

# Art therapy with rape victims



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Art therapy is used in many settings to aid in the treatment of victims through various populations. Art therapy is not only a creative outlet for patients, but it is also “ used to encourage personal growth, increase self-understanding, and assist in emotional reparation” (Malchiodi, 2003). Art therapy is a way of giving the patients the opportunity to express their feelings in a way that is not too painful for them. The art therapy provided also enables the patient to express things that they may not be able to or want to articulate verbally.

Art therapy is available to a variety of populations and settings. Art therapy is not only varied with its’ settings but “ anyone can use it, you don’t need to be talented or an artist, and there are professionals that can work with you and delve into the underlying messages communicated through art” (What is Art Therapy? , 2008). The unique part about art therapy is that the patient can express themselves through any type of art. This may include drawing, painting, sculpture, and photography. Art therapy is a distinctive type of treatment that may be used in an assortment of populations and settings.

Art therapy is also limitless with age. Art therapists may work with children, adolescents, adults, and families. One specific group art therapists can work with are victims of rape and sexual abuse. These patients may range anywhere in the age spectrum and can focus on males or females. Along with the rape and sexual abuse, art therapist may also help these patients with the post-traumatic stress they encounter after experiencing the rape or sexual abuse. “ Throughout our history, art has served as a visual record of cultural, social, and political issues of that time.

On a personal level, art conveys the emotions, thoughts, feelings as well as the conflicts of the artist” (Brooke S. L. , 1997). For victims of rape and sexual abuse the art work may show the feelings and conflict that they may not want to communicate verbally. Anyone that has been a victim of sexual abuse or rape “ are temporarily vulnerable to developing emotional problems” (Brooke S. L. , 1997). Art therapy is an innovative means of expression to repair these problems and ultimately aid these victims to get back to some sort of “ normal” life.

Art therapy for victims of rape or sexual abuse has been seen to be used mainly for the female populations from childhood into the adult years. One specific study looked at treating depression, self-esteem, anxiety, and sexual trauma with 25 sexually abused girls from the ages of 8 to 11. “ The purpose of this study was accordingly to evaluate a group art therapy programme — developed by the authors — for sexually abused girls in South Africa” (Pfeifer, 2010). During this study, researchers examined how art therapy may be an outlet for these girls to express any depression, pinned up anger, and any anxiety.

The instruments used in this study included a scale rating trauma to indicate the amount of sexual trauma that has occurred and The Human Figure Drawing to measure self-esteem as well as depression and anxiety. This study found that art therapy “ indicated a significant improvement in depression and anxiety” (Pfeifer, 2010). The study also found “ a significant decrease in sexual trauma following art therapy” (Pfeifer, 2010). This study, overall, demonstrates that using art therapy for victims of rape and sexual greatly affects the decrease in depression, anxiety, and sexual trauma.

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One therapist, Lynne Beldegreen, focuses her treatment on children and teenagers who have been victims of sexual abuse. Lynne is a certified Art Therapist and Psychotherapist that specializes in treating sexual abuse and trauma. “ When Lynne is able to work with children or teens when they are still young they have a greater chance at having more integrated adult relationships when they get older” (Beldegreen, 2004). She also feels as though “ treatment at this young age, considered early intervention, can prevent these young patients from developing psychiatric disorders or developmental delays” (Beldegreen, 2004) .

Along with mainly working with children and teens, Lynne also helps adult clients who have been sexually abused as a child and those who have been recently abused. Lynne says these patients “ that have recently been sexually abused, date or stranger raped, are often in shock and have to deal with acute symptoms as well as major interruption of their life” (Beldegreen, 2004) . Along with art therapy, Lynne integrates play therapy, role playing, and having the patient keep a journal in order to maximally aid these patients throughout their treatment.

One specific woman Lynne worked with was in her late 20s who have been car jacked, raped, sodomized. When the woman was ready to begin art work, the process became almost natural. Lynne saw this as art making in its “ purest form” in which the art “ is pure sublimation” (Beldegreen, 2004). Art therapy for sexual abused individuals can be seen in several settings. One of these includes art therapy in the clinical setting. In this type of setting, there is a “ series of verbal interviews” in which children are “ hesitant and

guarded, unable or unwilling to respond to additional queries about what happened and how they feel” (Malchiodi, 2003).

Because of this, many therapists encourage a play based atmosphere in which the child feels safe and comforted. Certain activities included in the play atmosphere include: “ art, sand, puppets, and toys” (Malchiodi, 2003). The art station includes things like markers and crayons. The sand station provides the children with figures in which they can “ make a ‘ world’ in the sand, or anything they wish to make” (Malchiodi, 2003). The puppet station includes puppets that represent “ dominance, vulnerability, aggression, docility, and transformation” (Malchiodi, 2003).

