

## Holistic Healing

### Picture of Health

*Art therapy and prescriptive art help heal negative memories.*

by Violet Snow

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Art is a wound turned into light," wrote painter Georges Braque, expressing the potential of art to transform pain. Even people who are not artists can benefit from its healing qualities, either by creatively expressing feelings under the guidance of an art therapist or by reinventing themselves through the positive lens of a prescriptive artist.

In an art therapy session, the client makes the art. Conversely, a prescriptive artist creates a picture of health for the client, fitting the person's specific emotional needs.

Art therapy is especially useful for children and developmentally disabled or mentally ill people who are unable to articulate their feelings. "Children learn through their senses first," says Diane Quiroga, an art therapist in Springfield, New Jersey. "Touch, smell, movement, the pressure of line on paper—it all helps to express feelings when they can't do it verbally."

In their book *Art as Therapy* (Phaidon), Alain de Botton and John Armstrong describe art, including works of design, architecture and craft, as a therapeutic medium that can help "guide, exhort and console its viewers, enabling them to become better versions of themselves."

"Art edits down complexity and helps us to focus, albeit briefly, on the most meaningful aspects," they write, assessing artist John Constable's cloud studies. "Constable didn't expect us to become deeply concerned with meteorology. The precise nature of a cumulonimbus is not the issue. Rather, he wished to intensify the emotional meaning of the soundless drama that unfolds daily above our heads, making it more readily available to us and encouraging us to afford it the central position it deserves."

Quiroga, the New Jersey therapist, lets her clients choose their own media—from crayons to clay to puppets—and offers a suggestion, such as "Draw your family doing something." She then looks at a series of pictures for patterns. A split in the drawing may indicate bipolar disorder, for instance, while depression is often represented by faint lines or use of only a small area of the paper.

She receives many referrals for anxiety, especially surrounding divorce or, in the case of autistic

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children, related to social interactions. Sometimes she encourages the client to create a simple puppet and use it to tell a story. "I'll ask, 'How would the character feel about that? How can you help them?'" says Quiroga. "Kids are so resilient and smart. This process can help them gain skills they can apply to themselves."

Emily MacArthur uses art therapy to help elders at Norwood Crossing, a long-term care facility in Chicago. "Art brings out strengths people still have—their creativity and wisdom and problem-solving skills," said MacArthur. "It's meditative to sit quietly and paint together. The client produces a tangible product to look at and be proud of."

If the person has a hard time adapting to life in the home, MacArthur may ask them to create a self-portrait. "We'll focus on the question of how you see yourself in your life at this moment. With the drawing in front of them, they'll take more time to think about it than if I just ask the question. Sometimes we'll talk about how they felt while painting and how they felt afterwards. The painting becomes a tangible, active listening tool, in which I see as well as hear what they're saying."

Prescriptive art involves a different process. An artist interviews the client while looking through his or her personal photographs, ultimately creating what digital artist Nancy Gershman calls a "tangible picture of hope." Gershman often conducts sessions with clients by phone or Skype. She finds her photomontages especially effective for people dealing with grief, eating disorders or estrangement, particularly where there is a need for acceptance of an LGBT family member.

"I'm interested in memories and photos with a positive association," said Gershman. For a client mourning the death of a loved one, "my job is to show them symbolically, metaphorically and literally, how that person would support a shared dream they might have. Or we might create a legacy portrait that brings out life lessons the deceased can teach."

Portrait photographer Carl Studna uses his camera as a vehicle for self-awareness. "When we are truly living in the present moment, all that can show up is a sense of spaciousness, free of judgement or any form of separation," Studna writes in his book *Click! Choosing Love One Frame at a Time* (Hay House). Letting go of control while having your picture taken, Studna adds, "takes being mindful and trusting that there is truly nothing you need to do other than simply show up and be you."

Gershman asks clients coping with lingering feelings of loss and regret what brought them joy before their problems arose. "We go back in time and bring supportive family members into the picture. Or we go into the future and co-create what should take place and where."

Chicago resident Loretta Downs went to Gershman for help after her mother, Anna, died. "My mom and I had a relationship where we were dependent on each other to be miserable," Downs says. "But in the last three years of her life, we had gotten really close. She forgave herself for being a bad mother and I forgave her."

Gershman selected a photo of Anna in the prime of life, on one of the few occasions when she had been happy. The younger Downs raises monarch butterflies, so Gershman included a monarch in the picture, as well as a photo of a wooden stool Anna had often sat on while reading to her daughter. A picture taken at Anna's wake shows her daughter and attendees sprinkling pink rose petals over the body. Gershman's final touch was creating a collage of rose petals.

Seeing the finished piece for the first time, Downs burst into tears. Now she loves to see it. "When she turned my stories into this picture, I could see the love I talked about manifested. Under normal circumstances, I'd have only old pictures. But this is a whole new memory of the experience. It's uplifting."



