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### **THE HEALING QUALITIES OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION** **The role of creative process and serious illness**

#### **PART 1: HOW DOES ART HEAL?**

Over the past few decades health care professionals and patients have begun to explore how creative approaches involving imagery and art making can have a positive effect on the body, mind and spirit. The field of medicine acknowledges and supports the value of creative approaches in health and wellness for patients. As a result, the practice of art therapy was declared a 'mind-body intervention' by the National Institutes of Health Office of Alternative Medicine (National Institute of Health 1994), Washington, DC. (Malchiodi,1999)

Creative expression in addition to medical treatment can be used to address the psychological, social, physical and spiritual issues of people living with cancer and chronic illness which may reduce psychological stress, have a positive influence for the immune system and overall functioning of the body.

McNiff (1992) has explored the concept of art as medicine and how art heals deeper aspects of the psyche. He states that the medicinal agent in art releases and contains psyche's therapeutic forces. He contends that the image is the channel through which soul speaks; an unending process of attunement and dialogue between images and the person who made the art. He explores the ideas of how images come to us, move through us and influence us. How we respond to images may be even more important than the message that the image brings. His definition of an image is broad based and includes pictures dreams, movements, sounds, poetry and enactments. He acknowledges the interplay between art, psychology and psychotherapy as it contributes to the work of the soul.

The experience of a life threatening illness or other traumatic life events can leave a person feeling overwhelmed, sometimes speechless. For those who find it difficult to verbalize problems or emotional experiences, art making can assist a person to communicate in images rather than words.

Naumberg (1987), one of the founders of Art Psychotherapy believed that when the thoughts and feelings of our unconscious mind reach expression in images rather than words the person can see images and symbols as a mirror for his/her unconscious mind. She termed this process "symbolic speech". When images are explored with an art therapist verbally and cognitively, the person experiences greater understanding of how deeper aspects of the self become consciously known. The process of art therapy assists a person to integrate life experiences that foster insight and healing.

Through art-making, a person can reveal the story of their illness, the psychosocial issues and beliefs linked to the illness, how to cope with physiological symptoms associated with cancer. Rosner and Ilusorio(1995) have found that a patient's art

reveals images associated with the progression and prognosis of physical illness, and the emotions and beliefs about illness. Artistic expression can address what Malchiodi(1999) and Lusebrink (1990) have identified common issues that people with chronic illness/cancer experience. They assert that art therapy is effective in dealing with the following: helplessness, hopelessness, increasing emotional expression, reducing psychological stress, relief or distraction from pain, increasing feelings of relaxation, transformation, transcendence and increasing feelings of control and hope.

Life threatening illness, trauma, profound change and loss are experiences that often touch a core part of the self or soul. Artistic expression becomes transformational because it shifts our experience from the thinking and problem solving aspect of our being to touching a deeper, perhaps unknown part of who we are. Life altering experiences and art making provide a journey into a "beyondness" of what we have typically known to be true about ourselves and others, our values, myths and beliefs.

### **Do you believe in your visual language?**

The inclusion of artistic expression into our belief systems about communication is asking us to reconsider and include how our 'language of images or visual language' plays a necessary and useful role in developing a greater connection and understanding of ourselves. Learning to trust the healing qualities of artistic expression can only be fully realized experientially or through the act of creativity and art making. If we experience knowing ourselves through verbal language and through artistic expression we have a contrast by which to know how each modality is useful for us.

McNiff(1988) believes that creation and art are essentially 'ideas' and that there must be a partnership between ideas and the physical act of art making; a delicate balance of trusting the process and utilizing the energies of creative movement. Being able to trust our creative process and work with our images we ignite a type of creative momentum. Through active participation we can see how our images evolve, emerge and take shape over a period of time. McNiff, elaborates on the idea of 'emanation' or the process where one thing emerges from another. He states that this is why a series of work tells a broader story about who we are than just a single piece of art.

