

Creating and Coping: How Art Therapy Can Improve Mental Health

I am sitting in my English class, but I'm not focusing on my teacher. Instead, I'm staring out of the window at the fall leaves, completely enveloped in my own world – so much so that I can't even give my teacher an answer when she asks me what's happening in the novel we are reading. I suffer from a condition called derealization, which is a mental state which causes detachment from your surroundings. Individuals and objects may appear unreal, but I'm aware that this altered state is not normal. Whenever I feel like this, I find myself turning to art as a means of expression and escape. I begin writing a poem about how I feel like I'm consistently living in a daydream. Floating around, just like a rouge leaf in the fall, I perform my day-to-day tasks while feeling disconnected from reality. My derealization has always been a struggle. However, when writing poetry, I found that I could express these difficult sensations and gain a sense of clarity in the moments where I had none. Through using and viewing art as therapy, people of all ages are developing improved coping patterns and learning how to communicate better.

When I returned home, my parents called me into the kitchen to talk about what happened at school that day. I never explained my derealization to my parents, I never had found the need to until now. I tried explaining what derealization was to my parents in every way possible, but nothing was getting through to them. *This is pointless. They'll never understand.* My parents didn't mean to be so dismissive, the generational gap between my parents and I shines through when it comes to mental health struggles. In "Mental Health Perceptions Across Generations," by Abby Hall, she describes Generation X as a group who are "...not educated on mental health, lacked advanced technology during childhood and adolescence, and [were]

raised by one of the toughest generations in terms of mental strength.” Generation X lacked what my generation currently has. Being a part of Generation Z, there is an overwhelming acceptance and awareness towards those with mental health struggles, as well as a plethora of resources to which we have access. We can use art as therapy, seek help from professionals online, and even relate to others who share their stories on social media. Since my parent’s generation lacked this accessibility, no wonder they can’t comprehend what I’m saying.

Just as I was about to deem this conversation a lost cause, I remembered the poem sitting in my backpack. Poetry was my main outlet of successful communication when it came to my mental health. Art helped me not only to look deeper within myself, but to take what I was feeling and cope in a healthier way. Although I was not specifically placed in an art therapy program, what I experienced was still the result of art therapy. In “How Making Art Improves Mental Health,” Sarah Kuta describes art therapy as, “an integrative treatment that uses artistic self-expression as a means of improving mental health and well-being.” As an individual who struggles with communicating her emotions through average wording, my art is used to express what I can’t truly get across. Many people who have experienced trauma use art therapy as a means of expression. Art therapist, Girja Kaimal, further explains this stating, “Experiences like trauma are very difficult to articulate into words, so therapies that can support and connect patients with nonverbal expression are really the foundation of the creative arts therapies.” (Kuta) Through this nonverbal communication, those who have faltering mental health can feel more supported and less pressured to find the “right words” to say.

As I read my poem to my parents, my voice was trembling with nervousness. Throughout my reading, all I could think was, *this poem is my only hope*. I uttered:

*the cold has consumed us all again.
i find myself dried and withered,*

*using my last grips of life to hold onto the branch
that is reality.*

*once all the green has left me,
i lean into the fall. i embrace it.
i loosen my grip
and prepare for my journey back to the ground.*

*i drift wherever the wind takes me
moving aimlessly with no control
but there is no use in worrying as i float
as i always end up landing on the floor again*

Once I finished, I looked up at my parents and finally saw that reassuring look that I'd yearned for. *They understand. They see me.* I never thought that art would help me connect with my parents on that deep a level before. My derealization was a part of me that I had tried to hide away from the entire world. What I was expecting even less was my dad coming into my room later that night and telling me how he draws when he is stressed. In fact, patients who seek art therapy use all different media to express themselves:

When patients have a hard time putting feelings into words, drawing, painting, sculpting, making collages, creating personalized papier-maché masks and engaging in other practices can help them unlock their emotions and translate them into something real. In the process, they're able to share a bit of what they're going through with the folks around them. (Kuta)

People who use art therapy as their means of self-expression develop healthy coping skills and a more open line of communication not only with others, but with themselves. My dad never seemed like the type of person to acknowledge his mental health, but although he had never outwardly shared his coping skills with me, it made me happy to know that he was learning to deal with his emotions within himself despite being raised differently.

Even though it is well known that creating art can help others to reach their mental health goals, consuming art has also proven to be beneficial to people's mental health. In "How Looking at Art Affects Your Mental Health" by Serban Veres, the article states:

Cortisol is a steroid hormone that the body produces...When we experience stress, our body ups the cortisol — creating the long term negative effects...including depression and aging. A 2006 study brought London city workers into an art museum for a brief, 35 minute tour. After a little more than half an hour, participants had marked decreases in cortisol.

By consuming art, your brain activates the conscious and unconscious. While analyzing art the brain can take a break from its focus on day-to-day stressors and place itself within the art in order to feel certain emotions. This process is called "embodied cognition." The University of Arizona defines this as, "mirror neurons in the brain turn things like action, movement, and energy you see in art into actual emotions you can feel. Embodied cognition starts when you look at a piece of art. The more you analyze the piece, the more you place yourself within the scene and can actually feel the quality of the works." Whether or not someone is deeply analyzing a medium of art or not, the sheer beauty of a piece has proven to improve the mental health of the viewer.

I always knew I had a natural aptitude for the arts as a whole. Whether poetry, musical theater, or dance, I knew I was talented. What I failed to realize though was how impacted I would be by being an artist. Discovering that art can be a passion as well as an outlet for my mental struggles was mind-blowing to me. The weight of not being understood was lifted off of my shoulders when I shared my poem with my parents. Even though I may not have been able to traditionally communicate to them what I was going through, art gave me a new line of

communication, not only to my family, but to everyone in my life. Through art, people everywhere find new ways to express themselves to the people around them.

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