

PENNSYLVANIA RECOVERY CENTER

Creatively Healing

Art Therapy in Mental Health Treatment

A clinical staff training on creative interventions in treatment



TODAY'S SESSION

Agenda

01

What Is Art Therapy?

Who can do it, and how it differs from other therapies and art practices.

03

Materials, Directives & Ideas

How to incorporate more creativity into your work right now.

05

Closing

Questions and thank you.

02

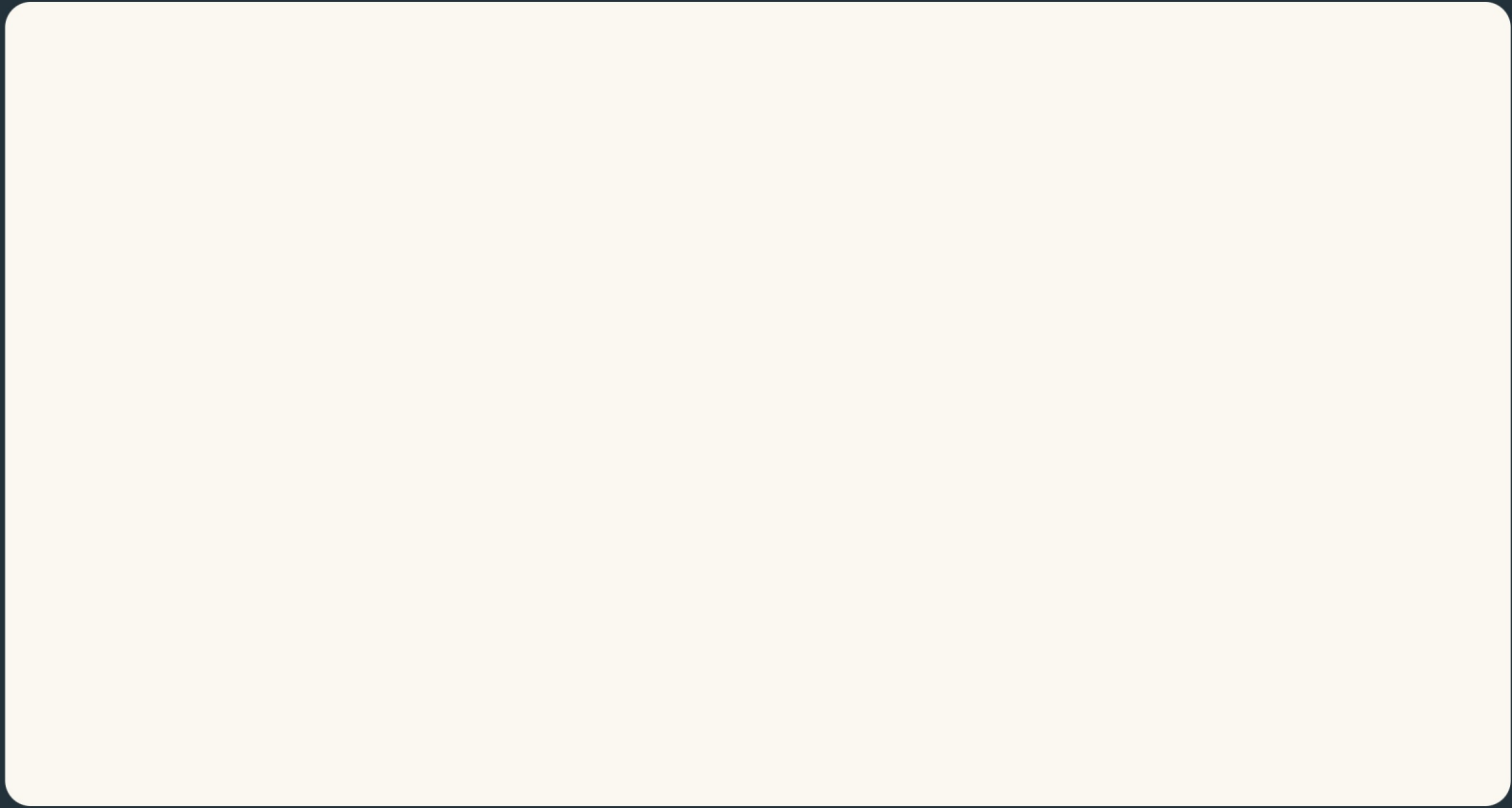
Art & Mental Health

Why creativity is so important and impactful to treatment.

04

Let's Make Some Art

Test it out yourself with the Postcards from the Future project.



By Marco Melgrati

DEFINITION

What is art therapy?

“ *Art therapy is a mental health profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship.* ”

— American Art Therapy Association (AATA)

CREDENTIALS

Who qualifies as an art therapist?

