

“Expressive Arts Therapy – The Power of Creative Expression!”

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Expressive Arts Therapy uses different artistic and creative modalities like dance, drama, music, puppets, figurines, art and other props that can be used in a therapeutic manner. Through simple techniques using expressive creative arts, an individual is able to understand their core issues on a subconscious level. This provides a deeper insight into them and can many times be an eye opener about something they need to work on or change. The notion of ‘therapy’ is a more westernized concept, where culture is not as communal or inclusive as it is in Indian traditions. People are more open to accepting therapy as a way of life in the West, as they lack many avenues of communal expression and cultural programs. In India access to formal therapy and counseling is only for a select minority. Also the idea of living in a joint family and the manner in which the familial setup is in India, people are more secure in terms of having someone to talk to. Music, dance, crafts and the performing arts have a huge significance in culture and religion, and have been around in India from centuries. They propagate our festivals, traditions, rites and rituals till today. Although roots of this field can be traced back to ancient Shamanic rituals, or performances of Ancient Eastern Mythological stories through dance and tradition, the United States of America has been pivotal in making it a professional practice under the division of Mental Health Counseling. The number of therapists and practitioners around the world are increasing, as new scientific research is being able to back the claims, that engagement in the artistic modalities has a direct and positive correlation to various lobes of the human brain among various other health benefits.

The essence of Expressive Therapies is complete spontaneous expression in the present moment, no matter what modality one is using. The notion of planning what one will do fails, as in spontaneity lays the magic. Paolo Knill (2005) says, an authentic work can never be adequately reproduced (p.29). Something that is expressed is done so at that moment and even if it were to be repeated there would be a difference, even if it were

slight, each time. The feeling might be similar, but the creation will definitely be different than the last time. In this work the final product is not as important as the process. As during the process of creation itself, the healing can occur. Malchiodi (2008) states, “All creative arts therapies and expressive therapies utilize tactile, kinesthetic, and auditory experiences in various ways. Each form of creative expression has its own unique property and role in therapeutic work depending on its applications, practitioner, client, setting and objectives” (Pg. 23). In this field the therapist has the freedom to choose what artistic modality would work best for the patient, as well as use a range of creative interventions to assess what medium the client is most comfortable in using.

In Expressive Therapies the different arts come together and hold value and space for the other. Many times one art form supports the other one, for example an artistic expression using crayons can be interpreted with movement using the body. The ability to use a range of modalities provides a more wholesome view of the clients mind. The experience is more substantiated and deeper. Halprin (2003) states (after a process where she completes the process of dancing and then drawing with her patients), “although movement leads behind nothing concrete, the painting we do provides an artifact to mark, or remind us of, the existence of the dance” (p.133). By making an art piece after the movement expression on the same topic, there is a concrete memory of the expression that can be revisited whenever desired.

There are a range of benefits and outcomes in this work, predominantly the ability to facilitate letting go of stored and repressed emotions and feelings that are stored in our subconscious memory within our bodies. Listening to spontaneous impulses and messages provides clarity and new insight into one’s personality. Halprin (2003) goes on to state that, “in terms of movement based expressive therapy, the expressive interplay between body, feeling and imagination is necessary for a true embodied experience. Along with this a framework for developing the aesthetic capacity and the metaphoric relationship between the art and therapy process”(p.103). She claims that through practice we are able to get deeper into ourselves, “we can achieve a higher sense of awareness accompanied by a wider range of expressiveness” (p.110). Having a wider

range of expressiveness a client is able to achieve more goals, as there is a stronger foundation for self-exploration and healing.

Each creative or artistic modality carries their own strengths and can be used in a variety of ways. Progress can be measured by the happiness derived while engaging in creative expression. Not only in terms how one feels, but creative expression also has the ability to reveal on a deeper level the true picture of someone's mind, current issues and personality traits. If you are not given an end goal or aesthetic form to conform to, true expression stems from what is being authentically felt in that moment in time, no matter what creative medium or modality is used.

