

Art therapy: promoting wellbeing in rural and remote communities

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Art therapy encompasses both preventative and curative activities and aims to improve ways of engaging those who might be reticent in seeking more traditional forms of psychological support offered through 'talking therapies'. The Longreach base of the Royal Flying Doctor Service in Queensland provides mental health support to people living in rural and remote locations in central western Queensland and has been complemented since 2006 by the addition of a full-time art therapist. This paper provides an overview of art therapy and a description of this innovative approach to addressing mental health needs in a rural and remote setting.

Key words: art therapy, mental health, remote, stigma, wellbeing.

The healing modality of art therapy has been widely used in the United Kingdom and United States since the 1940s. It is not yet as widely used in Australia but is becoming better known and understood as more Australian healthcare settings and organizations become aware of the important part it plays in providing therapeutic support not reliant on verbal interaction and disclosure. Art therapy is a form of psychotherapy conducted by a registered professional. In Australia, as elsewhere, art therapists are trained at Masters degree level and undergo clinical placements under rigorous supervision before commencing clinical work. As professional members of the Australian and New Zealand Art Therapy Association, they are bound by its code of ethics and work towards progressing the profession through education and research.

THE BURDEN OF UNMET NEED

Research reveals that middle-aged people are more likely to seek help than other age ranges.¹ Young people (16–24 years) are less likely than older people to seek help from their general practitioner (GP) or other healthcare professionals during times of mental distress.^{2,3} Young men in particular are less likely to seek professional help unless severely distressed, and often not until they have reached crisis point. Unlike women, they are also less likely to use informal sources of support such as family and friends, thereby limiting their help-seeking support resources. Women's greater tendency to confide in family and friends may increase the probability of them seeking additional professional support.^{1,4} Regardless, more than two-thirds of people who could benefit from counselling never seek help from a mental health professional.⁵ A study by Mojtabai *et al.* of adults with mood, anxiety, and substance disorders found that of 571 participants who recognized a need for professional assistance, 59% actually sought help.¹

People commonly feel they should be able to overcome their problems without seeking assistance from mental health professionals. This view is often enforced by partners and family members and can be attributed to a lack of understanding about the signs and symptoms of their condition or

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of the help available. Dennis and Chung-Lee found that perceived social pressures often prevented women with postpartum depression from seeking help due to shame or fear of being labelled mentally ill.⁶ Vogel *et al.* identified that an individual's awareness of public stigma regarding mental illness, predicted a negative self-stigma associated with seeking counselling, which in turn influenced their attitude and willingness towards seeking help from a mental health professional.⁷

AN OVERVIEW OF ART THERAPY

Art therapy is a form of psychological support that uses images (drawing, painting, collage, sculpture) to explore and express emotions, thoughts, memories, and ideas. Artistic ability is not required to participate in or benefit from art therapy as the focus is on the creative process rather than on the finished item as a work of art. It provides the client with a safe space to explore feelings that may otherwise remain verbally unexpressed due to limitations arising from a client's developmental stage or cognitive impairment,⁸⁻¹⁰ or simply because words cannot always adequately express emotions arising from deep trauma.^{11,12} Art therapy provides a healing space for clients to express explosive feelings which are too strong to contain, in a socially 'acceptable' way through a process of deep contemplation, creation, and reflection in conjunction with the art therapist. It is able to provide a sense of control that may be lacking in other aspects of the client's life. This is especially pertinent in the case of elderly persons reliant on care,¹³ and for those who have experienced a loss of control over significant events as in the case of bereavement, abuse, and life-threatening illness.^{9,14}

The art therapist utilizes a non-prescriptive approach with clients, supporting the view that there is no right or wrong way to do art therapy. The art therapy process enables exploration to occur at an unconscious level so that form is given to thoughts and feelings locked away beyond conscious awareness. In gently exposing and giving them an external concrete form, the client is able to name and acknowledge the previously unnameable or unrecognizable emotions and thoughts that have been dwelling beneath the conscious surface, enabling a shift to occur. As McNiff says: "healing cannot occur without the manifestation of problems" (p. 97).¹⁵ Once the problem or issue can be seen, it can start to be addressed.

People feel emotions to differing extents and what may be deeply troubling to one person may be shrugged off and processed by another as a mere irritation. The art therapy process enables each person to work at his or her own pace and in their own way and acknowledges that there are many ways in which people express and process their feelings, thoughts, and behaviours relating to events and memories.

As Shaffer *et al.* succinctly explain: "Counselling suffers from one serious limitation: It can only help those who seek it out" (p. 442).⁵ It is vitally important to find ways to increase rural and remote people's willingness to seek help. Art therapy provides a gentle and effective approach to addressing, exploring, understanding, and assisting psychological difficulties and promoting wellbeing in all age groups. Wellbeing art therapy groups enable community members to engage in a form of psychological support that does not have a 'mental health' nametag and associated perceived stigma with it. Attending a group can open the way to individual art therapy counselling sessions enabling the client to explore their issues at a deeper level, leading to progress and increased wellbeing. Most importantly, its focus is on preventative as well as curative outcomes and aims to ameliorate general wellbeing to mitigate the occurrence of greater mental health problems.