Credentialed mental health professionals

- Hold a master's degree or higher in art therapy
- **ATR** — Registered Art Therapist
- **ATR-BC** — Registered & Board Certified Art Therapist
- Many also hold a counseling license (LPC)

What they understand

- How materials affect mood and expression — and can trigger
- How to read psychological change in a client's artwork
- Symbolology, mark-making & color theory as indicators of abuse, trauma & disorders

NOT JUST FOR SPECIALISTS

Art as therapy vs. art therapy

Only art therapists are qualified to make art with clients? **No.** Any clinician, teacher, or client can use art as a therapeutic tool — art therapy itself is a distinct, credentialed practice.

Art as Therapy

- Practiced alongside any clinician, teacher — or independently
- Used as a tool to aid discussion
- Goal: practicing a skill, leisure, or mindfulness

Art Therapy

- Making art alongside a registered art therapist
- Supports treatment goals, expression & trauma processing
- Art is interpreted with the client to deepen insight

In both settings, art-making can be fun, relaxing, challenging, and empowering.

“

Engaging the creativity within an individual...is a means of developing the plasticity of the brain.

— Richard Carolan (2016)

WHY CREATIVITY SUPPORTS TREATMENT • PART ONE

Art therapy & art as therapy aid treatment

Creates feelings of control

Mastery over a material builds confidence, and lets clients engage in groups without feeling too vulnerable or exposed.

Bypasses the limits of verbal language

Clients used to talking about their mental health may deflect from deeper processing; words can echo past failures in classrooms or courtrooms.

Encourages engagement with emotions

Uncovers repressed or complicated feelings that are hard to find words for, through symbolism, color, and movement.

Externalizes the internal struggle

So much of mental health challenge is internal — visual metaphor gives it shape.

“

The art therapy process supports the individual in exploring different perspectives without activating defense mechanisms...

— Richard Carolan (2016)

WHY CREATIVITY SUPPORTS TREATMENT · PART TWO

Art therapy & art as therapy aid treatment

Increasing confidence

Trying new experiences and succeeding with new materials increases confidence and develops the plasticity of the brain.

Practicing mindfulness & intention

It's easier to engage in mindfulness when hands are busy and the mind is focused on a task.

Connecting with self

In discussion-heavy programming, art-making creates space for personal, quiet reflection while keeping clients engaged.

Alternative rewarding experiences

Rewarding experiences outside old patterns are developmentally important for clients used to living in “survival mode.”

“

Creativity is an antidote to shame.

— Libby Schmanke (2016) & Lynn Johnson (1990)

PART THREE

Materials, Directives, Interventions & Ideas

Practical ways to bring more creativity into your work — starting now.

Collage

Why it works: no drawing skill required — and materials are cheap (magazines, scissors, glue). Tear images instead of cutting where scissors aren't allowed.

Virtual resources: unsplash.com · Google Images · canva.com · Pinterest

“

Collage parallels the...healing process, as it is a process of construction, reconstruction and rehabilitation.

— Robbins (1998) · artwork by K. Moore

DIRECTIVE IDEAS

Collage projects

Most projects in which a client is asked to draw something can be adapted to collage.

- Compare the pros & cons of an upcoming decision
- Describe the experience of an emotion or challenge
- Create coping statement cards
- Represent one's healing journey

IN PRACTICE

Coping statement cards

MATERIALS & DIRECTIVES

Sculpture

The art of expression using 3D forms — air dry clay, ceramics, bent wire, or plaster molds.

Why it can work well

- Provides a physical release of energy
- Soothing — aids emotional regulation
- Builds group camaraderie over the “messy” experience
- Familiar to clients used to working with their hands

Accessible materials

- Crayola Model Magic — color with markers
- Crayola Air Dry Clay
- Stones & trinkets from any Dollar Store

DIRECTIVE IDEAS

Sculpture projects

The use of clay can have therapeutic properties alone, without the need for a prompt.

- Pinch pots or coil pots — name one thing you're grateful for per coil layer
- Sculpt an animal that represents something about you
- Calming or grounding stones — painted rocks, or clear garden stones with a picture on the back
- Coping skill jars or boxes
- Ball of emotions — use different colored clay for each emotion

MATERIALS & DIRECTIVES

Origami

The Japanese art of folding paper into decorative shapes and figurines — a clean process needing only paper, with countless free tutorials online.

Benefits: mindfulness, slowing down, following step-by-step directions, and building frustration tolerance.

