

Different Strokes: Art & Photo Therapy Promote Healing

Contributed by Barbara Trainin Blank

There's an upbeat scene in the otherwise heartbreaking movie *Splendor in the Grass*. Deenie Loomis (played by Natalie Wood), placed in a progressive psychiatric hospital in turn-of-the-century Kansas after attempting suicide over a lost love, finds that art marks the beginning of her recovery. (It also leads to a promising new relationship.)

According to the American Art Therapy Association, art therapy is a mental health profession that uses the creative process of art making to improve and enhance the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of individuals of all ages. Art therapy is based on the belief that the creative process involved in artistic self-expression helps people resolve conflicts and problems, develop interpersonal skills, manage behavior, reduce stress, increase self-esteem and self-awareness, and achieve insight.

Art therapy is used with children, adolescents, adults, older adults, groups, and families to assess and treat a wide array of difficulties, including anxiety, depression, and other emotional problems and disorders; substance abuse and other addictions; family and relationship issues; abuse and domestic violence; social and emotional difficulties related to disability and illness; and trauma and loss. Programs are found in a number of settings, including hospitals, clinics, public and community agencies, wellness centers, educational institutions, businesses, and in private practices.

Art therapists are master's level professionals who hold a degree in art therapy or a related field and are skilled in the application of a variety of art modalities (drawing, painting, sculpture, and other media) for assessment and treatment.

Photo therapy is an offshoot of art therapy using people's personal snapshots, family albums, and photos taken by others (and the feelings, memories, thoughts, beliefs, and values these pictures evoke)—during therapy or counseling practices conducted by licensed therapists. The techniques deepen and improve patients' insight, understanding, and relationships with others, in ways that words alone cannot do. (Photo art therapy is a subfield, practiced by individuals with additional specialized training in art therapy.)

Not limited to paper, photo therapy techniques can be used with any photographic imagery—including digital/electronic formats, videos, DVDs, and films.

It seems that a growing number of social workers are marrying their professions to art or photo therapy to enhance their practices. H. Mari Pizanis arrived at art therapy from the practice and later teaching of fine art. She has a master's in fine arts with a specialization in art therapy, and is also a licensed master's social worker.

"It was only later, in the working world, that I realized the need for professional credentials in social work and the need to integrate it into my practice," says Pizanis. "I work with at-risk youth in a special education high school, as well as maintain a private practice."

Art therapy with her students differs from that in her private practice. "In the schools, it can be used for social, emotional, and even physical purposes—like eye-hand coordination," Pizanis says. "It can be used if a student needs to refocus, or it can build self-esteem. Sometimes it can be a social building experience, such as in mural making."

In her private practice, Pizanis uses art therapy to work with unconscious material, to help patients uncover blocks, gain new perspective on an old problem, or recognize something not realized during talk therapy.

Erin Brazill, a registered and board-certified art therapist and licensed clinical social worker, currently works as an art therapist in a therapeutic day school for students who have been unsuccessful in a traditional school setting. "In addition, the school is unique in offering expressive outlets, such as music, drama, recreation, pet therapy, and the arts," says Brazill. "I provide individual counseling and conduct art therapy groups for the students."

Brazill's interest in art therapy grew out of a personal crisis. Diagnosed with cancer at 20, she used to take art materials to the clinic where she was receiving chemotherapy to "escape from reality." Brazill found the act of putting colored pencils or pastels to paper "instantaneously therapeutic."

"One day, a medical social worker at the clinic asked if I knew about art therapy," Brazill says. "The conversation stayed with me. I had taken a leave of absence from college for my treatment, and when I returned, I decided to get my degree in psychology. I completed an undergraduate psychology internship in a pediatric hematology/oncology unit during my senior year. It was then I realized how valuable the arts can be in helping these children find comfort during this very difficult time in their lives."

Certified as a clinical social worker, art therapist, psychoanalyst, and couples therapist, Bonnie Hirschhorn obtained a B.A. in fine arts. As she got more involved with painting earlier in life, she realized that "a lot of feelings came out that were not verbally accessible."

"Even as an undergraduate, I became interested in the arts as a healing process," she says. "I volunteered in the psychiatric department of a hospital, and I always knew I wanted to be more than a fine artist. I thought art therapy would be a good thing to explore."

One of the effective uses of art therapy is with people who experienced early trauma they don't recollect. "When clients draw, and they're asked to remember, they start to," Hirschhorn states. "Art therapy puts them into the mode where they put aside a verbal, logical side to gain memories and insights."

In all cases, art therapy can connect patients with "raw affect, not bound by logic." "Some people think art therapy is only for children, but that's not the case," the therapist says. "It can be used at different times in treatment and adapted with any particular population, including with 'normal populations' in private practice, by integrating art therapy with verbal therapy to help them gain awareness and insight."

