



ART THERAPY IS AN OPTION

When words are *not enough*

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When Lindsay Graf was a child, she was teased relentlessly for her skin condition, known as acanthosis nigricans. It manifested as darkened, thickened areas of skin, most noticeable on her face and other creases of her body.

“The kids in school were really mean; they told me I never washed,” said Graf, 41, from Rochester, New York. “They made me feel really bad about myself. I had a lot of issues feeling worthy.”

Graf went undiagnosed until the age of 16, eight years after she first experienced symptoms.

With self-esteem issues stemming from childhood, Graf finally sought out therapy as an adult.

She found Sarah Beren, an art therapist and owner of the Spotted Rabbit Studio in Rochester. Graf always was artistic, but she didn’t know that therapy could incorporate art or that art could be therapeutic. Graf was mostly critical of her artistic creations.

Lack of awareness of art therapy as a clinical treatment for mental health is not unusual.

Nadia Paredes, president of the American Art Therapy Association, said she often is mistaken for an art restorer or an employee of an art museum. However, the term “art therapy” was coined in 1942. A clinical treatment for all ages and mental health conditions, art therapy is gaining recognition and acceptance.

What is art therapy?

Art therapists hold at least a master’s degree in art therapy or its equivalent, which requires coursework in traditional mental health methods, such as talk therapy, and the use of art materials in a therapeutic manner.

Then, art therapists must complete supervised clinical work, as do all mental health professionals, before they can become board-certified and claim the protected title of an art therapist. Seventeen states now have additional licensure requirements, said Paredes, a number the AATA is working hard to increase.

“In art therapy, we not only talk about our feelings but actually make art about them,” Paredes said. “It’s the combination of psychology and art.” Art, she says, “gives you an extra level of communication. Sometimes words are not enough.”

“A common misconception is that we’re analyzing people’s artwork,” Beren said. “It’s really what they see in it. It’s important to note that no art skill is required. It’s not about making good art. It’s more about the process of self-expression. A lot of times we’ll have clients rip up their artwork, burn it, throw it away, bury it, all kinds of things to symbolically release those emotions.”

You can ‘alchemize the trauma’

Beren uses creative directives to draw out emotions and feelings.

In Graf’s earliest sessions, Beren took and made two copies of a black-and-white photo of the woman’s face. With the first copy, Beren prompted Graf to create what her bad side looks like, the second for her good and worthy side. On the first photo, Graf crossed out her face with angry black scribbles and gave the photo a bold red hue. She wrote out the ugly phrases that swarmed her head, such as “I’m unworthy” and “I’m stupid.” On the second, she surrounded herself with the colors purple and pink and adorned her face with glitter glasses.

“Sarah helped me alchemize the trauma,” Graf said. “Looking back at it, it’s exciting to see how far I’ve come since then. I don’t think this about myself anymore.”

Therapy leveraged in multiple settings

Art therapy also is used in settings beyond private practice, including in hospitals.

Art therapist Sarah Salice works at Silver Hill Hospital, a psychiatric care facility in New Canaan, Connecticut, that offers residential, inpatient and outpatient services.

In her inpatient group, Salice is limited by the 45-minute time frame, which includes time for the group to share the emotional responses elicited by their art, a more restrictive format than private practice. She works with adolescents and adults across diagnoses, such as mood disorders, neuropsychiatric conditions, trauma and substance use.

“The directives I do have to work with all of the populations, and that includes using the right materials,” she said. For example, she says, clay can be activating for people with trauma, so she uses a modified airy clay instead.

LaSondra Parsons, the former president of the Oklahoma Art Therapy Association with a private practice in Norman, Oklahoma, has been leading a popular art therapy group at the Resonator community center. It is free and open to all.

While she used to start with directives, she said, the group has now settled into therapeutic art-making, which is distinct from art therapy. However, she is available to help anyone process their feelings. “It is very therapeutic and very healing and has built some great relationships of people that would have never been together before,” Parsons said.

Insurance coverage remains spotty but is improving as more states establish formal licensing requirements for art therapists. To find an art therapist, the AATA offers an art therapist locator. Visit arttherapy.org/art-therapist-locator.

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support, tools and resources for, as she describes on the blog’s website, “the first generation of late-diagnosed ADHD women who are also entering peri/menopause.”

She hopes the blog helps others feel less scattered.

“Any way that you can externalize your memory is important,” she said. For example, using a whiteboard or sticky notes for reminders, or setting timers, or using visual cues, such as putting daily vitamins next to your toothbrush.

Other strategies also help

Weissert also uses the acronym INCUP, first proposed by board-certified adult psychiatrist William Dodson, which stands for interest, novelty, challenge, urgency and passion.

Weissert explained the acronym this way: “It’s like our brains are an orchestra and the prefrontal cortex is the conductor – and in ADHD brains, the conductor is asleep most of the time. So the orchestra plays at full volume and there’s no organization. But if there’s something interesting, novel, challenging, etc., the conductor will wake up.

“One of the biggest hacks is understanding how we are motivated,” she said.

Lisa Smith, a licensed professional counselor based in Bellaire, Texas, suggested building in extra time, called “buffer time,” between tasks and to the tasks themselves in case you get sidetracked.

Body doubling is another management tool Smith advocates.

This is a productivity strategy in which someone with ADHD does chores, assignments and other jobs – usually ones that are boring or frustrating – in the presence of someone else to help prevent distractions.

For those with ADHD, learning and maintaining strategies such as these are important both to yourself and the people around you, as they reduce stress levels and improve overall health, Smith said.

And if you are wondering if they meet the criteria for ADHD, she proposed filling out the Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale online. The free diagnostic tool was developed in part with the World Health Organization.

Being educated about ADHD means less chaos and clutter, and more acceptance and ability.

“When you’re working with their brain and not against it,” Smith said, “you’re going to find you can function just as well as your neurotypical counterparts. It definitely can change your life.”