



Using Art-based Activities to Work on Emotions

✿ A collection of practical activities
for counsellors, psychotherapists and educators ✿

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Introduction

This collection of practical activities is aimed to inspire professionals working with emotions and interventions techniques meant to relief emotional tension and induce personal growth and awareness and also to reveal the therapeutic value of art-based activities for achieving such goals.

The book is divided into three parts :

- *Section 1 – offers technical information about the preparation and planning of the activities and about structuring the counselling or intervention sessions either with individuals or groups ;*

- *Section 2 – represents the main body of the book and includes 30 art-therapy activities ; the activities are described as they should be presented to the final client, thus offering the professionals an example on how to describe the tasks and how to present the instructions to the people they are counselling or educating ;*

- *Section 3 – describes practices which could enhance the activities and their results and points out further useful resources for professionals who would like to expand their toolkit by including art-therapy techniques in their approach.*

All the activities included in the book have the potential to trigger personal development, but they are not all directed on a single topic or suitable for any kind of therapeutic intervention : some are more complex than others, some are more difficult than others, some are more suitable for individual sessions while others are more suitable for group work, some need more preparation in advance, while others involve more tools and materials during the activity. The heterogeneity of the activities included in the collection is actually one of its most valuable points, as it offers the opportunity for the professional to choose what best suits the therapeutic goals envisioned, the particularities of the clients and the counsellors' skills and competences.

The art-based activities are presented in terms of a short description, instructions for the clients, tools and materials needed and suggestions for enhancing its positive effects. Worksheets are also provided where the case is.

The main benefits for the people engaging in the art-therapy activities proposed in this book are revolving around :

- ▶ *promoting relaxation and reducing distress ;*
- ▶ *reducing the feelings of isolation ;*
- ▶ *dealing with emotions like sadness, fear, anger, loneliness etc. ;*
- ▶ *promoting personal insights about oneself and increasing self-awareness ;*
- ▶ *cultivating an optimistic attitude towards life and guiding focus on the positive aspects ;*
- ▶ *increasing self-esteem and confidence ;*
- ▶ *cultivating emotional resilience ;*
- ▶ *improving communication skills ;*
- ▶ *cultivating better awareness and understanding of the relationships with others ;*
- ▶ *enhancing social skills and reducing conflicts ;*
- ▶ *improving concentration ;*
- ▶ *improving cognitive and sensorimotor functions.*

Another significant fact of this collection is that all the activities included here have been tested in practice by psychologists, psychotherapists, counsellors and educators within the individual or group sessions they have conducted with their beneficiaries and the entire last section of the book is practically based on their input and their reflections after experimenting with these art-therapy or art-based activities.

This book is NOT an art-therapy manual and NOR it is designed for people with no intervention or training experience (unless of course one chooses to use the art-based activities just for fun). It is merely a guide meant to help professionals enhance their intervention toolkit and support them to support others in dealing with emotions and in guiding their focus on the positive aspects of their lives. Professionals are encouraged to modify and adapt the activities so that they best suit their therapeutic objectives and their beneficiaries' specificity

regarding age, skills, level of awareness etc.

Section 1 : Getting Started

Art therapy and art-based activities

Art therapy, basically, lets people express themselves through different art techniques, such as drawing and painting, other visual arts, dance and movements, music and drama. The goal is to use the creative process to help explore self-expression and, in doing so, find new ways to gain personal insight and develop new coping skills. It is not needed to have artistic ability or special talent to participate in art therapy : art therapy is not an art class ; it is more about letting participants focus on their inner experience.

Art therapy, as a sub-branch of psychotherapy, expresses itself through the use of every branch of art in psychotherapy. It enables individuals to express all kinds of emotions, thoughts and subconscious states that they cannot express verbally through artistic activities. In art therapies, a good knowledge of pedagogy and psychology is required as well as a good knowledge of art. An important point in art therapies is this : except those who have studied psychology, psychiatry and clinical psychology, they should be called art therapy practitioners. Art therapists do not have the authority to make a diagnosis unless they are psychiatrists or psychotherapists.

