

What Is Expressive Art Therapy?

Expressive arts therapy- the purposeful application and integration of art, music, dance/movement, dramatic enactment, creative writing, and imaginative play- is an action-oriented and sensory based form of psychotherapy. While talk is still the traditional method of exchange in psychotherapy and counseling, practitioners of expressive arts therapy know that individuals have different styles of communication. Some are more visual, others more tactile, and still others use movement and gesture as a form of expression. With the increasing recognition of body-based methods for regulation and recovery, expressive arts therapy is becoming part of the continuum of somatic practices in work with traumatic stress, attachment problems, addictions, and other health challenges. Because expressive methods emphasize implicit, embodied experiences that may be difficult to express in talk therapy, many practitioners now turn to these methods to help individuals quickly communicate relevant issues. In contrast to individual applications of image making, vocalizations, movement, enactment, or storytelling within the context of psychotherapy and counseling, expressive arts therapy is most commonly understood as the use of more than one art form, consecutively or in combination. In other words, one form of expression may dominate a session, or multiple forms may be introduced in work with a child, adult, family, or group.

Expressive arts therapy may include several types of expression simultaneously, or movement from one expressive form to another, depending on the needs of the individual or group. One way to understand the multiple possibilities of expressive arts therapy is through the characteristics that differentiate it from more language-based psychotherapies. These characteristics include 1) letting the senses tell the story, 2) self-soothing mind and body, 3) engaging the body, 4) enhancing nonverbal communication, 5) recovering self-efficacy, 6) rescripting the dominant narrative, 7) making new meaning, and 8) restoring aliveness.

Letting the senses tell the story, neurobiology has taught us that we need to “come to our senses” in developing effective components for psychotherapy for both mind and body.

Self-soothing brain and body, Self-soothing is a coping strategy that involves engaging in pleasant, comforting, and calming activities focused on the

five senses to relieve stress. These allow one to move their mind away from unwanted thoughts, feelings, and impulses.

Engaging the body, Through integrative methods, art therapy engages the mind, body, and spirit in ways that are not possible from verbal communication.

Kinesthetic, sensory, perceptual, and symbolic opportunities invite alternative modes of receptive and expressive communication, which can circumvent the limitations of language.

Enhancing nonverbal communication, Nonverbal communication is the act of conveying a thought, feeling, or idea through physical gestures, posture, and facial expressions.

Recovering self-efficacy, any effective intervention helps individuals to regain a feeling of vitality and self-efficacy. The expressive arts are action-oriented, experiential approaches that capitalize on active participation necessary to recover experiences of pleasure and joy as well as a sense of mastery and self-efficacy.

Rescripting the dominant narrative, Narrative therapy highlights the importance of an individual's sense of self, their perceived life narrative, and how the process of constructing and reconstructing of these stories bridge their identity and culture.

Eventually resaving or "rescripting" dominant narratives is part of most forms of intervention. This approach seeks to reach one of three goals: to put "untold" aspects of the client's past into the life narrative, help clients emotionally enter and reauthor their own stories, or help clients construct new meanings in relation to stories that may emerge in therapy.

Making new meaning, expressive arts therapy provides a unique opportunity for making meaning within psychotherapy. It not only allows us to re-author the dominant narrative of trauma events, but also to transform them into tangible, sensory-based expressions that have the potential of transcendence. When making meaning is successful, it often manifests as a creative expression of health and well-being, and a new and inspirational story of why one's life has been altered but not broken. For some individuals, arts such as painting, creating music, dance, or drama become experiences to be witnessed by others, reaching well beyond the treatment room and allowing them to return to their community to reengage with significant relationships and life in new ways.

Restoring aliveness, aliveness is not something we can be “talked into” ; it is experienced in both mind and body and particularly on a somatosensory level.

Polyvagal theory, is another concept that is increasingly being applied in integrative arts-based approaches. Polyvagal theory informs the social engagement system, a specific neural circuit found only in mammals. These physiological, biological, and neurological processes guide interactions with the environment via the vagus nerve, a nerve that runs from the brain through the heart, lungs, and digestive track in the body. The sound of a voice or facial expressions communicate an individual’s physiological state to others.

Mentalization, The concept of Mentalization describes a function central to everyone’s capacity to process feelings and develop health relationships. It is a faculty which allows us to be curious about and empathic towards ourselves and others. Mentalization is developed, at least in part, through the capacity for imaginative play, a necessity when engaging in expressive arts. Mentalization is really a stance as opposed to an actual technique when it comes to addressing trauma: the patient has to find himself in the mind of the therapist and, equally, the therapist has to understand himself in the mind of the patient if the two together are to develop a mentalizing process. Both have to experience a mind being changed by a mind.

When introducing expressive arts therapy to individuals who wonder if they can be creative or even imaginative, I explain one core principle. It is true that each of us probably has different capacities for creativity, but we all can be expressive in one way or another, and there are many ways of being expressive. This concept is the foundation of this practice, making it accessible to children, adults, groups, and communities. It is a way to help people discover forms of expression that are self-regulating, engage in enlivening self-exploration, communicate challenging sensations and experiences in reparative ways, and ultimately support recovery by imagining new meanings. These concepts are explained and demonstrated in more detail through frameworks for practice, methodology, and case examples in subsequent chapters.