

# Art Psychotherapy, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy, and Borderline Personality Disorder

Megan Shiell

## ABSTRACT

Art Psychotherapy can be used in conjunction with Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) in the treatment of clients suffering from Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). Art Psychotherapy offers a space for the creation of a revealing image, a space for reflection, and a space where a client can stay a little longer with intense emotions in the safe, contained environment of the therapeutic relationship.

Art Psychotherapy can offer another dimension to the skills-based DBT program since the making of objects and images can substantially support the understanding of the strategies and techniques offered by DBT in supporting clients. Through a DBT programme clients with BPD are offered a unique opportunity to reconnect with their families, the community, and most importantly, with themselves. It enables clients to find their observer-self and repair the chronic feelings of emptiness that are often felt in their lives.

## INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is a discussion of how the theory and practice of Art Psychotherapy can offer a space for clients with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) to develop strategies to address some of the symptoms of their illness, by creating images that reinforce the skills taught in a Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) program.

A study of the literature specific to BPD and Art Psychotherapy over the last 25 years, leads us to recognise some of the aspects of theory and practice that can offer this client group a wide range of experiences through the use of the metaphor, which may assist in understanding and rebuilding the deficit that is often felt in their lives.

In the latter half of 2005 I designed Art Psychotherapy sessions to support this skills-based program in an outpatient private hospital setting. The program offered an excellent opportunity to observe a range of experiences.

I was able to observe and reflect on how this particular skills therapy is conducted; on other therapists' techniques; on the clients' insights; and on my own reactions to working with this client group at that time. A six week program using Art Psychotherapy and some of the skills taught in DBT was designed, and is now regularly presented as an outpatient program in two private hospitals in Sydney.

Several case studies of past and present clients are presented to illustrate how Art Psychotherapy can be adapted as an adjunct to the four skills taught in the DBT program. Art Psychotherapy as a unique psychotherapeutic intervention is discussed and particularly its relation to three specific experiences: the physical, the emotional, and the intellectual.