

Psychotherapy Guidebook

The background features a vertical gradient from light purple at the top to dark purple at the bottom. Several overlapping circles in various shades of purple are scattered across the page, creating a layered, artistic effect.

GROUP ART THERAPY

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Table of Contents

[DEFINITION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[TECHNIQUE](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

Group Art Therapy

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DEFINITION

Group Art Therapy is a process that combines the healing/therapeutic qualities of art with group psychotherapy.

HISTORY

As the practice of Art Therapy has developed over the past thirty years, art has been introduced to the various modes of therapy — individual, group, milieu, and family. Although the pioneering work of art therapist Margaret Naumburg in the 1930s and 1940s was psychoanalytically oriented, philosophical approaches to Art Therapy have paralleled the multiplicity of viewpoints in the general mental health field. Psychotherapists have introduced the arts into group therapy sessions because of their interest in providing alternatives to verbal communication. The alternatives allow for the expression of feelings that cannot be completely revealed in words or the revelation of feelings that are too threatening to verbalize.

TECHNIQUE

Virtually every manifestation of Group Art Therapy involves participants in the basic process of making art and sharing their work with others. For the most part, art is made during the group session, although therapists will often encourage clients to make art individually outside of the group session and bring in their work for discussion. The sessions tend to run from one to three hours, and group members discuss their work with each other both during and after the process of production. The discussion that follows the production of art allows for more formal and focused analysis of feelings. Art works can provide the opportunity for the sharing of the artist's motives; the analysis and sharpening of visual perception; the projection of repressed conflicts and emotions; and as a means of provoking associations to past experiences. In addition, art activity is inherently therapeutic in and of itself. Thus, group discussion often focuses on the healing power of art, with participants sharing how they are personally affected by the artistic process. This orientation to art therapy is encouraged in situations where it is important for clients to be involved in creative activity for its own sake. Practitioners of Group Art Therapy have observed that the sharing of art works and the object orientation of artistic activity take away a great deal of the fear that many clients have of discussing their feelings directly. In this respect, artistic activity helps in the early stages of a group in developing trust, mutual respect, and a sense of purpose.

Although most of the literature on Group Art Therapy describes the use

of drawing materials, paint, and clay, virtually any art medium can be introduced to a therapy group, depending on the purpose of the group, its structure, and available space. There is also a growing interest in the integration of the arts (dance, drama, music, poetry, and the visual arts) in therapy. Analytically oriented group leaders will generally limit the availability of materials with the goal of developing a sense of continuity from session to session and to minimize distractions. Within this context, art is perceived as a tool in furthering the process of group therapy. Other approaches are more art oriented and make the broadest range of creative activities accessible to participants — from simple line drawings to stone and wood sculpture, to the construction of environments, to the artistic use of photography, videotapes, and so on. The art-oriented group may also place an emphasis on the artistic development of the person, because of the positive effects that this may have on the whole personality.

The structure of Group Art Therapy can again be extended along a continuum, running in this case from small, closed group sessions stressing intimacy and private sharing to the more open studio approach where individuals may work within the same space on individual projects and come together from time to time to discuss their work. It is generally agreed among group therapy leaders that a combination of both approaches is needed to maximize opportunities for creative expression. Structure in the sense of a common activity and a common artistic theme can also help a group to focus

itself on personal issues. For example, if fear happens to be an important theme in a group, each individual might be asked to deal with the feeling of fear in an art work. In this way each individual is given the opportunity to intensely focus on his personal concern. When the art is shared by the group, similarities and differences in experiences are discovered. On the other hand, more nondirective approaches to art activity and group discussion can give the more independent and self-sufficient group the space needed to bring personal feelings and concerns into the group experience.

APPLICATIONS

It is generally true that young children cannot sustain formal discussion of their art for more than a few minutes — especially if the children are afflicted by severe emotional disorders. Practitioners have discovered that behaviorally disordered children tend to function best in a structured environment where limits are clearly set. Children are also apt to show needs for accomplishment in their art and consequently, Group Art Therapy activity with children tends to be more “product” oriented than group sessions with adults. Although adults often have similar needs for pleasing “products,” the literature on Group Art Therapy indicates more of a concern with the process of artistic activity and the role that art can play in furthering personal reflection, sharing, and interpersonal learning.