Art therapies externalize the individual's expression in its most raw form, with a power beyond words. The aim of art therapy is to help individuals to convey every emotion, thought, trauma and many feelings and thoughts that they cannot express verbally, without intervention and direction through art. Studies¹ have confirmed that art therapy can positively affect people by causing both psychological and physiological healing. In general, the exercise of creativity improves the quality of life and promotes well-being. Moreover, art therapy can reduce depression and anxiety, often symptoms of chronic diseases. Art helps the brain compensate for pathology by using more efficient brain networks or alternative strategies. According to the behavioural neurologist Bruce Miller², even as the brain ages, creative abilities do not necessarily deteriorate ; on the contrary, the aging brain responds well to art, allowing the two hemispheres to work in pairs. In addition, expressive art exercises are innovative interventions

to promote self-expression and improve communication with others.

Art-based activities are tools which may be used by trained professionals who guide people in exploring their emotions and support them in their personal development path, thus serving the work of counsellors, psychotherapists, psychologists, educators. The art-based activities that we are proposing may be used as stand-alone sessions or might also be incorporated in other types of intervention sessions, thus completing a wider therapeutic or training process.

The main methods used in art therapy and art-based activities are the ones attributed to visual arts (drawing, painting, collaging, sculpting, modelling etc.), but dance and movement, music and theatre, creative writing shall not be excluded. Throughout the present collection of activities one will be able to find all sorts, as they are meant to reflect the vast array that counsellors or educators have at their disposal to choose from. We shall further analyse each method specifically, in order to have a better understanding of what they consist of and their benefits.

- DRAWING is a method used to express conscious and unconscious problems and beliefs ; in fact, it is a vehicle for facilitating communication, growth and understanding. In some cases the professional may opt for free drawing, while in other cases it is preferable to have a basic structure to follow that helps people to start and direct creativity.

- PAINTING allows people to be spontaneous and free, to experiment with colours, movement and style. In addition, it is useful with those who need to get rid of rigidity and structure, gaining greater flexibility.

- COLLAGING is a very versatile technique, as it allows the use of various materials and topics, without needing too complex artistic abilities. Using already shaped elements (magazine cut-outs, printed text or images, thread, seeds, odds and ends etc.) offers the person an increased level of confidence.

- SCULPTING AND MODELLING are more tactile visual arts, based on spontaneous creative expression or induced with artistic and technical materials. As opposed to hard materials sculpting, modelling with soft clay (usually with paper clay or polymer clay) is a more forgiving process, as one may reshape the product multiple times before settling for a certain final shape.

- DANCE facilitates emotional, social, cognitive and physical integration and

is therefore considered as a useful intervention for people with physical, social and psychological disabilities, especially those who have difficulty expressing their needs and people with cognitive impairments.

- MUSIC involves musical or rhythmic interventions selected specifically by a music therapist ; it helps the recovery, maintenance or improvement of social and emotional functioning and physical health. A music therapy activity can take place playing an instrument, participating in singing, listening to a certain type of music etc., with great benefits for physical and mental health, as it improves the ability to remember and concentration through the memorization of words, patterns and rhythms ; it increases movement and exercise or serves to calm the agitation of dementia patients, using special rhythms that help to slow the heart rate.

- THEATRE may be used as primary means of achieving psychological growth and change, within a psychotherapeutic relationship (there is also a psychotherapeutic method and theory based entirely on using theatre – psychodrama). During the theatre session patients explore their life experiences through dramatic staging, fantasy and imagination to identify themselves in the role of the character. There are several benefits as it helps to better understand oneself and one's own experiences, reduces feelings of isolation ; it also offers the opportunity to tell one's own story and change it, as well as to look at problems from a different perspective.

- CREATIVE WRITING AND POETRY is another very much employed mean of expression for therapeutic purposes, as it offers people to use the regular, everyday life means of expression, namely words, in a different manner to express their feelings, thoughts, desires etc. Creative writing may be prompted with inner reflections, with random words or images, with out of the ordinary tasks (for example, write a recipe for relieving stress, by using the following ingredients : sleep, sugar, friends, pets and bookmarks).

An art-based activity doesn't need to be limited to one method, but instead it may employ and combine several methods and techniques in order to better facilitate the desired result. The product is not important in this equation ; the process is the one that matters.