



“Each art form—music, dance, movement, painting, sculpture, poetry, prose, story-telling, and ritual—is a gateway to the deepest aspects of the self, reawakening a language of image and metaphor and expressing what cannot be easily put into words.”

CIIS, California Institute of Integral Studies

An Introduction to Expressive Arts - Healing through the Arts

As researchers learn more about the benefits of the arts on mental and physical health, the field of expressive arts therapy continues to grow. Expressive arts therapists combine “talk” psychotherapy, such as contemporary psychoanalytic, cognitive-behavioral, and humanistic approaches, with an understanding of the psychological aspects of the creative process.

Expressive arts therapy is a specific discipline that falls within the umbrella of creative arts therapy, also known as expressive therapies. Art, music, poetry, drama, and dance/movement therapy also fall under this umbrella. Whereas these disciplines tend to specialize in one modality, expressive arts therapy emphasizes the **inter-modal use of the arts**.

Within an expressive arts therapy session, the therapist and client may move between a number of modalities in order to best support the client in his or her healing process. Practitioners have a wealth of options to draw upon, including visual arts, music, dance/movement, creative writing, singing, storytelling, guided imagery, dream work, and sand tray.

The skills of the expressive arts therapist are playing an important role as a “meta-language” in clinical settings with diverse client populations. They are also helping us globally to communicate across differences including those of race, ethnicity, gender, physical abilities and social class.

Expressive arts therapy is now used in almost all psychotherapeutic contexts and settings. As a result of their versatility, the arts can be used to serve those more disadvantaged, while also facilitating human growth and potential for most anyone. Research in neuroscience is supporting the role of the arts in healthy psychological development and in recovery from trauma.

In addition more and more communities and organizations are reaping the rewards of using expressive arts-based methods to work creatively with the challenges that come up in day-to-day organizational life.

The arts have been incorporated into other nature based cultures for centuries. These cultures did not have the same issues of mental health and addiction that you find in ours, that is so disconnected from organic modes of expression. It is time to integrate this simple wisdom of the ages for healing and well being, into our wonderful technologically advanced society.

History of Expressive Arts Therapy

While people have undoubtedly experienced the arts as healing for millennia, the field of creative arts therapy was established during World War II. During this time, veterans hospitals noticed that shell-shocked soldiers seemed better able to express and process their traumas when engaged in the arts. Creative arts therapies were introduced to British and U.S. hospitals to help rehabilitate returning soldiers and were eventually filtered into other institutional settings.