

# Handbook of Art Therapy

*Edited by*  
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## About the Editor

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# Preface

Art is a powerful tool in communication. It is now widely acknowledged that art expression is a way to visually communicate thoughts and feelings that are too painful to put into words. Creative activity has also been used in psychotherapy and counseling not only because it serves another language but also because of its inherent ability to help people of all ages explore emotions and beliefs, reduce stress, resolve problems and conflicts, and enhance their sense of well-being.

The countless individuals I have been privileged to work with over the last 20 years have repeatedly demonstrated to me how art expression is effective as both a form of therapy and a method of nonverbal communication. On the jacket of this volume, there is an image by one of these individuals, Eduardo, a remarkable man whose struggle with mental illness was helped through art therapy along with psychiatric interventions. Now in his early 30s, he had been struggling with depression and mood swings since adolescence, and was looking for answers about his condition and seeking professional help. Even though he lived more than 2,000 miles away, Eduardo sent me a letter of introduction and a large envelope with some of his drawings and paintings. He had been carefully saving his artwork for many years, and it was easy to see just how much creative expression meant to him. He neatly titled each on a small piece of notepaper meticulously clipped to the upper-left-hand corner of each artwork.

For the next month, we communicated through e-mails and letters, and I learned more about Eduardo's mental illness, his life history, and lack of success in obtaining effective treatment. On good days, he wrote articulately, describing his frustration about his depression and "his problems with thinking." On other occasions his letters were disorganized and illogical, reminiscent of a thought disorder, and seemed to be a result of manic feelings and impulses. To ensure that Eduardo received appropriate treatment, and since sufficient medical care was not available where Eduardo lived, I made arrangements for his treatment at a local neuropsychiatric hospital. Fortunately, Eduardo was willing to relocate and was able to enter one of the hospital's inpatient programs to receive an evaluation.

Eduardo was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, which accounted for his mood swings, from lethargy to mania and days of insomnia. Psychiatric treatment included finding the correct drug combination to control his mood swings and individual and group therapy to increase the psychosocial skills that he had suffered as a result of years of emotional disturbance. I was able to work with Eduardo on an individual basis during his inpatient program and later as an outpatient for many months. I helped him to continue his creative expression during his psychiatric treatment and kept the neuropsychiatric team informed about the content and scope of his artwork. As his art therapist and clinical mental health counselor, I was intrigued by the range of colors, patterns, and subjects in his images and impressed by his creative abilities, especially because he was not a trained artist. Many of his drawings and paintings were quite playful and almost childlike abstract designs (see Figure 1) while others were haunting representations of the effects of mental illness such as his recurrent insomnia and mania (see Figure 2). Some had detailed stories about fanciful characters and animals like whales that could speak or fly or had other extraordinary powers (see Figure 3; see also book jacket).

Eduardo's experiences illustrate the value of art expression as part of psychotherapy and counseling, and his case validates the benefits of visual communication. Like many individuals, his drawings and paintings served as a record of his mood swings, giving his helping professionals a clear "picture" of how he was feeling, pre- and posttreatment. His artwork also gave him a way to express what words could not during moments when his thoughts became disorganized and inarticulate. Most



FIGURE 1. Untitled design in oil pastel by Eduardo.



FIGURE 2. "My Insomnia," a painting by Eduardo.



FIGURE 3. "Fisherman Hunting a Whale," an ink drawing by Eduardo.

important, in his words, it gave him a reason to “get out of bed in the morning” and “it’s one of the things that helps [him] to feel free.” I believe art did help him overcome his often-severe depression, find a release from his illness, and discover and nurture a sense of well-being.

What was particularly wonderful about working with Eduardo was not only being part of his journey to recovery but also once again witnessing the power of art in therapy and how it can be useful in so many aspects of evaluation and treatment. While I was the art therapist on the case, many other helping professionals also encouraged and participated in Eduardo’s art therapy. For example, the staff psychiatrist asked Eduardo to complete several art-based assessments; the clinical social worker and I used Eduardo’s art expressions and verbal descriptions as a way to help us design his inpatient and outpatient programs; and psychiatric nurses learned to use art as a way to help calm him when his moods were uncontrollable.

For many individuals like Eduardo, art therapy is a primary form of treatment. In his case, it provided a way to communicate and establish a relationship not only to me but also to the many other professionals who provided therapy and support that eventually led to his recovery. In other situations, art therapy may be used as an adjunct to treatment, to enhance verbal therapy through working with the client to increase self-understanding and insight. For still others, art expression may be a way to reach those whose problems have not been revealed solely through talking about them. Drawing, painting, collage, or simple sculpture may be the modalities through which a child expresses an abusive experience for the first time, an adult uncovers a forgotten trauma, or a family discloses a previously hidden secret or significant incident.

While art therapists make art expression a central part of their work, other helping professionals can easily adapt art therapy approaches and applications to their own ways of working with individuals, families, and groups. With increasing frequency, clinical counselors, social workers, play therapists, marriage and family therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists are discovering that drawing activities and other expressive media are helpful in the assessment and treatment of people of all ages. Because art therapy permits expression of feelings and thoughts in a manner that is often less threatening than strictly verbal means, there is a level of comfort and a sense of safety sometimes not found through traditional therapy alone. Clients’ feelings and experiences are transformed into concrete and tangible images, allowing both the client and the therapist to obtain a fresh view of problems, conflicts, potentials, and directions. With the advent of brief forms of therapy and the increasing pressures to complete treatment in a limited number of sessions, many therapists find art expression helps people to quickly communicate relevant issues and problems, thus expediting assessment and intervention. For this reason alone, helping professionals are increasingly using drawings and other expressive art tasks in therapeutic intervention.

This volume addresses the need for a handbook that provides a clear overview of the field of art therapy and its role in contemporary practice. Thirty chapters, written by experts within the United States and abroad, present to the reader art therapy’s origins, the art and science of why art therapy works, major theoretical approaches,



and the extraordinary range of clinical possibilities and applications to a variety of populations. Leading-edge topics for practitioners are also presented, including art therapy and the brain; cognitive-behavioral, solution-focused, multimodal, and other contemporary approaches; clinical applications with trauma, abuse, autism, depression, learning disabilities, medical illness, and addictions; art-based assessments; and ethics, supervision, and education specific to art therapy.

The *Handbook of Art Therapy*, an assembly of theory and approaches that will enhance therapists' understanding of how to integrate art expression within treatment, is both practical and comprehensive. It brings together the theory and practice of art therapy through numerous cases and visual illustrations of how children, adolescents, adults, groups, and families can benefit from the opportunity to experience art expression as part of their psychotherapy or counseling. It is my hope that you will be inspired by the extensive range of ideas, resources, and clinical examples in the pages that follow and deepen your own understanding of art therapy's value as a potent modality for change and growth with a variety of populations and settings.

CATHY A. MALCHIODI

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