Try: fold intentions or goals into “lucky stars” · fold goals for change into butterflies · race paper boats as a metaphor for resiliency

Origami butterflies, made in session

MATERIALS & DIRECTIVES

Drawing

Easily accessible with materials most facilities already have — pens, pencils, markers, colored pencils. Oil pastels add brighter pigment and a more fluid feel.

Drawing can be triggering — it may raise “I can't draw” or comparison between clients' skill levels.

Make it more accessible

- Offer templates whenever possible
- Offer a collage alternative
- Allow journaling or a poem instead, if drawing feels too triggering
- Allow tracing from a magazine or screen
- Allow AI-generated images when appropriate

DIRECTIVE IDEAS

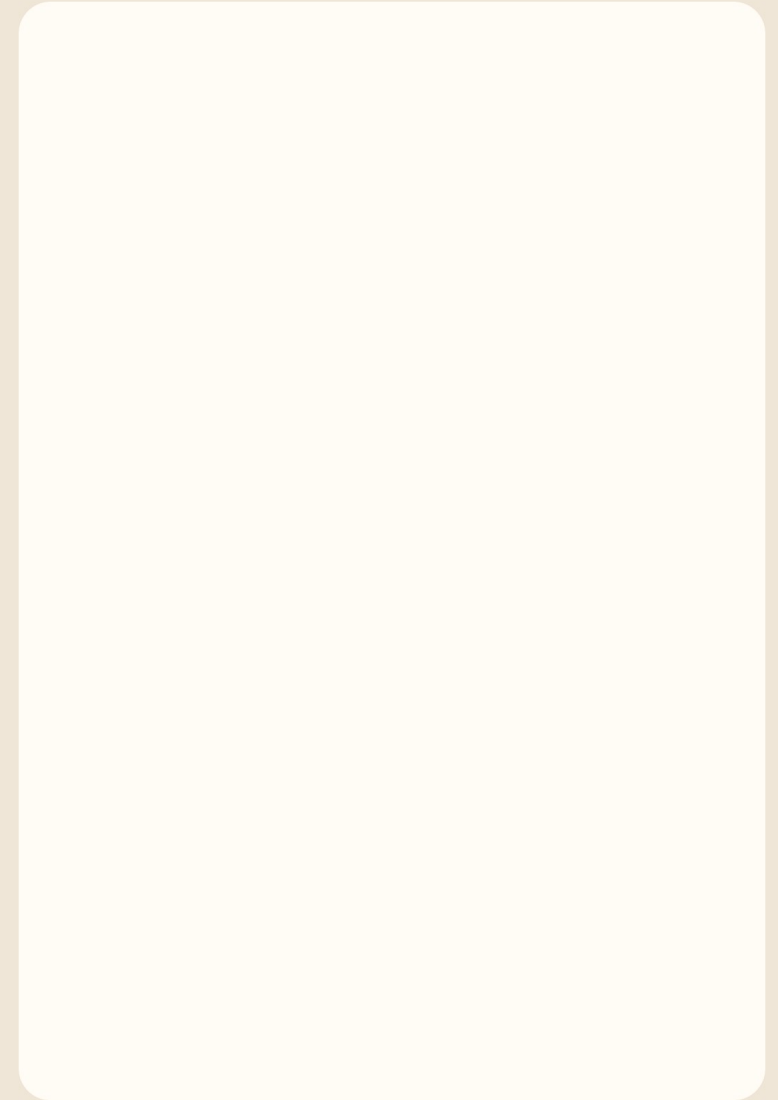
Drawing projects

Mindful drawing — crumple paper, unfold it, trace the fold marks, then color the spaces they create.

Animal strengths — draw one hybrid animal combining a client's emotional, physical, and spiritual self.

Objects of recognition — draw a small achievement in the mental health journey, like using a coping skill or being on time to program.

Road drawings — draw a road representing the treatment journey so far.





DIRECTIVE

Butterflies of change

Provide a template of a butterfly outline. Have clients decorate their butterfly with symbols that represent the changes they've experienced, or hope to experience.

