

Art Rx  
*for creative healing*

A child can feel empowered by creating an imaginary hero out of modeling compound, and role-play situations with a bully.

A woman can utter her name for the first time after a stroke while spelling it out with popsickle sticks.

A cancer patient can sew a pillow before entering the hospital to represent the comfort and nurturing that he so desperately needs.

Experts say that the ability to communicate emotions through the creative process—such as drawing or painting—isn't limited to professional artists...and any age group can benefit. Art therapy integrates the fields of human development, visual art, and creative process with models of counseling and psychotherapy. It is an established mental health profession that uses the creative process of art to improve the physical, mental and emotional well being of individuals. Art therapy has been used to assess and treat anxiety, depression, mental illness, addictions, family and relationship issues, disabilities, trauma and loss. Its programs can be found in a number of different settings such as hospitals, clinics, businesses, schools, public and community agencies and private practices.



*Photographed by Eric Nalpas*

*Visual expression has been used for healing throughout history, but art therapy did not emerge as a distinct profession until the 1940s. It requires a master's-level degree, 1,000 hours of clinical service and board certification. Careerbuilder.com recently listed the profession in its 10 "cutting edge jobs for 2007."*

The fact is, people are living longer and art therapy with the elderly has proven to be very successful, especially with geriatric and individuals with Alzheimer's disease. The Alzheimer's Association reports by the middle of the 21st century, the number of new cases will increase by nearly one million each year. The total number of people with the disease will explode from an estimated 4.5 million today to as many as 14 million by 2050. With Alzheimer's or other types of dementia, channels of communication break down, causing a source of frustration. According to doctors and other medical professionals, as well as patients' own caregivers, through art therapy these individuals can not only access long-term memory that they are not able to articulate, but also express anger or frustration. Laura Dessauer, a registered, board certified art therapist at the Encouragement Institute in Lakewood Ranch, has 18 years of experience working with emotionally challenged, developmentally disabled, and at-risk children, adolescents, adults, and families. She has 10 years of art therapy experience as an independent practitioner and consultant. As an art therapist, Dessauer has the opportunity to combine her love of art with her passion for helping people. The results are often rewarding; she can watch the progress of her clients through their creations. One preteen client she worked with lacked self-esteem and was very shy. Her first drawing was very lightly drawn and barely visible, but by her last session her illustrations developed into bold lines with brilliant colors. Even the preteen was able to see the difference and confidently talk about it.

*Although kids tend to be more open to looking at things in a different way, it can be a valuable tool for adults too. "You have to trust the process, Dessauer says. "Creating alone is therapeutic." The creative process involved in artistic self-expression helps people to resolve conflicts, develop interpersonal skills, reduce stress, increase self esteem, and achieve insight.*

What kind of materials would be expected in a session with Dessauer? What ever the heart—or psyche—desires. She has crayons, markers, paints, modeling compound, scissors, and glue. Clients can make collages and road maps, sculpt, paint and even sew. She feels strongly that everyone has an inherent creativity whether it

is gardening, writing or decorating. Dessauer recommends considering art therapy when “talk,” or traditional therapy, doesn’t seem to help anymore, or if clients have difficulty expressing themselves in general. She explains, “It taps into your unconscious or preverbal you. “In art therapy, you use your innate creativity to solve problems and develop new ways of thinking, acting and feeling.” **LWR**