

# The Golden Treasure of Therapeutic Arts



By Petra Barghouthi

Therapeutic arts refer to any kind of art – such as drama, movement, dance, writing, visual arts, music, or other creative outlets – created within a therapeutic process to enhance individual development and growth.

Because words are not always the most efficient means of expression, therapeutic arts stand out as an adequate method to convey complex feelings and serve as an emotional outlet. They can provide refuge from the intense emotions associated with illness, trauma, grief, and loss and allow people to find meaning and a deeper understanding of themselves and others through role-play in a story, the use of colors and shapes, a musical instrument, or simple gestures and moves.

Art was introduced into the therapeutic world in the 1940s, and mental health institutes in the United States recognized therapeutic arts as a profession in 1991. Various studies have demonstrated how engagement in artistic activities – whether as an observer of the creative efforts of others or as an initiator of one's own – enhances one's positive mood and emotions. It also has a salient impact on important psychological parameters by improving cognitive and sensory motor functions, raising self-esteem and self-awareness, and more.

Stories stimulate the active participation of the brain by engaging the power of imagination. Not only do they spark the brain's interest in their topics and subjects, they also activate memory. Because the story's various elements guarantee a safe, focused, and positive control of brain engagement, it is key to treatment and happiness. According to scientists, listening to good stories stimulates the secretion of two types of hormones: oxytocin, which is responsible for regulating emotions or behaviors such as empathy and social engagement, and cortisol, which is related to our reaction to stress.



■ Photos from my work with women in Anabta Village in Tolkarm in which I used art therapy and drama therapy techniques within the project: Art and culture and community participation, funded by A.M. Qattan Foundation and SDC.

One of my patients, (M), is a young man in his twenties who struggles with anxiety and emotional distress. During a drama therapy session, I told him the story “The Old Man and The Angel” about a tired old man who could hardly walk. When he found a beautiful pair of white wings hanging on a tree, he decided to try them out. As soon as he put them on, the old man felt a joy and vitality he had never experienced before. Eventually, he had to return the wings to the angel in exchange for a wish. While we were acting out the story, (M), who chose to role-play the

old man, refused to return the wings, and told me, “I desperately need these wings. I am not ready to give them back.” It was consequently agreed that he would return them at the right time. About a year later, (M) told me how the wings had helped him move on with his life and establish social and emotional relationships: “I feel calmer and more grounded. I am happy with my achievements; however, I still need those wings.” Indeed, role-play in drama therapy feels nonthreatening because the therapist provides a judgement-free and safe haven.





■ Some results (sculptures) were displayed in the exhibition Faces for Masks, as shown in the photos. as in the photos. The first two photos are from the training.

stimulates the release of dopamine, also known as the “pleasure hormone,” a chemical released when we do something enjoyable. Increased levels of this feel-good neurotransmitter can be very helpful if you are battling anxiety or depression.

According to the American Art Therapy Association, art therapists are trained to understand the roles color, texture, and various art media can play in the therapeutic process and taught how these tools can help reveal one’s thoughts, feelings, and psychological disposition. This type of therapy has also been shown to help children by engaging them in an enjoyable activity, which accelerates healing and growth processes. Therapeutic arts positively affect function, mood, cognition,

Therapeutic arts are suitable for anyone who feels overwhelmed or pressured by modern life; creating art will give you a chance to slow down and explore your issues. It also helps in dealing with addictions, anxiety, attention or eating disorders, grief and loss, dementia, depression, PTSD, trauma, relationship issues, social difficulties, physical illness, and more. Studies also show that creating art

and behavior, which is particularly evident in children with special needs, such as those with autism, speech impairments, and other disabilities and disorders. When children express themselves through art, they gain a sense of normalcy far from any judgment, which allows them to show their individual personalities and strengths.

Since therapeutic arts focus on the process rather than the final product, your engagement in such activity is not about becoming a great artist but about finding meaning and connection in your life. All you need is a willingness to experiment. Human beings are innately creative, so all you must do to successfully complete a therapeutic art activity is to be honest with yourself and with your emotions. Once you unleash your creativity, your inner artist will quickly awaken – and you will discover the golden treasure of your inner world. Various studies on therapeutic arts have examined the close relationship between art and health and probed how these interventions enhance health: Because you are using mental processes in a physically engaging way, you are forging a grounding and healing mind-body connection. When you create art, you take yourself on a journey of self-discovery that will help you eliminate emotional roadblocks and learn how to communicate with yourself and with others.

Perhaps what lies at the core of therapeutic arts is their connection to human nature. Throughout thousands of years of civilization, all human societies have engaged in distinctive rituals for all the various phases of life from birth until death. These rituals carried a person through life’s transitional phases, as they addressed the transition process. The methods that art therapy applies can

be traced to these human rituals in which therapeutic artistic activities took participants on a spiritual journey through chant, myth, painting, storytelling, etc.; such engagement originated in their own history yet has been dismantled in modern times.

Although therapeutic arts emerged in psychological intervention programs in Palestine less than two decades ago, people who engaged immediately felt familiarity and a closeness with this practice. Societies that are distant from urbanization and still connected to their roots as well as communities that practice their social and religious rituals can greatly relate. In a society such as the Palestinian one, where admitting psychological difficulties and seeking therapy are social taboos, therapeutic arts comprise a beneficial outlet for many individuals.

*Petra Barghouthi holds an MA in art therapy, with a specialization in drama and movement therapy (Sesame method), from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London, UK. The founder of the Art Therapy Palestine initiative, she is a therapist and art therapy consultant for governmental organizations and NGOs and has worked as a theater-maker since 2006.*

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