In the late 1980s, prior to training as a clinical social worker, Cathy Lander-Goldberg was a professional photographer

who volunteered to teach photography to adolescent females in a residential treatment center.

"The girls were drawn to taking self-portraits in mirrors and taking pictures of each other as well as their belongings," she recalls. "Then, when I brought them into the darkroom, they began to open up and talk about their worlds. I sensed this work was healthy for them and began looking for articles on art therapy with photography."

In group work, Lander-Goldberg uses a combination of art therapy, writing therapy, photo therapy, and occasionally music therapy. "Like many of the expressive therapies, photo therapy is a way for clients to access thoughts and feelings that may not come to the surface in talk therapy," she says.

When working with adolescents who have family problems, low self-esteem, or social anxiety, Lander-Goldberg sometimes assigns self-portraits to help them explore their identities and relationships with others. She has been involved in two special photo therapy projects. "Photo Exploration" is a series of workshops Lander-Goldberg facilitates for adolescent and adult females to increase their self-awareness through journal writing and photography. "Resilient Souls: Young Women's Portraits and Words" is a traveling exhibition, composed of portraits of young women who have overcome a variety of obstacles and essays they wrote about how they achieved that.

Nirit Lavy Kucik discovered photo therapy serendipitously. The Israeli clinical social worker was doing therapy with a couple who argued endlessly about their families of origin. One day, feeling helpless, Lavy Kucik asked them to bring in photos of their family.

"The outcome was astonishing for me and for them," she says. "Both of them started to share feelings and childhood memories, and it was the first time they had ever listened to each other in our sessions. As a result, I started to use this technique more and more over the years, in bereavement work and in couples therapy."

Lavy Kucik realized photographs played a special role in her own family. Her mother had no photographs, because her parents had died in Auschwitz and she herself was hidden with a family in Belgium. Taking photos was not allowed. It was considered dangerous, because it was evidence of her real identity. "My mother's attitude toward taking photographs of us and my father was deeply affected by her losses," says the social worker. "So for me, photographs and taking them was always something meaningful."

After publishing an article in 1991—the first in Hebrew—about her photo therapy work, Lavy Kucik realized there were other practitioners. The opening of a school in Jerusalem offering training in the field, where she now teaches, helped boost growth.

Speaking to the difference between photo therapy and art therapy, Lavy Kucik says, "I understand that usually in art therapy you create an art work, even when you use collages or ready-made materials. But in photo therapy, you can bring in photographs taken by you or other people. What you create is the meaning the photos have for you."

Lynne Bernay-Roman works with the "Finding Focus Through Photography" (copyrighted) Program, implemented with at-risk kids and also as a mainstream module in critical-thinking classes.

A licensed social worker for 12 years, seeing adults, adolescents, couples, and families with a myriad of diagnoses, Bernay-Roman comments, "I was looking for a more dynamic way than the traditional clinical setting to work with kids—something that would be engaging, experiential, and fun, a more creative way to promote positive change, coping, and growth. To date, I've only implemented the program in a classroom setting, but it could be used with an individual just as effectively."

Originally an art major with a self-taught interest in photography, Bernay-Roman finds that photo therapy taps into "each kid's innate uniqueness, to recognize that in others, to learn to express and implement that in new ways and in every day." Photography can also create excitement for learning and empowerment that can enhance a school experience.

She believes photography is especially suited for creative learning and as a therapeutic tool. "Photo therapy differs from other art therapies such as fine art, music, or dance, because it is so simple to do and nonintimidating, and no previous skills are needed," the social worker says. "Everyone can immediately look and click and get a product that can be enjoyed. Taking a photo is easy, limited only by our perspectives and our focus."

Lee Carruthers is a Yukon, Canada, photographer who holds a BSW degree and certificates in criminology and conflict resolution. After conducting a photo therapy project a few years ago with aboriginal populations, he saw the benefits and risks more clearly.

"Photography must be done carefully with client populations," he says. "It is a powerful medium and—especially of late with the obsession society has with celebrity, paparazzi, pornography, and terrorism—its purpose and benefits have been sadly distorted. Many people view it with suspicion, and there are ethical concerns regarding its use with clients."

Still, photography can bring awareness of self and the environment, providing an opportunity to gain insight and opening doors to healing. "The bottom line," Carruthers concludes, "is that photography is powerful, so it must be used with thoughtful care. Photo therapy provides an opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of the art."

So does art therapy with regard to visual art.

Barbara Trainin Blank is a freelance writer in Harrisburg, PA.