

## Student Voice

# The creative arts offer many unique contributions to psychotherapy and counselling: A student's subjective review

By Eileen M. Higgins



In this article, I will discuss expressive therapy, its themes, concepts, and the creative process of emotional and cognitive expression. Specifically, I will examine the correlation between art and therapy from two perspectives; that of a student, and as a parent of a child diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Therefore, I delineate my experiential learning and understanding of the creative and expressive therapy module through my own story.

So, what is it about art that brings more awareness? Many artworks are meticulously

designed and placed in specific locations to encourage contemplation. For example, Berset's *Broken Chair*, (Handicap International, (HI) humanity & inclusion, 2018) a powerful symbolic expression; stimulating reflection and encouraging action for the victims of war from those in leadership.

I was introduced to art therapy over fifteen years ago, long before I fashioned the intent of becoming a counsellor. I was, among other things at that time, a parent to three children. At aged four and without speech, my son, and youngest child at that time,

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was found to be on the Autism spectrum. Unable to communicate his feelings and thoughts, art therapy was introduced by my son's Occupational therapist. Dalley states "... art therapy can offer an alternative, non-verbal means of communication for those whose use of speech or understanding of words is incomplete or non-existent." (1984, p. 115). In the case of my son, the theme chosen was animals. It is widely understood and accepted that individuals with ASD benefit greatly from interactions with animals (Autismawarenesscentre.com, 2020). Through this creative and expressive therapy, it was possible for me to capture the essence of his condition and

acquire insight into a little of my son's inner world. Gaining an Awareness- a feeling sense of my son's world from inside out. Importantly, allowing my son to meaningfully engage with me and others. With his amassed collection of drawings dispersed throughout our home, my son creatively communicated his inner emotions and thoughts through this alternative medium.

Emery (2004) reports on a study of the growth and progress of a six-year-old boy diagnosed with Autism using art therapy as an intervention, "... use of nonverbal expression through the experience of making art encourages children with autism to begin to represent their experience." (p.147). Progressing further, and through continued employment of his own drawings, my son's vocabulary grew, and to an acceptable standard. Although still below average for his age, it was sufficient for entry to mainstream school. Moreover, he excelled at art, and his verbal communication continued to improve over the years. It is this emphasis on strengths and inner resources that facilitate development of the individual's potential (Academy of Pediatrics, 2020) and thus provided a sense of accomplishment. Accordingly, developing confidence and increased self-esteem, resulting in academic achievement (Al-Hebaish, 2012). For example, to date, he not only sat the Leaving certificate exam, but passed every subject. Quite the accomplishment when one is reminded of the once four-year-old boy who was without speech.

Regarding art in therapy, is the counsellor's therapeutic approach significant? There are differing

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theoretical modalities in art therapy (Hogan, 2015); such as the psychodynamic approach of Freud and Jung, and the client-centred approach of Rogers (1951). For example, Freud's concept of *free association* (Jones, 2018) may be viewed as integral to creative processes, encouraging individuals' exploration of inner thoughts and feelings. This allows for instinctive expression, free of rehearsal. The "... therapist uses the arts as a healing process and for self-exploration and understanding," (Rogers, 1993, p. 98). Through my engagement with an art therapy module during my training, I discovered how day-to-day occurrences impress on whatever is created; how I was feeling in the moment. Rogers (1993) indicates that "...creative arts is [sic] a powerful and effective way to help clients identify and be in touch with their feelings." (p.96). Art can communicate feelings and thoughts which are otherwise non-verbalised. Rogers (1993) explains how by utilising, "...expressive arts also allows clients to tap into and explore unconscious material." (p. 97). Importantly, one does not require natural creative skill to involve oneself: with art therapy the "... general emphasis [is] on self-expression, rather than making a

'good' painting..." (Dalley, 1984, p. xvii). In addition, keeping in mind my son's prior beneficial experience with art therapy, I involved myself in the module with both interest and curiosity.

Beginning with improved control over my 'inner critic' I immersed myself in creative expression. Interestingly, after choosing the materials I wanted to work with – crayons, I spontaneously began to break each crayon and peel off their wrappers. What materials we choose to use in art therapy can be as significant as the image we create (Orbach, 2003, p. 2). Therefore, what meaning did this seemingly involuntary action convey? Later I was to discover that it did indeed hold a particular meaning. However, if anyone had noticed and inquired at that time, the answer that apprehension had been the most probable motive for this behaviour, would have been offered. Nevertheless, I remained consciously aware of this outwardly as, perhaps, an anxiety response. Orbach highlights (2003) "how accurately ... materials express ... emotions and state-of-mind ... the selection of materials is often governed by unconscious processes rather than logic or conscious knowledge" (p. 3). Additionally, and importantly, it was the material that suited me best "... the creator will always choose the best-suited Materials that reflect his innermost feelings and desires," (Orbach, 2003, p. 3). Furthermore, McNiff (1994) indicates that "I create from where I am not from where I think I should be." (p. 35).

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colouring; damaged, they may be, yet still useful.

During my life, I have experienced many difficulties and have overcome many adversities including; losing the sight in one eye, having a significant hearing impairment, incurable tinnitus, twice surviving breast cancer, and a resultant heart condition. More recently I have been undergoing tests for suspected Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Just like the broken and wrapper-less crayons, I still work! Notwithstanding and despite all of these immense difficulties, I remain resolute. With the capacity to take on new challenges, perhaps not the same as in the past, nevertheless, I can keep moving forward; discover new purpose, and create new goals for myself. Indeed, difficult times in our lives may shape us, however, they do not define us.

Returning to the subject of themes in art therapy, e.g. the animal theme utilised in my son's case, I personally found it frustrating to always be given a set theme during my art module at college. This, also revealing much of my personality

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of preferring to go my own way and not follow the rulebook. Importantly, it reflects the fact that I am a published fiction author; as fiction of course allows for free expression. Consequently, following from this experience, it is useful to regard art as being a medium or vehicle for reflection and self-discovery.

To conclude, art therapy is clearly effective for recovering or remembering the 'self'; it taps into the child of ourselves - our inner child. Removing oneself from the adult-self or 'ego'. Thus, the true self is unencumbered; allowing for natural creative expression of our inner thoughts

and emotions to emerge. Ask a four-year-old to draw a picture, and in the case with my own son, he absorbed uncontaminated by self-consciousness; and in doing so discovered the secret; one is free from suppositions, judgement, and presumptions, where self-consciousness otherwise may inhibit self-expression. By employing art therapy with the interpretation of visual images combined with 'talk' therapy – clients may uncover emotions and thoughts that they may not otherwise have been capable of accessing directly – put another way, when words fail, art may prevail! ☺

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Eileen hails from Kildare, is a published author of fiction novels, and a parent of five children, ranging in age from 10 – 30 years. Two of her sons are on the Autism spectrum. She has a Diploma in Counselling and is a newly accredited Counsellor (This issue's list of first time accreditations).

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