

The Healing Magic of Art Therapy

by Judith Campanaro

What exactly is art therapy? How does it work? What does it do? Is it true that art heals?

These are questions I am often asked when I tell people I am an art therapist. According to the American Art Therapy Association, "Art therapy is an established mental health profession that uses the creative process of art-making to improve and enhance the physical, mental and emotional well-being of individuals of all ages. It is based on the belief that the creative process involved in artistic self-expression helps people to resolve conflicts and problems, develop interpersonal skills, manage behavior, reduce stress, increase self-esteem and self-awareness, and achieve insight."

For years, health professionals have known intuitively that art has a lot to offer medical science. Research and recent studies are now providing evidence to support that intuition. Scientists have found that brain waves change when a person is involved in the creative process. Studies have shown that art-making creates the same brain patterns as if one is in the REM state of a deep sleep.

Basically, our brain has three levels of consciousness, the brain stem, the limbic system

and the neo-cortex. Each has its own memory system and level of consciousness. The brain stem is inwardly directed rather than outwardly. It imprints and holds the deepest levels of pain. The limbic system is responsible for feelings and memory. The neo-cortex has two parts. The left side thinks, plans, schemes, and manages our external world. The right side is responsible for feeling and manages our internal world and the quality of things. To become whole, we must manage to recruit the fragments of our lives into a complete picture. For that we need both brain hemispheres working in harmony.

Traumatic memories in our brain stem and limbic system are deeply buried and cause emotional blocks and physical issues that stop the flow between the left and right parts of the neo-cortex. Trauma tends to prune the cells, creating a bad connection. One side can't hear the other and has no idea what it is trying to say. As a result we lose contact with our feelings which are then buried in the right unconscious mind and even deeper in the brainstem and limbic system.

We become driven by these forces without ever knowing it. Both physical and emotional pain use the same pathways in the brain. When that pain gets stuck in the body, a person becomes numb and unable to feel.

Sometimes one finds oneself just going through the motions of life without feeling. Financial or relationship problems may manifest, behavioral issues or stress-related illness often arise. Going deep into the subconscious is a way of getting the self back, the self that is hidden away from conscious awareness deep in the lower registers of the brain.

Creativity helps lead people to a new and different understanding of how they think and feel. This knowledge can be the tool that helps them unlock their inner joy. Art unearths conscious material such as feelings and locked away memories that are difficult to express. Art can be our voice when we have no voice. It helps people who cannot express themselves — or maybe don't even know what is wrong — create an outlet to get in touch with their feelings and thoughts. By helping people get in touch with what is going on around them, art therapy helps determine the source of their stress so that they are better able to cope with or eliminate the stressor.

Getting something out of life first means to feel the life inside of us. Joy isn't out there, it's within. That's why my mission statement is "To facilitate empowerment through creative expression." Whatever form you may choose — dance, music, journaling, scrapbooking, visual art, viewing, creating or teach-



ing — just do art!

A therapeutic art educator and art therapist, Judith Campanaro is active in promoting the healing power of art through workshops, motivational speaking, and in her private practice in Mill Creek. Her mission statement is to facilitate empowerment through creative expression. She can be contacted at (425) 208-9574 or through her website, www.judithcampanaro.com

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NORTH END CHAPTER: November 14, 6-8 p.m.

Meeting at Kent Boruff's New Becomings Office, 205 Cedarwood, Bellingham. For more information call (360) 855-2991.

SPOKANE CHAPTER: For meeting information contact Charles Lightwalker (509) 389-7290 or email charleslightwalker@yahoo.com

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