it for yourself and found it to be integrative and of personal value.

Spontaneous expression is generally emotionally safer for an individual as they can stay in charge of their choices and therapeutic process. Some individuals, however, feel safer with a few directions, which can be presented in an open-ended fashion where right or wrong responses would not apply. The directed approach may be easier or necessary for the clinician as there can be value in focusing attention in particular area, or they may be operating under a short-term therapy mandate. It just simply may be more pragmatic to be directive. This can occur during either individual or group work where the therapist feels constrained to actively encourage the client to move quickly into key issues. However it is not documented that a directive approach is any quicker in terms of treatment so it may have more to do with a therapist's level of comfort in a specific treatment plan and approach.

Only one time in my art therapy practice have I been firm in giving a directive and on this occasion I only said that it was important for the client to make a mark on the paper. I had been working with a young mother for an extended period of time doing verbal therapy and counseling her regarding her two small children who had been abused (and whom I was seeing in art and play therapy). She was having difficulty in taking action to protect her children and to be assertive in making choices and decisions in her life. It appeared that perhaps this was being reflected in her reluctance also to use the art. I placed the directive in the context of her practicing taking action with all the risks involved. She managed to paint a small black area on a corner of the page while turned the other way so that she couldn't see what she was

doing. This piece of art was a turning point in her therapy. She began to paint very evocative pictures and develop her sense of self worth and empowerment as she took more charge in the art making and in her parenting.

The therapist's role is to provide a safe and supportive environment for self-exploration. This includes the ability to accept, or tolerate all of the individual's repressed feelings and traumas. This allows the individual to come to accept all the divergent aspects of him or herself and find meaning through creative self-expression. The ingredients of the supportive environment are defined by specific boundaries of time, of place, and of the therapeutic relationship.

Some activities and techniques are useful for art therapy groups with children or adolescents. It can be beneficial to introduce something like puppet making or styrofoam print making to extend their creative ideas and enhance their sense of self-mastery and self esteem. Generally speaking, in a spontaneous art therapy group, the spectrum of choice of art materials would always be available. This means that a child could paint or use clay at any time if they choose, but they would be exposed to other possibilities. This would provide opportunities for coping with new information, practicing problem-solving skills and working through technical frustrations.

The ground rule is that there is no wrong way to create art. The only parameters the art therapist needs to set would pertain to safety of the individual, group members, the therapist and the environment. It is not beneficial to allow a child or adolescent to destroy the art therapy room as this would lead them to believe that their anger is dangerous. It is important for the art therapist to create an indestructible holding environment and to not be destroyed by the artist/client's actions. Anger and aggression need to be focused, symbolized, expressed and released through the art making. Sometimes the therapist needs to set other parameters regarding the use of material due to budget constraints. For example, the issue of whether to allow pouring paint may come up. Pouring paint may be important for a heavily defended repressed individual but problematic for a child who needs containment. It is always preferable to set your table and environment in a way that does not lead to extensive setting of limits. For example, you might have

the paint jars half full so that it both doesn't encourage pouring and if pouring occurs there is a limit to the amount of paint consumed.

Regarding the release of aggressive emotions there is a basic guideline that I use regarding pounding clay. Artist/clients are not given the opportunity to pound clay with implements as this can easily escalate their aggressive feelings rather than help them to give symbolic form to the issue at hand. They can, however, pound the clay with their fist and can have enough clay so that they don't hurt their hand. The distinction here is that in using their own hand they will get physical feedback from the expression of the aggression. This parallels the client's outside life in that he or she will get feedback or consequences from the expression of aggression. The intent is to provide cathartic release, and to encourage symbolic expression and verbal articulation regarding the roots of the anger. It is hoped that this will lead to insight and the development of skills in the management of anger.

I want to emphasize the importance I place on spontaneous art therapy, looking at the art and reviewing it in any of the ways already indicated: free association, looking at the focal points, amplification, and gestalt or with the phenomenological method. One can use whatever has been created as a springboard for the process.

It is my belief that directives should emerge directly out of the context of the client's process. However, there are some directives that encourage self- reflection and there are other techniques or activities that will motivate certain clients or groups. Therefore I believe that it is good to be familiar with a number of different possible directives and activities that might be appropriate or adapted at any point. I don't want to leave the reader with the impression that I use primarily a directive approach because of all of the activities included in this book.