Art making can help you to express your feelings and experiences that words alone can't do. Many of us can think of a time in our lives when we have experienced an unordinary event or a peak experience where there were no words, no language to express what we were feeling. Art expression can serve as a way to help a person to open up to a deeper part of the self, permit the unconscious to become conscious and to increase mind-body awareness.

### **Art Therapy and mind-body practices.**

Many researchers affirm the idea that art expression is believed to be an effective healing agent to supplement traditional medical procedures. Images become a bridge between our body and our mind, between what we are consciously aware of and the physiological changes in our body. (Lusebrink,1990). Just like a bridge, imagery can act like a container that can carry information from body to mind and from mind to body. (Malchiodi,1999). In this way, art therapy plays a valuable role with those persons diagnosed with a chronic or life threatening illness and sheds some light on

how artistic expression can be used to help patients deal with the emotional trauma that result from the physical and medical treatment of cancer or other chronic illnesses.

Art making provides a way to externalize and translate body sensations and emotions into concrete form. We can draw or sculpt what the body feels like. Artistic expression increases our objective understanding of ourselves because we have created distance between feeling what we experience and looking at something outside of ourselves. Images and forms once created exist as separate from the art maker allowing for the objective development of insight, containing difficult emotions and coping with the many physiological changes that result from trauma or illness. To further this concept, many art therapists believe that learning to dialogue or talk with the image is useful in deepening our understanding of the meaning in an image. This assists us to develop a more open-minded view of how images can guide, inform, teach, transform and heal us.

### **How art images encourage the expression of psycho-social issues for patients living with life altering or chronic illness.**

Imagery can be used to assist a patient to express emotions and the psychosocial issues of serious illness or cancer. Art making encourages a patient's ability to cope and a means to reduce stress which may have a positive impact on the physiological progression of the disease.

In working with cancer patients Malchiodi (1999) has discovered two central themes about the art images cancer patients make which she has termed "hurter" and "healer" images. Hurter images can be about the disease itself, fear, grief, losses, or how life has been changed in some way. Examples of hurter images are: jagged rocks, volcanoes, dark clouds, serpents, barriers and the use of the colors red and black. Healer images seem to help support the person. She contends that when the therapist and patient work together, they mobilize healthy forces within a patient's personality to fight the disease. Examples of healer images are: a light source, mandalas (circle drawings), mystical figures, and metaphors for God, symbols of love, and the use of the color yellow or gold. The meaning of symbols, colors and metaphors are defined by the person who made them. In Art Therapy, importance is given to the type of images that appear; how the person made the art and how the person interacts or responds to the art.

Art therapists working with cancer patients have identified common issues such as: helplessness, control, limbo, concept of time, fear, panic, loss, helplessness, isolation, wholeness, balance, death, emergence and transformation. (Lerner (1999), Sibbett (2005)). In running a therapy group for cancer patients, Lerner asks the participants of the group questions about their beliefs and perceptions of cancer to encourage active participation in their recovery.

### **Questions to ask yourself as you recover from your illness.**

Who am I becoming? How does this affect my relationships?

What is emerging as a result of the experience with illness?

Where am I on the path of this journey?

What choices am I making and what turns do I take?

What is driving me to make the choices that I am making?

What do I feel is contributing to my wellness?

How do I locate the part of myself I need to use to guide me through this journey?

Where are my partners in healing?" (Lerner 1999, p.152)

## **PART 2: CREATIVE EXPRESSION: MAKING ART**

The art ideas listed below refer to those persons living with cancer or life altering illness. Note: Because the art suggestions are broad concepts they can be adapted to anyone who wants to begin personal expression through art making.

### **Art Materials:**

If you attend a group art materials will be provided. If you are making art at home consider buying: a box of oil pastels and chalk pastels, and a pad of 18x24 white paper, non-firing clay or fimo clay (plastic colored clay that bakes in the oven), basic painting supplies. To make magazine collage you will need glue and cut out images from magazines or personal photos. Just remember, you have creative license- there is no right or wrong in art making. Trust and enjoy the process. Making art is a personal statement about you-much like journal writing. Decide what images are private and what images you want to share with others.

