Using Art Therapy to Cope With Depression

by ANGELA FINLAY

Art Therapy for Depression

Depression is a pervasive illness that's notoriously difficult to treat. One of the most difficult steps to healing is coming to terms with deep, buried emotions – an area where medication and conversation often fall short.

It's no secret that art is a positive and inspiring mode of expression, but it can also be a surprisingly powerful approach to uncovering, managing, and overcoming the entrenched symptoms of mental illness. In fact, art therapy could bring the breakthrough you've been hoping for, and is certainly worth a try for anyone who suffers from depression.

How Art Therapy Can Work for Depression

Depression can affect motivation, self-confidence and mood so severely that even beginning the healing process can be an uphill battle. Not only do patients have a difficult time describing their symptoms, but the act of communication itself is compromised by deep-seated apathy and a disabling sense of helplessness. However, art has a unique way of sidestepping some common obstacles in depression.

- **Whole body experience –** Talk therapy is a classic – and reputable – approach to overcoming depressive symptoms, but it can be difficult to express dark and unhappy thoughts with words alone. In contrast, art therapy invites you to express without having to speak; the manual act of creating can overcome that first hurdle of describing your pain, which makes it a powerful start to a conversation.
- **Canvas as "container" for feelings –** Many find that by externalizing their feelings, they can relieve their internal burden. Transferring thoughts, emotions and concerns to a canvas (or paper, or lump of clay) brings a real, tangible result – a piece of your internal reality that stares back at you, impossible to ignore, but ultimately easier to understand and overcome**.**
- **Positive physiological response –** Looking at (and creating) something beautiful can actually make you happier, research shows. When you see beauty, the pleasure center of your brain releases dopamine, a chemical that increases feelings of love and contentment. In turn, it's almost impossible not to notice a positive shift in mood (even if it's slight).

How to Benefit from Art Therapy: Tips, Methods and Approaches

Art therapy might be more accurately described as expressive therapy, since it refers to many modes of artistic expression. From art to music to dance, the act of creating could be tangible or abstract – the important element is the expression and creation, rather than a polished final product.

While anyone can get something out of art therapy, those who have trouble describing their feelings with words will probably notice the greatest benefit. Visual art is a common starting point for patients with chronic illness, but there are other forms of expressive therapy that can help those with depression break through their shell:

- **Music therapy –** Listening to music has a powerful effect on personality, emotion and attitude, but creating music can be similarly cathartic. In fact, research shows a link between music therapy and a decrease in depression.
- **Dance therapy –** A liberating and fluid form of art therapy, dance therapy has the added benefit of physical activity – another proven way to kick-start positive feelings. Dance may not bring the clear imagery that a drawing offers, but rhythmic movement can be a powerful tool to tap into emotions.
- **Drama therapy –** Role playing can eliminate the pressure of expressing your feelings, since you are quite literally stepping out of your own mind and body for a time. By assuming another character, some patients find that they can come to grips with buried feelings or external barriers more comfortably.

Regardless of the artistic medium you choose, any useful art therapy practice must involve a sense of play. The freedom to enjoy and explore without rules or restrictions fosters creativity, and removes the self-judgement that can keep you from moving forward.

As those with depression begin to identify and express their emotions more easily, they often find improvements in their mental state. Though there is no immediate cure for depression – and art therapy is traditionally used to complement, rather than replace other treatment – the creative process brings a sense of control that has likely been lacking from other areas of life. That sense of control is a an important step to overcoming the feelings of helplessness that are at the heart of depression.