In 'Art Therapy' there are various activities such as Free Drawing, Collage making, Mask making, Zen Scribbles where clients work on issues from their own personal lives on a spontaneous and intuitive level. This helps the client access those parts of them that their cognitive intellect might not have been able to process. The clients have complete freedom to express themselves in whatever way they wish. For a commercial artist the act of painting in itself is therapeutic and rewarding. For children specifically, this work gives them a non-judgmental way of expressing their feelings as they are not very good with emoting, expressing and regulating their emotions, let alone understand them. Children in the current education system are very scared of getting something wrong or not being able to draw an image with aesthetic perfection due to punishment or a scolding. Since there is a trend for aesthetic perfection and commercially viable art, it puts a lot of pressure on free creative artistic expression and the manner in which it is perceived. Expressive Art Therapy honors even the basic scribbles, the symbols used and even the smallest impulses that carry a lot of emotion and meaning for a child who is developing on every level. It finds and gives meanings to expression that actually holds immense significance for them. The last thing we want to do is destroy a child's self-confidence and esteem because we were unable to understand or let them indulge in their own creative imagination. Because the child is not reprimanded and is given a platform to be who he or she is, the confidence, communication skills and self esteem of a child is heightened. On a verbal level also the child becomes more emotive and closer to his peers. Many times when a child is going through some trauma or abuse

at home, aggressive behaviors come out in artistic expression more prominently through strong symbols. The child mostly cannot intellectually process it and hence cannot communicate the experience effectively.

A significant example using Art in therapy was after the second World War, people underwent intense trauma and the only way they could express, share and heal themselves was to draw out images of what they had witnessed, seen or felt, as talking about it was way too difficult to do.

In using 'Play as therapy', in a Sand tray session example, a child is asked to arrange figurines to depict an image of their family, using a choice of basic toy figurines that appeal to them. While they arrange a depiction of their family portrait, Even the distance of positioning the family members in the activity talks a lot about the actual relationship and about the subtle nuances that they might not be able to talk about or process verbally. For example if the child is having an issue with a parent or their sibling, the positioning of the toy figurine will be far away from them, as opposed to them touching or being in proximity to each other. These can be used as vital cues that the therapist gets in order to help the child tackle and deal with issues they are unable to talk about. Subtle messages like these along with body language and artistic symbols can help and benefit the therapeutic relationship tremendously giving a lot of opportunity for growth and resolution.

In 'Music Therapy' playing an instrument to express emotions is therapeutic and sometimes cathartic, while listening to Tibetan Gong Sounds is very healing on a psychosomatic and cellular level. Since prehistoric times, Shamanic healers have used the sounds of the drums to heal people and alleviate them of their physical and mental ailments. Sound as a vibration can also be honored in terms of the tremendous powers of mantras and chanting. The repetition of reciting them plays a vital role in our religion and culture, which could lead to finding peace and harmony within and helps us express gratitude to our creator.

Within 'Dance/Movement Therapy' the body is used as a primary tool for expression. 'Authentic Movement' is when the patient is made to move their body in complete silence, with their eyes closed in presence of a therapist. Since the only influence to move is the inner self, it honors the true and unbiased movement repertoire, which is without the influence of choreography and impressionism. The objective of Dance/Movement therapy is to expand the movement repertoire of a person and increase body awareness. A wider range of movement over time is a tangible measurable indication of progress. Different principles and systems in using the body as an avenue of expression, work on the same premises but have different methods such as the Feldenkrais system, Five Rhythms, Laban System of Notation among others. Healing and progress might start on physical level with movement, but will unknowingly address the mental and emotional/spiritual components as well.

In 'Drama Therapy', therapists could use different techniques such as Psychodrama, where the patient enacts the problem at hand. The presence of an antagonist and a protagonist create the necessary dialogue and connection for the patient to be able to explore their role in the drama with respect to the actual situation in real life. Role-playing is quite effective in understanding a perspective that might be very different from one's own. This happens in a more personal and intimate setting, where as in bigger groups there are more communal dramatic exercises that are performed. For example: Drama for Social Change is where a group creates a dramatic story enactment, using pressing social or political issues that are affecting them. Performing it and sharing the story has a big role to play in reconciliation, understanding and awareness. The power of performance has its own value and attributes in terms of moving the audience as well as the performer for narrating his story.