ART THERAPY PRACTICE

In a typical session, following an initial discussion the client is presented with a choice of materials enabling him or her to assume a position of control and responsibility from the outset. Further choice is available through subject matter and use of the art materials. During group sessions, a theme or idea is occasionally suggested by the art therapist but most often the client is encouraged to create an image to explore their feelings and thoughts in whatever way they wish, without direction, input, or influence from the art therapist. Generally, 2 hours are allowed for each adult session and about an hour for children's sessions. This enables time for an initial discussion on arrival to gather information about the presenting issues and history of the client, and in subsequent sessions, for an update regarding mood, progress or regression experienced by the client. Usually an hour is set aside for the image-making part of the session. The client decides when the image is finished and it is at this point that the art therapist invites the client to say anything they wish to say about their image as a starting point to the discussion. It is important to note that the art therapist does not analyse or interpret the client's image. The image may suggest things to the art therapist through symbolism and use of colour but it is only the person who has created the image who truly knows what personal meaning it holds for them.¹⁶

THE ROYAL FLYING DOCTOR SERVICE AT LONGREACH

The Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) Longreach base services a wide area across central western Queensland, providing support to individuals in Longreach and surrounding towns and property homesteads. The art therapy program is available to individuals and groups of all ages and includes children, adolescents

and adults. The emphasis is on preventative as well as curative aspects of individual and community needs. Referrals are received from many sources including GPs, Queensland Health, support services such as Blue Care and Anglicare, school teachers and guidance officers, and increasingly as self-referrals from clients directly.

Programs that focus on mental health promotion in the community can greatly assist in breaking down barriers of stigma, enable earlier recognition of symptoms, and lead to increased help-seeking. Educating communities in understanding about the signs, symptoms, and effects of mental disorders on those experiencing them will potentially lead to greater tolerance and acceptance.^{6,17} The RFDS social and emotional wellbeing team regularly promote mental health issues to communities through public health promotion events, RFDS field days, local ABC radio information segments, in-service presentations, and mental health first aid courses.

THE ART THERAPY PROGRAM

The RFDS art therapy program commenced at the Longreach base in July 2006, following a direct approach by the author. The art therapy component complemented the existing social and emotional wellbeing program employing two psychologists and a mental health nurse and its remit was to focus on vulnerable people in the community including the elderly, the young as well as isolated individuals, for these are the least likely to seek support. Its initial and continuing emphasis has been on educating and informing other health professionals and members of the public about the nature, methods, and intended outcomes of art therapy. This has been achieved through ongoing presentations to local GPs, hospital staff, service providers, school staff; educating and promoting art therapy through local and national media; and through presentations at professional conferences to peers within the health and mental health sectors. Now in its third year, the program is receiving significantly increased referrals and acceptance by the communities it services.

The RFDS art therapist works with a wide range of presenting issues within the outback location of Longreach and surrounding areas. Anxiety and depression feature strongly, as do issues surrounding grief and loss, sexual abuse, and social and emotional needs arising from people living with personality disorders, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. The art therapy net is cast wide to support those individuals who might feel that they fall between service providers, or that their unease or distress does not warrant a visit to a psychologist, social worker, or mental health nurse.

In an effort to combat similar reluctance, the RFDS art therapist has introduced wellbeing art therapy groups to communities where and when possible and

these have been effective in encouraging individuals to subsequently self-refer for ongoing art therapy support. A 'wellbeing art therapy group' is perhaps perceived as less threatening than an appointment with a psychologist or other similar 'mental health label' and does not contain the stigma so often associated with 'mental health issues' when named as such. The image-making gives form to the thought and emotions often unrecognized, unacknowledged, and unaddressed consciously by the client. It is different from other psychological therapies in that it is a three-way process, the central process being between client and therapist. The image provides a communication gateway to the client's unspoken thoughts and fears through form and symbolism.¹⁰ A non-verbal approach such as art therapy can prepare and often enable the client to undertake individual verbal therapy to assist them further with the healing process. As Thompson tells us: "The creative impulse is a means of unveiling what is ordinarily hidden from everyday awareness" (p. 60).¹⁸ The wellbeing art therapy groups aim to provide opportunities for making choices, increasing self-esteem as well as enhancing communication and social interaction. They also offer sensory stimulation through the provision of tactile items such as fabrics and various papers. Most importantly they offer an opportunity for the client to assume and regain a sense of control over what may be in inwardly chaotic state and thus increase self-esteem and wellbeing.

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