

Arts therapy is about the process

In times of stress, men and women of all ages are often encouraged to pick up a hobby or throw themselves into an activity as a form of relief- a coping mechanism or distraction. With many activities, be that sport, a musical instrument or even learning a language, the focus is on results. An emphasis on churning out a perfect finished product can often lead to more stress as we strive for “perfection,” whatever that may be. A distraction, perhaps, but shifting our stress to one area rather than another doesn’t seem like the healthiest form of relief.

This is where art differs, and why so many people turn to arts therapy in overcoming personal hurdles and hardships. Arts therapy is about the process, not the finished product.

In the same way that stress, anxiety, hardships, happiness and relief look different to all of us, art is unique to the individual. Art in all its forms is entirely subjective, and the purpose of art as therapy is for each person to be able to express themselves in ways they may never have explored before. The finished product is always beautiful, not because of what you physically see in front of you, but because of the process each artist worked through to get there.

The process is different for everyone, as is the result. Arts therapy accepts and welcomes everyone and every medium

For most, it's about being brave enough to try something new and tapping into a sense of peace and calm during the creative process that they may have lost touch with.

It's harnessing emotions and using parts of the brain that they've never dwelled on before, and expressing those emotions in a visual way.

In times of great stress it can feel easier to repress our emotions, particularly those that we struggle to put into words. Arts therapy allows and, more importantly, encourages us to tap into those emotions, working through them in a therapeutic way rather than pushing them to the side.

Art therapy with young offenders

(To indicate the potential of using Art as modality in Therapy and/or Counselling)

The assignment was to create a seal out of a lump of clay. But Pat, a 14-year-old boy, had decided to produce a family of seals. He made seals of different sizes: A big one in the centre, several medium-sized ones near it and some tiny seals on the back of the big, centre animal. "This big figure is the mother seal, and the rest are her children," explained Pat, a crew-cut boy

wearing the mandatory yellow T-shirt and navy-blue pants uniform. "Where is the father seal then?" asked the art therapist/ counsellor who was observing the art therapy process in action at the three-day special workshop held inside the compound of the Juvenile and Family court Section). Pat grinned, "He ran away with another woman." Chuckling, he looked at the questioner. "He is irresponsible." A lull followed as Pat continued perfecting his sculptures. Pat's answer may provide an important clue that could help authorities improve the process aimed at healing him and fellow detainees while they are in the remand home, so that, hopefully, they will never be sent here again. Works from the art therapy process reveal and heal the inside worlds of young offenders, their yearning for love and understanding, their lack of problem solving skills and hope for the new chapter of life. The art therapy process helps uncover the complex nature of the youngsters' hearts, where the problems lie. Unless we are able to learn the roots of what brought them here to the detention centre, we cannot find ways to help them. Most of these youngsters are from poor and broken families. Their parents and guardians are busy making ends meet, thus having little time for their kids to guide them through the maze of right and wrong. Many suffer from abuse by family members. Using a paper with black marks and asking the children to complete it focus on the ability to handle the black marks on their pictures and it reflects the youngsters' ability to deal with difficulties in real life. The black mark can for example be bolded and separated from other colours, or it can be turned into something funny, making it part of the whole picture. Many young people steal because they want to be accepted in society. They want to have the brand-name cell phones and to wear the fashionable clothes splashed in the media and advertisements. The most common crimes that result in 10- to 18-year-old youths being sent to remand homes are theft, violent and brutal rows, sexual offences, gambling, drug abuse and truancy.

There are no evil or bad people in this world. They are just weak people who cannot get through life's temptations and challenges. They need empowerment. Humans are creative beings. We can always create and re-create our life. If people believe in their own potential, they can, and will, change for the better.

In a "give and take" activity, an art counsellor asked each of the boys to draw an outward spiral on a small sheet of paper and an inward spiral on another small sheet of paper. Then she asked them to write inside the first spiral what they wanted to give to the world and, inside the other spiral, what they want to receive from the world. The aggressive, ignorant-looking boys wrote almost in unison: "Love, warmth, hugging, caring, intimacy, happiness, flowers and sincerity" inside both spirals.

Art process activities help them to reach out with their hearts and feelings.

Source: AATA