

Creative rehabilitation: Art therapy for the elderly

By Audrey R. Miller, MSW, RSW, CCRC

When visiting clients in the community, I am always pleased to see beautiful art, created by my clients, hanging on their walls. There is often a story behind the work; sometimes, the person can verbalize this story, while other times, the work itself is the story. These “stories” are being shared in many homes and long-term-care facilities thanks to art therapy.

Healing and life-enhancing

Art therapy is based on the belief that creating art is healing and life-enhancing. The therapy, which began as treatment for severely emotionally disturbed children and adults, provides a safe and structured setting to help participants express their thoughts or feelings in a verbal or non-verbal way. Drawing, painting, or discussing art are a few examples of the therapeutic interventions. And the individual is free to choose from a variety of media to express repressed thoughts and feelings related to conflicts, traumatic experiences, fantasies, dreams, self-image, and patterns of relationships with others.

Creating and accomplishing

In a long-term-care setting, an art therapy program strives to improve the quality of life

for residents by

- promoting individuality and a sense of being valued as a person
- building self-esteem through the accomplishment of doing and achieving
- elevating mood through the stimulation of creating
- promoting active involvement in programs
- decreasing agitation through the enjoyment of creating
- rehabilitating physical upper-body weakness by manipulating art media
- stimulating cognition and memory by incorporating visual, tactile and olfactory cues
- enhancing communication by allowing for verbal and non-verbal expression
- reducing restlessness through the captivating nature of creativity

Art therapy is often used to treat people with dementia, a growing population that needs on-going, creative programming to address their changing needs. The primary focus behind creative therapy programs for this population is to reduce anxiety and increase attention. Oftentimes, persons with

dementia will begin to feel isolated because of their condition. This experience can cause a great deal of anxiety and often leads to

depression, particularly in the early stages of the disease when a person recognizes her or his own confusion. Communication can also be difficult for someone with dementia, adding to their feeling of isolation. Art therapy can encourage communication as well as socialization and

expression, particularly for those clients in the later stages of dementia.

Experts in creativity

This unique therapy is delivered by art therapists, professionals who usually hold a master's degree in art therapy or a related field. They work with children, adolescents and adults and provide services to individuals, couples, families or groups. Therapists often work as part of clinical teams in settings that include rehabilitation facilities, community outreach programs, wellness centres, schools, nursing homes, art studios, and independent practices. They are skilled in the application of a variety of art modalities (ink, paint, clay, and other mediums) for treatment and assessment.

A source of stimulation

For many clients, art therapy provides an important source of stimulation to promote activity and encourage self-expression. Through creating and talking about art, a person can increase self-awareness, manage symptoms of a condition, alleviate stress, enhance cognitive abilities, and enjoy the life-affirming pleasures of creativity. Thoughts, feelings and experiences can be expressed through visual expression and through the therapeutic relationship of art and therapy.

References are available from the author upon request.
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A visual key

By Esther Zeller, BA, DTATI, TWS

Art therapy finds a visual key to unlock each person's door. The art therapist becomes a guide and creates a nurturing, non-judgemental and safe environment where both therapist and client can navigate a unique and personal journey together. In this environment, every contribution, whether visual or verbal is positive, has meaning and is important.

Unlike studio art, where technique and the end product is the focus, art therapy focuses on the relationship that is established between the therapist and the client that makes the process of creating more important than the end result.

The meaning and interpretation of a client's art belongs to the client. The images that are created may not always be pretty pictures; often, they are simple or even childlike, but that doesn't mean the artists are childish. The elderly should always be treated as adults, not as children.

The images created in art therapy may be used to encourage and share experiences and discussions with others, including groups, care providers, and family members.

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