

## What is Art Therapy?

Art therapy is a mental health profession in which clients, facilitated by the art therapist, use art media, the creative process, and the resulting artwork to explore their feelings, reconcile emotional conflicts, foster self-awareness, manage behavior and addictions, develop social skills, improve reality orientation, reduce anxiety, and increase self-esteem. A goal in art therapy is to improve or restore a client's functioning and his or her sense of personal well-being. Art therapy practice requires knowledge of visual art (drawing, painting, sculpture, and other art forms) and the creative process, as well as of human development, psychological, and counseling theories and techniques.

NeuroDevelopmental Art Therapy (NDAT) is psychodynamic, attachment-focused treatment of relational trauma

- NDAT utilizes the integrative capacity of the brain - cortical cooperation - and applies neurobiology in the clinical setting.
- A paradigm shift is occurring across all sciences from conscious, explicit, analytical, verbal and rational left brain to the unconscious, integrative non-verbal, body-based emotional processes of the right brain.
- All are central to a deeper understanding of the fundamental mechanisms that drive development, psycho-pathogenesis, and psychotherapy.
- The concrete image on the paper allows the client to objectify the images, creating distance and allowing her to speak about an external event rather than an internal one. Objectification of images also eliminates the flooding of disturbing images and sensations. The drawing format itself is effective. The paper acts as a container of that trauma.
- In trauma situations, the brain is primarily processing information visually. The most common recall of traumatic imagery is in visual form. NDAT helps clients remember, express, and integrate traumatic episodes.
- Emotions are expressed and released through art media. Incoming stimuli such as intrusive images, sensations or memories become better organized as the person becomes more aware of affect.
- Art can bypass left-brain activity and use other regions of the brain where traumatic memories are stored. The affective power of images does more than reduce trauma symptoms, it also allows for an expansion of previously blocked right brain social-emotional development.
- The kinesthetic aspect of scribbling with art media activates the lower structures of the right brain and stimulates the formulation of imagery. The bilateral stimulation and eye movements appear to unify the hemispheres as a part of the neural restructuring process. Most treatment sessions include mindfulness work and some form of nonverbal expression.
- A focus on the right hemisphere of the brain can help to bring about healing. By engaging in kinesthetic activity of art making, play and other creative work, sensory nonverbal pathways are activated along with the left-hemisphere verbal neural pathways,utilizing the integrative capacity of the brain.

- NDAT is different from short-term, acute trauma treatment. Relational trauma and repeated exposure to child abuse and neglect are not single, one-time events. *To address sustained issues of grief and loss, maladjustment and inability to relate to others in a positive manner, a sense of trust has to be established.*

When the significant developmental task of attachment with a primary caregiver is missing or inadequate, the development of a child's concept of mind/body/self is compromised. The child does not have the ability to develop the sensory and motor systems that normally occur through interaction with others and the environment, foundations for learning and behavior. Once the lower structures of the neural system are integrated, they will inform the higher structures.

The corpus callosum - the band of tissue that connects the hemispheres of the brain - is smaller in abused children than in nonabused children. The child cannot access the higher structures of the brain for thinking, planning, judgment, consequences, wisdom, compassion, or empathy.

The prefrontal cortex includes wisdom, judgement, compassion, moral development, prosocial attitudes/behaviors, social decision making/pragmatic knowledge of life, emotional homeostasis, reflection/self-understanding, value relativism/tolerance, and acknowledgment of and dealing effectively with uncertainty. The prefrontal cortex is what makes us human, and is *not completely developed until age 25 at the earliest.*

Why Art Making is an important modality in trauma intervention:

- Art making is a right hemisphere psychomotor process. Because trauma is a sensory experience, and not solely a cognitive experience, intervention must include ways to tap sensory memories of the trauma
- The drawing format is effective; the paper itself acts as a container of traumatic memories
- Drawing provides a visual focus on details that encourages children, via trauma-specific questions to tell their story and to give it "language"
- Drawing engages children with the active involvement in their own healing. It enables them to move from passive, internal and unregulated trauma reactions into active directed, controlled externalization of their trauma experiences
- Drawing provides a safe way to communicate what children, even adults often have no words to describe
- Art Therapy combines right and left hemisphere in cortical consolidation
- Right and left neural pathways operating in tandem offer maximum therapeutic potential