### **Art ideas for you to try:**

\* **What do I feel?** Consider the above issues listed or choose your own issues you experience as you recover from cancer. Choose a creative approach such as drawing, painting, sculpting clay or making a collage to express an issue that you currently feel. When you are finished your art, tape the picture to the wall and sit about 6 feet in front of it. Notice what the images are communicating to you, how you feel in your body as you look at your art. Allow any awareness to come forward; a thought, a belief, a memory, a sensation in our body or an emotion. What are you beginning to sense about yourself? Is another image coming into your awareness?

\* **Where am I now?** Review Lerner's question list above, choose a question that has the most charge for you? Make art about the question you chose. Decide what your next step will be or what type of support you want after you complete your picture.

**Control:** Regaining a sense of control is central for those persons living with physical challenges or chronic illness. The ability to exercise choice and control is compromised as a result of being diagnosed with a physical illness, how the body responds to treatment and the lack of choice regarding the types of medical treatment. Through the art making experience a patient can exercise choice and control over what art she/he makes and the art materials used. Patients experience a greater sense of security because they have a means to challenge the feelings of hopelessness or passivity. Art Therapy has shown to reduce feelings of helplessness by encouraging a patient to participate in their own health care. (Malchiodi,1999).

### **Art idea you can try:**

\* **Vision Board:** Create a healing vision board for yourself. Focus on visioning what you want for yourself physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually. (To learn more about visioning see references)

### **Limbo:**

Limbo is experienced as a neither here nor there feeling, uncertainty, the unknown and disorientation. Limbo can trigger anxiety, fear, stress, and a sense of feeling

ungrounded.

**Art ideas you can try:**

- \* **Grounded and True:** Make a picture about "what you know for sure". Draw what you know is certain in your life, that which is unchanging.
- \* **Transition Bridge:** Make a collage of a bridge and paste images of your past (on the left side of the bridge, paste images of yourself in present time on the bridge and paste images of your future (on the right side of the bridge). Identify three things that you need and three strengths you already have in order to cope with your transition time.

**Time:**

Time becomes a central focus for patients; time before and after cancer, the idea that time is now held as valued in a new way. The waiting experience in healing is like time on hold, waiting for test results, waiting for a chemotherapy treatment. Some patients feel like they are living out of time or in a state of timelessness. (Sibbett, 2005)

**Art ideas you can try:**

- \* **Self Portrait:** Draw yourself as a tree before you were diagnosed with cancer and draw yourself as a tree living with the experience of cancer. This picture helps you to get in touch with the 'old me and the new me', the time before and the time after cancer.
- \* **Surreal time:** Make a painting of how the concept of time has changed as a result of being diagnosed with cancer. Make art that matches up to what it is like for you to live life on hold. Draw how you feel in your body when you are waiting for answers.

**Art ideas to help you cope with overwhelming experiences:**

Art can help you to cope emotionally by focusing on what you are creating so much so that you lose the track of time and enter into the experience of flow. If you are feeling anxious or you want to create distance from your illness or the pain of your illness a mandala can be a centering and calming experience.

- \* **Mandala:** Draw a circle by tracing a dinner plate on white or black 18x24 sized paper. Use oil pastels to draw repeating patterns to fill in the space in the circle. Begin on the outside and work your way to the center. Play soothing music at the same time as you draw or paint.
- \* **Self box:** Find a small cardboard box, a shoe box or smaller. Cut images from magazines that represent your outside self, the part of your self, your feelings etc that you show to the world. Paste these images on the outside of your box. Do the same process for images that represent your inner self, the part of yourself that is private, that you don't show to the world. Paste these images on the inside of your box. Place other objects or images that represent the most difficult experiences of your illness inside the box. Notice what you keep hidden away from others, and what you show to others. You may want to keep your difficult experiences contained within the box or share them with someone you feel comfortable with.