Children that are suffering from cognitive disabilities receive a lot from the freedom of the Expressive Arts. For many of them speech is an impairment and hence through creative abstract expression a lot of their feelings and emotions have a place to be revealed. The lack of an avenue of verbal expression; coupled with mental and physical deformities, the tight structure, competition and ideals of an art or dance class can be frustrating and debilitating for them. In working with children who are diagnosed

within the Autistic spectrum, I have seen that using a medium such as Finger Painting, gives them immense confidence and happiness as they do not have to worry about how to hold the brush, or how much paint to use, or what they need to draw; but they create a beautiful colorful abstract picture, with their own fingers. The tactile connection that they make to the painting does wonders for them in understanding and exploring ideas of connection and communication along with a sense of pride that something they created deserves recognition. Even for them while dancing with their bodies, they receive such an immense joy; that it is almost spiritually liberating to see them move their bodies with happiness, excitement and determination. This is common for other children as well who are suffering from other kinds of disabilities, such as Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation, Slow Learning, Dyslexia, ADHD, where for them, being engaged physically or artistically in a non structured manner facilitates the release of pent up emotions and holds immense value for their overall happiness and well being. Since most of the disabilities have no curable remedy, making their quality of life better makes a huge difference.

Unlike formal Psychotherapy the client does not talk about their problems directly with the Expressive Art Therapist. Sometimes during the creative process or only after the process is done do the symbols, images and cues that are highlighted by the client open up room for conversation and bring up more issues for resolution. For a therapist this gives a very deep understanding of what the patient is undergoing versus them trying to cognitively find a reason to justify how they are feeling as soon as they start their session. Finding out the root cause of the issue might be more effective in helping the client involved. The client after viewing and experiencing his authentic and creative artistic expression has the ability to think about where he is or what his problems are, he can then dwell on it and perhaps make his own personal goals. If not, he has more time to slowly come to terms with the concept of change and deal with it in a holistic manner as opposed to being confronted by it. He may in his own time slowly start verbalizing and finding a fruitful relationship with the therapist. Sometimes uttering or expressing without thought reveals the truth of the expression. Donna Halprin (2003) states, “the exercise of the arts, in the decentering phase, provides that possibility of giving

prescriptions which may have an effect beyond the session time” (p.32). The client will always refer back to what was expressed as a symbolic expression of their soul.

Even in deepening a child’s knowledge, basic education using movement has been proved to have significant results as educational concepts are retained better. Involving a child through physically embodying an educational concept has had remarkable results in increasing the child’s attention spans, as they are engaging not only their minds but also their bodies and their whole attention. In teaching children educational concepts such as the concept of plant photosynthesis for example, if we were to ask them to become the seed, and pretend to be the water and make them do the whole process like a choreographed dance they would be able to understand and grasp the concepts. Muscle memory and embodiment have a deeper significance and memory in one’s body, and physicalizing a situation reinforces it on many deeper levels.

Improvisation or spontaneous expression through movement or drama has minimal structuring which provides a larger space for the client to engage in free play and provide adequate freedom to explore inner impulses. By not imposing mental or verbal restrictions, the impulses of the body and mind are able to lead the person into whichever direction their impulses guide them towards. These activities also help an individual listen to themselves or their inner voice clearer. Some activities might have the potential to bring up a lot of fears for people and unblock energies that have been constrained, ignored or subdued. Halprin (2003) quotes Knill et al (2005) stating,

“by interrelating each of these mediums in systematic and repetitive ways, we are constantly recreating and strengthening the interplay between body, emotion, and imagination. Each medium speaks with a particular resonance to our physical, emotional and mental levels of being. This resonance can be understood and used to encourage our sensory motor responses in particular ways. Movement and dance correlate with our visual, auditory and kinesthetic senses, and resonate deeply with body sensation and feelings” (pp.131).

By strengthening the interplay between the body, emotion and imagination, the client is more centered and happy. He is more confident and secure in all aspects of his being and

personality. One of the pioneers and propagators of this field, Shaun McNiff writes: “If we stay closely attuned to the processes of creative expression, it will suggest new frontiers of understanding” (1988, p. 47). It is this understanding that the arts have always served to help individuals overcome adversity and tune into a deeper engagement in life, that has been the life force of this new profession and it is this vitality that will sustain it into the future (Kossak, 2009). We must adapt ourselves, and open up new ways and avenues for increasing the scope and range of activities in our therapeutic professional capacities.

We have to let go of the notions that in order to engage in dance, we have to spend hours of vigorous training and timeless discipline. In order for us to be do some art; we need not be famous artists or skilled in any form. In order to play and engage in imagination we do not have to be children. Going back to our roots and the basics always helps in making our grounding more secure, especially in this fast changing globalized world. The Expressive Arts gives us a way to access the ancient wisdom that is everywhere and within us, and gives us an opportunity to honor that divinity. We must give our children the freedom to do what they want and honor everything that makes them who they are. In Pablo Picasso’s famous words, “Every child is born an artist, the problem is remaining one when we grow up”.

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