The end result of using play therapy “ is that the children’s resistance will decrease as they feel valued, safe, and respected by the clinician” (Malchiodi, 2003). Another form of art therapy, outside of play, is dance. When an individual is faced with dealing with a traumatic event such as sexual abuse or rape, “ direct attention is rarely paid to the clients’ relationship and experiences of living in their bodies” (Mills, 2002). Dance therapy is “ the psychotherapeutic use of movement as a process which furthers the emotional, cognitive and physical integration of the individual” (Mills, 2002).

This study looked at dance therapy and if it was meaningful for personal growth with women who had suffered from childhood sexual abuse. The participants included 5 women who had histories of childhood sexual abuse ranging from the ages of 25 to 48 with the mean age of 39 years old. All five women were Caucasian and had participated in group dance therapy. Each

woman took part in an interview that lasted an hour and a half. One specific question given in this interview included: “ What differences can you detect in your experience/understanding of yourself after experiencing dance therapy? (Mills, 2002).

“ The interviewer endeavored to conduct interviews in a sensitive manner, conveying an attitude of interest, openness, trust and respect. Each interview continued until the participant believed her experience of dance therapy had been thoroughly described” (Mills, 2002). After analyzing the results, six themes were found among the 5 women, with most of them being benefits coming from the dance therapy. The six themes that occurred included reconnection to their bodies, permission to play, sense of spontaneity, sense of struggle, sense of intimate connection, and sense of freedom.

Within the theme of reconnecting with their bodies, each woman attributed her body, before therapy, as fragile or became disconnected because they felt their body “ attracted a child abuser” (Mills, 2002). After the dance therapy the women reported “ feeling an increased sense of acceptance and care of their bodies” (Mills, 2002). One woman’s testimony describes the process of her dance therapy experience stating: “ In the dance therapy room, you can have one new experience where [abuse] doesn’t happen ... you can force your body past that place where it remembers what happened and have a new memory, of something that’s different and positive ... now I can say to myself “ it just feels like where I was before, but I am not actually there” and then I can snap out of it.

I just have to remember to go back to my body and do those things where I can feel present” (Mills, 2002). Overall, dance therapy allowed these women to gain back self-esteem, self worth, and freedom within their own bodies after experiencing childhood sexual abuse. One woman testified to the benefits of the dance therapy by saying: “ My epiphany was a complete body experience.

I started sobbing, and I ended up on the bathroom floor curled up in the fetal position screaming at my dad, screaming at my mom, that I wasn’t going to hold onto this anymore ... and my body let it go. Since then, I remember the beatings and the sexual abuse, but the pain isn’t attached to it anymore. I’m not reexperiencing the pain with every memory” (Mills, 2002). The uses of art therapy, play therapy, and dance therapy with victims of rape or sexual assault provides to serve great benefits for the victims.

Some of these benefits include: gaining access to traumatic memories and encouraging disclosure, dealing with developmental issues, reconnecting with others, and overall healing power. “ Since art therapy is a visual and sensory modality, it can help clients access traumatic material stored in implicit memory, a sensory, body-based form of memory that is not the same as conscious, narrative memory” (Hennig, 2004). Art therapy can also provide a safe environment in which the clients feel comfortable enough to disclose information and to find a way to “ speak” about the abuse without verbal methods.

Along with dealing with developmental issues of suffering from rape or sexual abuse, art therapy aids in reconnecting with others. “ Creative arts

expression is a superior way to communicate the devastating effects of trauma and abuse, since it can trigger feelings of empathy in an audience” (Hennig, 2004). Being a victim of rape or sexual abuse causes the person to disconnect from others “ and creative arts expression can reestablish that sense of connection” (Hennig, 2004).

Art therapy also aids the client in reestablishing self-esteem, reducing depression, and overall breakthroughs of healing and tranquility. Although art therapy, in many forms, serves as great benefits for victims of sexual abuse and rape, ethical guidelines must be followed. Some of these ethical guidelines include: respecting the rights of the clients, maintaining confidentiality, the appropriate use of assessment methods, and always knowing the art work is property of the client. The art therapist must always respect the client. This respect includes multicultural and diversity competence.

Because art therapists work with such a broad spectrum of clients, they must obtain the knowledge needed to ensure that the diversity among clients are always respected. The art therapists must also maintain confidentiality and know that the art work is property of the clients. Victims of rape and sexual abuse are already vulnerable when beginning treatment, so it is the therapist job to ensure safety in that their testimonies and art work are kept confidential. Overall, the use of art therapy with victims of rape and sexual abuse is a instinctive type of treatment in which the clients can express themselves in a way that is not too painful for them.



Art therapy allows the client to express themselves without the use of verbal means. Art therapy serves various populations in several settings such as the clinical setting and can be applied within play and dance therapy. Art therapy provides many benefits such as reconnecting with others and increasing self-esteem. Art therapy with the use of rape and sexual victims, as a whole, serves to be very beneficial and valuable for the treatment and overall healing process.

### **Works Cited**

<http://www.creativetoolsforhealth.com/strauma/strauma.html>