



In search of
creative
solutions

Some people just can't open up to a psychiatrist and talk about their problems. But give them a paintbrush and a blank canvas, and everything changes. With art therapy, many patients discover a colourful new outlet—and the means to move on. **by Hailey Eisen**

DESPITE ESTHER ZELLER'S LOVING EFFORTS, nothing seemed to shake the anguish her mother felt after suffering a massive stroke 20 years ago. She had always been an affectionate person who enjoyed entertaining, but the stroke left her partially paralyzed, feeling miserable and robbed of her autonomy. One afternoon, Zeller, a Toronto-based artist, put some paper and pencil crayons in front of her mother, pleading with her to do something. With sudden confidence, her 63-year-old mother picked up the crayons and began drawing. The images were full of vigour and colour, depicting scenes from her childhood in Poland and her later life in Toronto. "For the first time since the stroke," Zeller recalls, "I was able to see my mother for the life she still had in her rather than for what she had lost."

Zeller had studied psychology at university in the 1970s, and that first glimpse of the healing powers of art became a catalyst that eventually sent her, at the age of 49, back to school to complete a graduate-level diploma at the Toronto Art Therapy Institute. She was a dedicated artist who harboured an intense desire to help people, but it wasn't until she started training at the institute that she realized how potent her two passions could be when combined. Now 56, Zeller offers workshops and therapy at long-term-care facilities and from her home studio. She believes strongly in art's ability to empower people and improve their quality of life, pointing out that we could all paint and draw before we even learned to speak. >



One client explained that for her, art therapy offered a way “to transform

HOW IT WORKS

Unlike conventional talk therapy, which relies on someone verbally opening up to a counsellor, art therapy allows them to open up creatively. Anyone can benefit from this approach: it’s especially useful for children (who have yet to master verbal communication skills) and seniors (who may have trouble speaking due to illness or dementia). It can also help patients cope emotionally with cancer or HIV/AIDS, as well as fight depression, anxiety, grief and addiction.

For the first part of a session, the client paints or draws while the therapist observes. It’s not only what you paint that matters, but how messy or controlled your work is and what feelings arise. What usually follows is a discussion prompted by what appears in the art.

Sasha knows the therapeutic effects of creative expression firsthand (like other patients in this article, she asked us to use only her first name). About five years ago, she turned to Sister Marcella, an art therapist at St. Joseph’s Health Centre in Toronto, to help her cope with an ordeal that continued to haunt her. Through six sessions, Sister Marcella encouraged Sasha to depict her past, present and future as she envisioned it. “What I found revealing was her observation of my use of colour,” says Sasha, 45. “In my first image, I used red to illustrate a point of trauma in my past, so she followed my use of red in other drawings to see how it would evolve.”

Though Sasha’s colour choice was subconscious, Sister Marcella noted that in later drawings, she used red to draw flowers and a river. “The images and patterns that appeared in my drawings helped me realize how much of an outcast I felt like in my own family and in many other parts of my life,” says Sasha. “I was trying to transform my past trauma into something positive.”

BACK TO BASICS: A CRASH COURSE IN ART THERAPY

Most of us can remember making art as a child, but at some point in many of our lives, a parent or teacher likely made a comment about our work that cast doubt on our abilities. Suddenly, art wasn’t about free expression anymore, but about perfection and accuracy. “For

people who haven’t done art in years, this kind of therapy helps them get back in touch with their creativity,” explains Gilda Grossman, one of Canada’s first certified art therapists and former director of the Toronto Art Therapy Institute. “You certainly don’t have to be an artist or have any prior art experience to benefit from this form of therapy.”

Throughout the ages, great masters like Vincent Van Gogh and Frida Kahlo have used art to express pain, fear and love. For some, the meditative qualities of painting and sculpting promote relaxation and help them to focus, triggering the subconscious to reveal ideas and emotions that the conscious mind may not be aware of. “Visual people are typically drawn to this process because they can use images to make sense of their feelings,” Grossman explains.

