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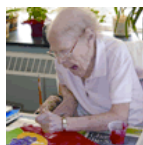
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What is art therapy?

Art therapy paints a portrait of success for residents with dementia. by Elizabeth Cockey, Certified Art Therapist



What is art therapy? Many family members ask me that question when we discuss art programs. They want to know how art will help their loved ones suffering from debilitating ailments. Art may seem an unlikely resource for recovery and rehabilitation, but its impact on those suffering from cognitive impairment disorders, such as stroke and dementia, is shown to have positive and measurable results, such as improved motor skills, memory, and creativity.

Art therapy is used in many clinical settings, especially when individuals are nonverbal or unable to communicate about traumatic experiences. This form of therapy is also the means by which people can express themselves in a nonthreatening and comfortable way. Art therapy can also help someone recover the use of an arm and motor skills in the same way as physical rehabilitation.



This painting was created by a Catholic nun whose paintings always include a church, and her signature at the bottom, a cardinal.

My colleague Dr. Rudy Rhea, a clinical psychologist, found that art therapy in conjunction with traditional psychotherapy and medication significantly reduced depression and memory loss in those suffering from mild to moderate dementia. Many of my patients are confused, have lost the use of one arm, can't see very well, have become depressed, and are unwilling to participate when they first attend art therapy. However, Dr. Rhea discovered that those who improved hand-eye coordination were less irritable and happier. Painting and sculpting are activities that most impaired individuals can accomplish, including those confined to a wheelchair.

When someone paints a picture, various areas in the brain are used to achieve the desired result. Those regions affecting memory and coordination are stimulated, in turn, boosting the individual's self-esteem. Groups of disabled patients painting together often develop a new sense of camaraderie. These are the same individuals who were previously depressed and isolated themselves from others.

Socializing is an important part of the recovery process, especially with individuals who are disabled and disassociated from society. Together, these people are able to accomplish as a team what singularly was not possible before. Teamwork and conversation

The 10 benefits of art therapy:

- 1. Cognitive memory function significantly improves**, especially short-term memory. We studied 20 individuals over an 18-month period and found that their ability to recall recent events or recite short lists after a five-minute lapse improved by 80%. (note: this study is not published).
- 2. Motor coordination improves**, making it possible for participants to have independence in dressing, eating, and using the bathroom. Everyone in the group showed a 50% greater ability in hand-to-eye coordination with small motor skills applications such as picking up a dime.
- 3. Individuals experience less dependence upon medication** for stress-related disorders such as depression. In all cases, the dose for antidepressants such as Bupropion SR and Zoloft were reduced by 25% over a one-year period.
- 4. Participants show a greater ability to successfully transition into a new environment** and become a vital member of that community. One 93-year-old woman who was psychotic recovered and was able to be mainstreamed back into normal group activities with her peers.
- 5. A reduction in delusional thinking**, especially in the afternoon when many are subject to "sundowning" (i.e., Grandma says: "I have to go home and feed the baby now.").
- 6. A renewed interest in living.** A man and a woman within the group formed a "romantic" relationship during this time. They successfully supported one another on an emotional level when one was treated for cancer and the other for congestive heart failure.
- 7. An improved sense of self and renewed self-esteem.** It became quite obvious to the social worker, activity director, and residents alike that the group felt and acted more positively over the course of a year.
- 8. Provides an activity that brings family members together.** I started an "artist of the month" program to augment the group's progress, selecting the "best" painting each month, which was framed and hung in a permanent exhibition gallery at a retirement community in Baltimore.



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foster compliments, which boost self-esteem and satisfaction.

Family members are also encouraged to take part in the art therapy programs. Family members often find it difficult to relate to a loved one who has dementia and memory loss. For example, when I introduce a daughter into the group activity, I find that it gives her the opportunity to actively interact with her mom. Although the mother's verbal skills are not 100%, together they can communicate through the art-making process.



A long-term care resident paints a vase of flowers; a subject that delights her and a reminder of the cut flowers she used to place on her dining room table.

9. Greater socialization and social skills among members of the art therapy group were noticed by family members and the social services department. Group members had an opportunity to learn more about one another while they painted; this translated into better relationships and friendships among them.

10. A sense of accomplishment was an important outcome of the art therapy program. Everyone who participated felt that they had achieved recognition from their peers through their paintings. Some even became boastful and one gentleman said: "There's still life in the old dog!"



Elizabeth Cockey helps a resident paint with positive encouragement and a stimulating environment in which to create. Notice the plethora of paint containers and numerous volunteers who also facilitate the activity.

Art is a connection between individuals, and a way to communicate for those who are nonverbal. Creating art stimulates the various parts of the brain that have become inactive because of cognitive impairment disorders. Over time and with practice, what was lost can be recaptured through the combination of art therapy and other more traditional methods such as psychotherapy and medication. Truly, a holistic approach to any disease is a possibility for hope and renewal that was never thought possible before. I have discovered that when you do art, everyone gets better!

Elizabeth Cockey is a certified art therapist and author of *Drawn From Memory: A Personal Story of Healing Through Art*. For more information on art therapy, visit www.elizabethcockey.com.

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Tuesday, July 29, 2008 7:29:23 PM by [donna reihl](#)

Once again, Elizabeth has been able to articulate the benefits of art and art therapy for everyone, while still detailing the positive outcomes to individuals with memory loss and dementia. If more people would embrace the importance of art in cognitive functioning, art would not be cut out of curriculum for our youth. It is necessary and helps facilitate more than a picture for the refrigerator. Keep up the advocacy for art Elizabeth.

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