

Art Therapy Vs "Regular Therapy"

by BZA therapist Melanie Zamborsky, LCPC, ATR-BC

So you've never heard of Art Therapy? Or you have heard the term, but you have no idea what it is? You've come to the right place! When people say they are 'going to therapy', they are usually referring to what we call 'Traditional Talk Therapy'. There are so many useful, helpful, therapeutic ways to work on things people may struggle with and talking is typically going to be at the base of any therapy work someone does. But what if someone needs something a little different? Or what if they have tried therapy a few times but it just isn't quite capturing what they need to get from it? And what if a person struggles to feel understood even when they have tried every word to express what they are feeling? While it's certainly not the only expressive therapeutic approach, Art Therapy is worth a try and you may be amazed by how much you learn about yourself in a new way.

Art Therapy is a field of its own within the larger world of mental health and psychology where trained professionals utilize art materials to help a client/patient work through a multitude of possible emotional health concerns. Art Therapy does not require anyone to be an 'artist' and it isn't 'only for kids'. In fact, anyone can benefit from it as long as they are willing to give it a shot! It often finds a way to put emotions and experiences into a format that takes the concept "a picture is worth a thousand words" to a meaningful place that can allow for tremendous emotional growth. What if you could explore your emotions---good ones, bad ones, all of them---in the safety of therapy and have someone who is specifically trained to help you do so at your pace? In therapy a client should always feel safe and comfortable. Adding art materials into the mix can seem unusual or maybe even odd at first. Just remember the art therapist went to school for a long time and they know how important your concerns are and they know how to use these tools to help you explore your inner world in a way that fits you. Art therapists tend to be flexible, open-minded, creative people who are still excellent listeners and have two main goals in mind: to get you feeling better and leading a healthier life. They just do it with a few extra tools!

I have worked with little ones and everyone older for the last 16 +years using art therapy much of the time. Some clients try it and never want to stop while others might use it for some sessions and focus on just talk based therapy for others. I work from a place of wanting the therapy to fit the client so no one ever has to feel stuck in something that doesn't work for them.

So what does this look like exactly? Here is one version that may give you a little window into what to expect: I meet with a client and then I try to gain as much history about them, their life, and what brings them to services just like "talk therapy" intake sessions. Then, if possible in the first session, I introduce art materials (ex pencil, pen, crayons, pastels, markers, paint, clay, etc) as a concept and suggestions of what we can work on or how to use certain materials (ex how to mold clay materials, cutting things out/adhering collage). I am there as the guide and cheerleader. Typically I give options for clients to start with---at the beginning it is common to use something like a House-Tree-Person drawing and it's just like it sounds. The client draws a house, draws a tree, draws a person and is also encouraged to add any other details. This can serve as a starting place to show someone who is new to the idea that it's not so scary and I'm right there with them. I often draw or create right alongside my client. We can talk or not talk while my client works---just depends on what feels good to them! I give my client a time check in and we come to a good stopping point to be able to talk more about their picture/image/creation together. Sometimes we can make immediate connections to things that they are feeling or things that are happening in their lives. Other times the client isn't ready for that---maybe not for a long time---and that is ok too. I'm trained to know when the time is right and how to

help someone get there. Either way, the client is able to process whatever they need to do in as many words as is comfortable for them and they have a highly trained therapist at their side through it all.

My goal is to give every client as many ways as possible to express what they have going on inside in the ways that work for them. Sometimes feelings and life situations show up more through metaphor or symbols in art. I am trained to be a 'detective' with my client---we figure out what comes next together. I am there to make sure things go at the right pace for each person and support my clients any way I can. We can use nearly any material we can get our hands on (or that is safe in an office!) and artwork can happen both in and out of session which keeps the growth happening ongoing. We are partners in your care and your mental health.

So...what do you say? Ready to give art therapy a try?! I can't wait to meet you and introduce you to the power of your own creativity and how it can help you!