But it’s not for everyone. Some find the pressure associated with producing art on the spot more stressful than beneficial. Others consider the process too abstract and prefer more traditional therapeutic methods. Still, art therapy has a long history of success and continues to infiltrate mainstream health-care systems worldwide.

WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

The pioneers of art therapy began exploring its benefits in the early 1940s. In North America and Europe, doctors and psychologists first used it alongside talk therapies in psychiatric wards. While the United States remains years ahead of Canada in the development of art therapy programs and standards, the growth in popularity of alternative medical practices has led to increased demand for art therapists across this country. There are now more than 500 registered members of the Canadian Art Therapy Association, and a growing number of certified art therapy schools and training courses in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia.

When asked to describe their emotions, many patients know all the right things to say to their therapist, but what emerges is not necessarily the reality of the situation—feelings remain repressed and words can mask the truth. “People can talk about their hopes,



a past trauma into something positive.”

fears and difficulties,” says Michael Haslam, a Vancouver-based art therapist, “but what comes out when they start creating non-verbally is a much deeper level of authenticity.”

Before establishing The Lynn Valley Arts and Therapy Centre in North Vancouver in 2003, Haslam had worked in correctional facilities and psychiatric hospitals across Canada for 25 years. “Art therapy is certainly not going to solve everyone’s problems,” he notes, “but it puts the client in an active position. Rather than lying on a couch and feeling helpless, the client does something, and hopefully in that process begins to discover some of his own strengths and develops creative problem-solving techniques.”

One of Haslam’s clients took the lesson almost literally and applied it to a real-life situation. When her parents decided to sell the family house and move into something smaller, Joan (not her real name) found the prospect of having to leave home and live in a basement suite “totally depressing”—but it was all she could afford at the time. Five months into her therapy, Joan, 24, was painting vibrant colours on huge pieces of paper, leading her to realize that she didn’t have to accept her apartment as is. She could decorate her place similarly, choosing uplifting colours that were “bright and energetic.” The creative process allows clients to imagine acceptable solutions and move beyond obstacles that have been holding them back.

For many people, the opportunity to let loose and play with art supplies is as soothing as the conversation that follows. “When you’re creating art in a therapy session, all worries are out of your mind and you’re focusing intently on what you’re doing,” says Amanda, a Toronto-based health-care practitioner. Her work is geared toward caring for others, but she believes it’s equally important to look after herself. She’s been working with an art therapist on and off for five years to deal with job-related stress, helping her cope with emotional issues whenever they come up. “Art therapy provides perspective and awareness, and it helps me relax,” she says. “Through art therapy I have found my inner child, and now I leave each session feeling more energized and full of life.”



AN INTUITIVE APPROACH TO SELF-IMPROVEMENT

People seeking guidance don’t always need the help of a certified therapist. For those striving to make major life or career changes, or who simply want to feel happier and more fulfilled, **an expressive arts practitioner is another option.** Like art therapists, they use the creative process to promote healing, self-improvement and independence, but don’t have the psychology training and background.

Fay Wilkinson is a practitioner who offers workshops from her studio, The Creative Cocoon, near Haliburton, Ont. As the coordinator of the expressive arts program at Fleming College’s Haliburton School for the Arts, she also helps train educators, social workers, counsellors and others who aren’t interested in becoming therapists but want to use art as a medium to empower people. “My firm belief is that **we all have our own answers,**” she says.

“Women in transition” is one of the groups Wilkinson assists. “As mothers, wives and career women, our roles were clearly defined for us,” she explains. “But then our kids grew up and left home, our role in the workforce changed and things began to shift—physically, mentally and emotionally.” Through expressive arts, **clients learn to play again** without worrying whether the lines are straight or the colours are balanced. “When we pick up a paintbrush, we start reconnecting bits of ourselves that were previously disconnected,” she says. “And what I do is provide an environment where wisdom can reveal itself.”

➤ For a listing of art therapy resources in Canada, visit www.searsadvantage.ca.