



## The Value of Art Expression in Trauma-Informed Work

Gretchen Miller, MA, ATR-BC, ACTP

Registered Board Certified Art Therapist | TLC Advanced Certified Trauma Practitioner

The benefits of creating art and engaging in the creative process to promote emotional expression, cope with traumatic stress, and strengthen sense of self are many. The following list summarizes a few of the important themes and considerations connected to trauma-informed work and how the process of art-making can help to achieve grounding, reflection and growth.

Non-art therapists are advised that the information in this document does qualify as practicing art therapy (per the American Art Therapy Association's *Ethical Principle 8.6*, 2013).\*

- **Visual Voice:** Art expression is a powerful way to safely contain and create separation from the terrifying experience of trauma without the necessity of or reliance on verbal language to share one's story (Morrissey, 2013). This creative manifestation can become a visual voice that can help retrieve content from lower-functioning parts of the brain where traumatic experiences live without words and can transform into drawings on paper, molded into clay, painted onto a canvas and more. Art safely gives voice to and makes a survivor's experience of emotions, thoughts and memories visible when words are insufficient.
- **Finding Safety:** Activating and using the imagination to convey visual symbols and representations of safety through creative experiences can help bring some relief associated with overwhelming states of fear and alarm. Art making can help restore a sense of emotional safety and wellbeing (Cohen, Barnes, & Rankin, 1995) which is an essential foundation to start stabilizing terror into manageable states of contentment and security.
- **Structured, Sensory Intervention:** Steele (2003) speaks to the challenges that trauma has on our explicit (cognitive) vs. implicit (sensory) memory. Engaging in the expression of art as a form of trauma intervention taps into the implicit functioning of the brain that can tell the experience of trauma through visual representations, not words. [TLC's SITCAP leverages the power of drawing](#) to access sensory-based content for the expression of powerful emotions often connected to trauma, such as fear, anxiety, anger, hurt, guilt and shame (Steele & Kuban, 2013).
- **Empower Resilience:** [In an article about neurobiology, trauma and art expression](#) published in the art therapy literature by Hass-Cohen, Clyde Findlay, Carr, and Vanderlan, (2014) the authors highlight, "trauma-informed, resiliency-orientated interventions increase a person's mastery, coping and quick recovery from short- and long-term stress responses" (p.71). Engaging in art supports the survivor to make choices, problem solve, make meaning, and safely learn how to successfully navigate trauma reactions and stresses in the safety of the therapeutic experience. This creative process also strengthens one's internal locus of control and empowers new ways of seeing the self and the recovery path ahead.

\*Guidelines on when to make a referral to or contact an art therapist:

- The child/teen expresses feelings, thoughts, and experiences more easily through visual images and art-making;
- The child/teen expresses an intense affect or reaction during or after creating art;
- The child/teen has a history of preverbal trauma;
- The artwork is disturbing to the therapist or the therapist has questions about how to respond to it.

To locate an art therapist, please visit [www.arttherapy.org](http://www.arttherapy.org)

### References

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