

Using Creative Arts Therapy for Healing

By Sharon Itkoff

Creative arts therapy is a form of psychotherapy that draws on the creative process along with traditional talk therapy to facilitate personal growth, insight, and resilience. Because chronic illnesses, such as ESRD and chronic kidney disease, can have psychosocial and spiritual effects on one's mind, body, and relationships, art therapy as a treatment modality can be used to supplement traditional medical approaches to help one seek balance, wholeness, and self-actualization instead of just focusing on the cure. When one's energy is shifted from finding a cure to improving his or her quality of life in the here and now, the locus of control moves from external to internal, which is healing in and of itself. Art making in a therapeutic context can also provide a less threatening way to access feelings that may otherwise be too overwhelming. Moreover, creating "art for art's sake" is an exercise of self-care that can cultivate self-compassion and aid in healing.

Stress is a contributing factor to developing ESRD, and symptoms often include feeling generally ill and fatigued, drowsy, confused, and having difficulty concentrating. The organizing, containing, and stress-reducing effects of art making can alleviate free-floating anxiety and build self-esteem through helping one to develop a sense of mastery over the successful completion of an art project that is within one's control. Feelings of self-worth are also cultivated through engaging in the challenge of learning a new skill and thereby, taking healthy creative risks. Feelings of hopelessness and depression are combated through opportunities to show utility and continuity by creating an art object that withstands time as a sort of tangible personal legacy (1).

Art making provides a healthy distraction that can aid in pain management as well, because research has shown that spiritual or emotional suffering can lower one's physical pain threshold (2). Becoming absorbed in a creative project can also shift attention away from negative thought loops and improve frustration tolerance in working on a task step by step over time. Moreover, art therapy can allow patients to "re-author the dominant narrative of their ailment and provide a way to explore 'posttraumatic growth'" and the creation of a post-illness identity (3).

In an art therapy group or private session, the relational component of having another person witness a creative process can reduce the isolation that often occurs when one defends against the depression or anger toward the physical health condition or illness. From a humanistic perspective, a new social identity as artist can be fostered as opposed to just patient. The therapeutic alliance that develops between an art therapist and patient can enhance a sense of relatedness and connection and help one feel seen, validated, and understood, because the

creative process is witnessed through a compassionate lens; moreover, in viewing patient artwork, family, friends, and caregivers are also invited into the patient's creative process and can view them more multidimensionally than simply ill (2).

In sum, living with chronic illness and experiencing associated depressive symptoms can wear on one's mind, body, and personal coping tools. Art therapy is an effective treatment modality for helping

one to reconnect with his or her life energy and innate creativity and thereby, facilitate transformative healing from the inside out. ●

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