

# You Don't Have To Be An Artist to Express Yourself

- Deb Schwarze, MS, MA, LCPC

- Expressive Arts Therapist and Caring Canines Coordinator, SwedishAmerican Health System, Rockford, Illinois

- I. Intro to Art Therapy – What IS it?
  - a. According the American Art Therapy Association, 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. It is based on the belief that the creative process involved in artistic self-expression helps people resolve conflicts and problems, develop interpersonal skills, manage behavior, reduce stress, increase self-esteem and self-awareness, and achieve insight.”
- II. Where is it used?
  - a. Medical facilities
  - b. Outpatient therapy
  - c. Long term care facilities
  - d. Mental health facilities
  - e. Schools
- III. Why art?
  - a. For all ages, there are some events and experiences for which we have no words
  - b. Expressive therapies help us tap into the unconscious and help us express our hidden and/or buried emotions and thoughts
- IV. But I can't draw
  - a. All of us our creative
  - b. Because we are unique individuals, we show our creative sides in different ways
  - c. As with any effective counseling experience, expressive therapies are designed to fit the individual's needs and strengths
- V. What kind of art is utilized in a school setting?
  - a. There are truly no limits as to what can be utilized-
  - b. Supplies can range from a box of crayons and a piece of paper to elaborate art studios
- VI. Why does it work?
  - a. According to Hass-Cohen & Carr (2008) and Lusebrink (2004), experiential therapies use motor activity (moving a crayon, paint brush, scissors, etc) stimulate and strengthen connections between the brain's subcortical regions

and the neo-cortex (bottom-up approach) OR cognitive challenges (trying to figure out how to manipulate the art making tools) activates and strengthens the connections between the neocortex and subcortical regions of the brain (top-down approach)

- b. Creating something triggers the pleasure centers of the brain
  - c. The distraction of focusing on the art makes it easier to talk
  - d. The creative process helps foster a sense of mastery
  - e. Focus on the “process” rather than the “product”
- VII. Examples of art medium and their possible uses and meanings
- a. When a variety of choices are given, the choice of media that the student makes *may* be indicative of their emotional state
  - b. Pencils, crayons, oil pastels, markers – range from very controlled (pencil with eraser) to more open (markers)
  - c. Clay, play dough or plasticene (sculpy) may need to be used cautiously
    - i. With some students the feel of the material on their hands may be either enjoyable or distasteful
    - ii. It may also trigger deep feelings
  - d. Watercolors are known for their fluidity and difficulty to control
    - i. This can be helpful when working with someone who seems to have buried feelings and emotions and is seemingly very self controlled
    - ii. However, it can be frustrating and too overwhelming for a child who is already agitated and anxious
  - e. Magazine photo collage
  - f. Expressive art journaling
- VIII. Designed Project vs Free Form Art
- a. Many opinions
  - b. Examples of when projects can be helpful
- IX. As a school nurse, how can I use the expressive arts?
- a. Students with attention difficulties may benefit from the different type of focus that art brings
  - b. Students with cognitive deficits may benefit from utilizing the creative, right side of the brain
  - c. Motor skills can be practiced
- X. My experiences working as an art therapist in a special education department of a public school
- XI. Summary
- XII. Let’s make something!
- XIII. Questions

## References

Hass-Cohen, N. & Carr, R. (2008). *Art therapy and clinical neuroscience*. Philadelphia. Jessica Kingsley.

Lusebrink, V. (2004). Art therapy and the brain: An attempt to understand the underlying processes of art expression in therapy. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 21(3), 125-135.

Malchiodi, C. (1998). *Understanding children's drawings*. New York: Guilford Press

Malchiodi, C. (2007). *The art therapy sourcebook*. New York: McGraw-Hill

McNiff, S. (2004). *Art heals: How creativity cures the soul*. Boston: Shambhala Publications

Van Meter, M.L. Art therapy and special education. Retrieved from <http://www.arttherapy.org>

Gain important education outcomes: Implement a successful art therapy program within k-12 schools (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.arttherapy.org>