

History of art therapy

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Art therapy is an effective form of self expression and is now considered to be a viable psychological tool in resolving inner conflicts, and particularly helps in the rehabilitation of emotionally disturbed or mentally ill patients.

Through the arts, thoughts, feelings, and needs are communicated. It must be known that the cornerstone of this mode of therapy is psychoanalysis, which will be explored in detail below.

Art therapy has been supplementing the psychotherapeutic programs in the hospital settings. It is now widely used in psychiatric hospitals and rehabilitation centers, and, is practiced by qualified art therapists or by psychologists. But when and how did it begin?

To begin to understand the discipline of psychology, and the role psychoanalysis played in the practice of psychotherapy in general, it is noteworthy to mention that while psychoanalysis and psychology have a common background in nineteenth century science, they were independent of one another for a number of years because of their differences in focus or interests.

Psychology was looking at sensation, perception, memory and thinking - all elements and processes of consciousness.

Whereas, psychoanalysis focused on the unconscious - motivation, emotion, conflict, neurotic symptoms, dreams and character traits. Following World War II, and perhaps, due to the demands of the time, the gap between the two disciplines began to diminish, and thanks to the opportunity offered to psychologists to train in psychoanalysis (Hall & Lindzey, 1978).

While the arts as a form of human expression have been around for thousands of years, the merger of psychotherapy and arts therapy was realized in the 1940's during the World War II. Adrian Hill, a professional artist, coined the term "art therapy." Hill turned to his art for his own therapy while he was recovering in a health sanitarium for tuberculosis patients.

He later had the chance to introduce painting to other patients. He found out that, not only did the patients find satisfaction in their work, but they were able to use it to reveal their repressed feelings and trauma of the war (Borowsky, 1984).

It was Edith Kramer who made observations on the importance of art for traumatized children. In the late 1930s, Kramer has worked with children of refugees from Nazi, Germany, and she has observed firsthand, how the children responded to stress.

The artwork of these children revealed patterns of unresolved conflicts, regression and even aggression. It must be remembered that these children have seen the horrible damage done by Hitler (Kramer, 1971).

Kramer emphasized that art expression is an emotional journey toward self-discovery. In her approach, art as a process is a catharsis. Recreating scenes and images from one's past traumatic experience helps bring the unconscious conflicts into consciousness, and once catharsis is experienced, relief and positive change follows (Moreno, 1946).

The concept of catharsis is associated with the early psychodynamic theories. Catharsis is defined by the American Psychological Association

(2007) as “ the discharge of affects connected to traumatic events that had been repressed by bringing these events back into consciousness and reexperiencing them (p. 153). In this approach, painful experiences are released in therapy, by reliving the suppressed emotions. Its curative effect is seen in various forms - religion, medicine, literature, theater and the arts.

Margaret Naumberg founded the Walden School in New York City in 1915. She believed that children best learn and develop when they are encouraged to express themselves through creative pursuits.

She just knew that art is a window to the subconscious mind, and the therapist can best understand the difficulties one is going through by utilizing art as a tool of expression. For her, what is important is what one is consciously or unconsciously expressing through his artwork.

Theories of Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, and the other psychoanalytic thinkers of the time seemed to have been of great influence to Naumberg's approach to art therapy. The idea that art could be used to enhance diagnosis encouraged not only Naumberg but other early practitioners to study these images and their meanings. Diagnostic drawing and protocols were later developed that led art therapy onto its clinical direction.

Jung believed in the healing power of imagination and creativity. He gave importance to archetypal symbols, and even encouraged his patients to fantasize and to explore (Feder, 1981).

It must be recalled, archetypes are thought forms that create image that correspond to normal waking life, such as an image of a mother figure, that is then identified with the actual mother. Jung pointed out that feelings are

explored through a variety of ways. Flow of images are represented in drawing, painting, sculpture, music and movement .

Meanwhile, Freud provided the foundation for understanding psychoanalytic processes when he discussed much about symbols in dreams through his writings.

Freud believed that dreams are predominantly visual. However, much of the dream experience is lost in the interpretation of these images into words. He believed that patients could best draw an image, what they were unable to describe in writing (Feder).

Naumberg came to realize through their theories that art expression is a technique that has the innate capacity to unavel repressed material, much like verbal therapy. She recognized that one's unconscious feelings and thoughts are best expressed in images than in words. Also, to further illustrate its parallelism to psychoanalysis, take for instance the created images in artworks.

These are seen as external symbols of one's thoughts and a skilled therapist could best use these images to elicit feelings, much like the idea of transference. Integrative transformation or healing is made possible when this experience is made part of an art therapy session.

The concept of transference is the cornerstone of the theory and practice of psychoanalysis which originated with Freud. Simply, transference is reacting to a person in the present as though he or she were a person in one's past. Freud opined that during therapy sessions, patients were unconsciously “

transferring” the feelings and attitudes they had toward early significant figures onto their therapist.

Since then, he knew that the “transferential” relationship between the patient and the therapist is actually the curative element in psychoanalysis.