DIRECTIVE

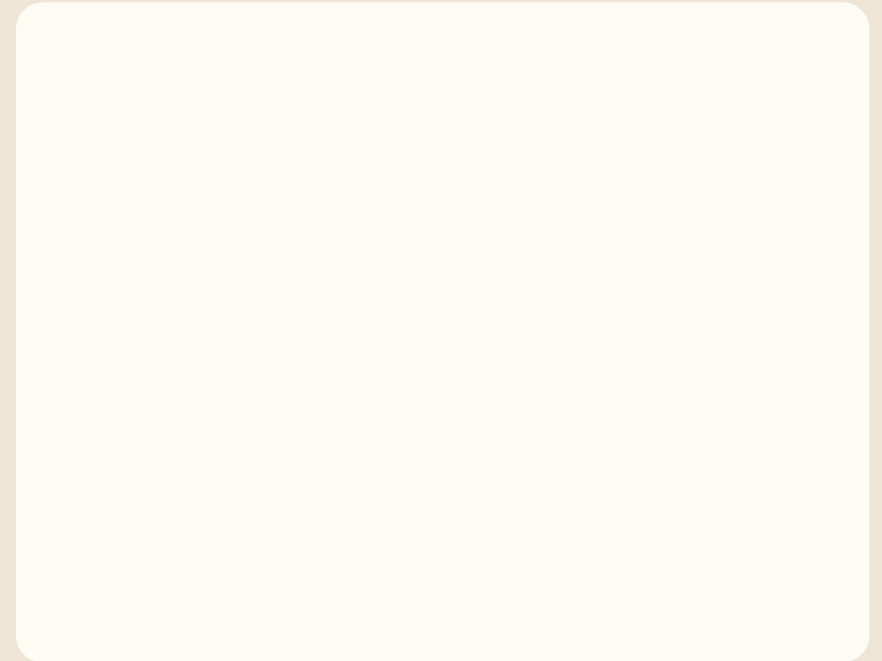
Joy menus

Have clients list activities they enjoy through the categories of a restaurant menu.

Entrées — big things that take planning and prep

Sides — smaller things that can be done weekly

Desserts — activities best enjoyed in moderation





DIRECTIVE

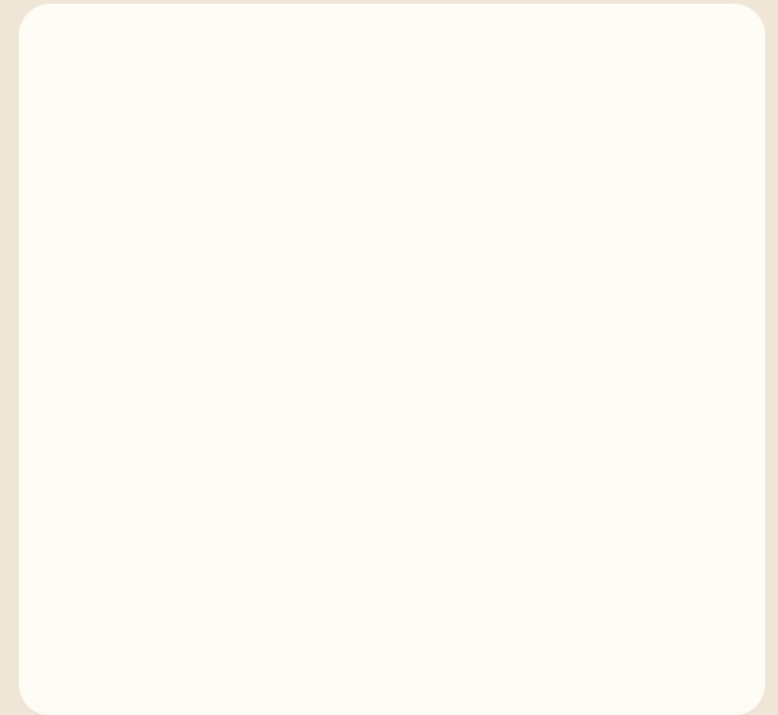
Word art

Have clients draw a word or phrase that helps them cope or provides comfort, expressing why it matters to them. Alternatively, they can write an acrostic poem using that word.

DIRECTIVE

T-shirt designs

Provide a t-shirt template and have clients design a shirt that expresses something they've learned through their treatment journey.



IN SESSION

Tips for discussing art

Keep a curious attitude and ask open-ended questions.

Never ask “What is that?” — instead say **“Tell me about that.”**

Start statements with: “I notice...” · “I appreciate...” ·
“I wonder...”

PART FOUR · TRY IT YOURSELF

Let's Make Some Art!

Postcards from the Future

POSTCARDS FROM THE FUTURE

A message from your future self

Front: decorate with images of where you hope to be in the future, and what you hope to be doing.

Back: write a message to your current self from your future self — encouragement, advice, or hints about what's ahead.

KEEP LEARNING

Other resources

Essential Art Therapy Exercises

Effective Techniques to Manage Anxiety, Depression, and PTSD —
Leah Guzman

Essential Art As Therapy For Youth

Lea Guzman

The CBT Art Activity Book

100 Illustrated Handouts for Creative Therapeutic Work — Jennifer Guest

Creative Recovery

A Complete Addiction Treatment Program That Uses Your Natural
Creativity — Eric Maisel & Susan Raeburn

CITATIONS

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Thank You

Questions, reflections, or a favorite directive to try this week — let's talk.