**Increasing Emotional Expression:**

Art expression helps us to 'open up' by making our thoughts and feelings visible. Through opening up we can explore, release and understand emotional distress and alleviate trauma. What is unique to artistic expression is a term called externalization, which is a person's ability to see what they think and what they feel. In this way art images become a mirror, reflecting the internal self back to its maker,

thus providing insight, objectivity and distance from overwhelming emotions. Emotions contained within the body can be expressed in drawings, paintings and clay forms, in this way art making helps to shift the emotional energy from within the body by redirecting it into the art.

### **Art ideas you can try:**

\* **Body Outline:** Draw the outline of a body shape on an 18x24 piece of paper. With the use of color, lines and shapes draw the three positive and three negative emotions you experience the most at the present time. Decide where in the body you feel your emotions and draw it in as many areas as you need to. As you look at your art you will see which emotion have taken up the most space in your body outline. Take another piece of paper and use the entire surface to fully express the emotion that is dominant in your art. If you imagine that your emotion could speak to you, what is it saying? If your emotion was an animal, a weather pattern or an object from nature, what would it be?

\* **Squiggles:** To loosen up and feel spontaneous make squiggles with paint or pastels. As you continue notice what emotions you experience. From this picture make art that feels fun, spontaneous or playful. Let yourself feel the joy of creativity.

### **Transcendence:**

This is the experience of going beyond the illness, beyond the self or to rise above it. To be able to shift away from the experience of the illness and become awakened to another aspect of ones self or to life. In transforming illness we can use art to re-author our lives discover a new outlook on life, make life changing decisions and reconstruct the meaning of life. Spiritual beliefs and peak experiences may be woven into the ideas of transcendence or transformation.

### **Art ideas you can try.**

\* **Safe Place:** Make a picture of an imagined or real place in nature where you have felt secure, safe and connected to something greater than yourself. In your picture you can choose to add a nurturing or a protective figure. Notice what you feel in your body as you draw this picture. Match the colors to what you are feeling.

\* **Healing Symbol:** Draw your symbol of healing, the concept of overcoming or of a spiritual guide helping you in your recovery. Take this symbol and form it in non-firing clay to a size you want. (You can also use fimo clay). After the clay has dried, paint your symbol with acrylic paint. Place it somewhere in your home where you can see it. What affirmation (positive self statement) is connected with this symbol?

\* **Dreams:** Draw or paint a dream or a vision that had a significant impact on your healing experience with your illness. What healing message is the dream revealing to you?

The ideas presented in this article introduce theory and practice of how artistic expression can be used as an alternate therapy to encourage patients how to feel like active participants in their healing process, to discover new ways to cope with adversity and increase feelings of wellbeing. Note: The art activities provided are not exclusive to persons diagnosed with a serious illness and can be experienced by anyone who wants to begin exploring creative self expression.

The artistic process has shown to support, and transform the psychological and physical stress of cancer. "...psychological stress is only one of many factors potentially influencing the development of, and recovery from, cancer." People do not willingly encourage cancerous growth; nor can they will it-or draw it-away."(Malchiodi 1999, p.132).

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For the purpose of this article, the role of Art Therapy is presented as a form of therapeutic support for persons diagnosed with cancer or life altering illness. The art activities presented in this paper are not a form of therapy.

It should be noted that the field of Art therapy has broad applications to a wide range of social, behavioral, psychological, cognitive and spiritual issues for individuals, families and groups. The process of making art without the presence of an art therapist is referred to as creative self expression or art as therapy. The term "art therapy" is reserved for when a certified art therapist is providing professional guidance to a person, family or group.

For further information contact the Canadian Art therapy Association, The BC Art Therapy Association, and The American Art Therapy Association.

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