

Improving communication with Art Therapy

Artistic images invite us to look at and reflect on them. Art therapy uses the process and results of art-making as a way of communicating thoughts, feelings and experiences.

Many people share a belief in the ability of art to expand communication and expression. The creation of and what is done with these images after their creation demonstrates art therapy's potential to adapt to suit the artist's needs.

Traumatic brain injury changes and challenges a person's way of communicating. Their understanding of their relationship to the world has been dramatically altered, and the creative process can help one rebuild this understanding.

Rainbow Rehabilitation Centers offers art therapy to its clients, and both adults and children benefit from the opportunity to heal from their injury and support their rehabilitation goals in this way.

What is Art Therapy?

Art therapy is a mental health profession that uses the creative process of art making to improve and enhance the physical, mental and emotional well-being of individuals of all ages. (American Art Therapy Association)

It is based on the belief that the creative process involved in artistic expression helps people to resolve conflicts and problems, develop interpersonal skills, manage behavior, reduce stress, increase self-esteem and self-awareness, and achieve insight (Sutherland, Waldman, and Collins 2010).

In art therapy, a person is given the opportunity to express their feelings and thoughts in a safe environment in the presence of a trained therapist. It is the process of creating art and building relationships with the therapist and other clients that can help them communicate thoughts and feelings that they could not previously put into words. This process can lead to a new understanding of themselves (Edwardsdottir and Ingvarsdottir, 2005).

Art Therapy and Brain Injury

The altering and sometimes disabling of the brain's processes for communication is a common result of a brain injury. This type of injury affects cognitive, emotional and physical centers and results in disorientation and disconnection with oneself and the world around them. The process of recovery includes a redefinition of oneself (Wexler, 2004).

The identity of a person is flowing yet stable throughout their life (Holzknecht 2004). After brain injury, what was once thought to be a stable part of one's personality may be very different or even absent. The non-verbal communication that



Art therapist and author, Beth Lorey helps a Rainbow client to express herself through the creative process.

art offers can lead a person to "approach one's unknown self, learn to recognize one's feelings and emotions, and accept and value oneself as a developing and learning individual" (Holzhacker and Holzknecht, 2004).

The loss of identity, low self-esteem and lack of motivation that are also a part of brain injury and recovery make this recognition and acceptance important to successful rehabilitation.

Art therapy can also contribute to the numerous therapies in which an individual will participate on their road of rehabilitation, supporting the development of:

- Fine and gross motor skills
- Attention/focus
- Following directions
- Sequencing
- Generating ideas
- Empathy
- Memory

Art Therapy and Instruction

The right amount of instruction will enhance an art experience. The role of instruction in an art therapy session will change with the client and the therapist's theoretical approach.

Instruction can set up some individuals with expectations and distractions as they focus on using the material correctly. These distractions can take away from the power of the creative process, which is at the heart of art therapy.

As prominent art and expressive therapist Shaun McNiff described it, "Artists with radically different degrees of technical expertise are afflicted with an inability to value the image for what it is....Technique is vitally important to art

Art Therapy *continued*

therapy. But we can begin only where we find ourselves at any given time.” (McNiff 1992).

When an art medium is first presented, time and encouragement to experiment is offered. Playful experimentation and free exploration can be difficult and anxiety-provoking. Giving and taking this time and space for exploration requires an acceptance that there may not be an end product. Then there is a natural point at which instruction and a more planned project are needed. Next there is a need to organize an experience in a coherent way (Rubin 1984). The art therapist will guide the individual to a balance of freedom and structure in which they can best use the art experience.

Art Therapy at Rainbow

Currently, Rainbow provides art therapy groups in the adult and pediatric programs. Art therapy in a group setting can offer several opportunities for the individuals to grow and work on their rehabilitation. Just a few of the benefits of group therapy are:

- Learning how to interact with others and receive feedback.
- Discovering that others have the same problems, anxieties and fears and that they are not alone.
- The nature of a group structure is less threatening than individual treatment.

Introducing art into a group:

- Can provide an alternative way of communicating.
- Can provide a less threatening way of expressing oneself.
- The artwork can be the focus for interaction.
- Using art materials can add an element of play and fun as well as being serious.

Recent research has indicated that self-identity has improved and social relationships developed after therapeutic art interventions. The research involved adolescents with learning disabilities who have experienced great losses in their lives (Hautala 2004).

The importance of these social relationships is described in the Journal of American Art Therapy (Sutherland, Waldman, and Collins 2010). Students begin to see more clearly how they relate to one another in the group and gain awareness of their interactions with family members, friends, teachers and even strangers.

Group art therapy can help a person move away from self-focused, uncooperative, or inconsolable behaviors. There is also an important sense of belonging in a group that leads to a feeling of participating, high self-esteem, and self-confidence

that can be won by being a part of a group, cooperating with and being useful to others.

The therapist’s role is to encourage interaction between members, make comments and ask questions of the group as a whole (Waller 1993). Groups will produce art work based on their own ideas as well as themes introduced by the therapist. The value of the group creative process and the interactions facilitated by the making of images are a remarkable thing to experience. ❖

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