

ART THERAPY, POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER, AND VETERANS

From the American Art Therapy Association (AATA)

About Art Therapy

Art therapy can be beneficial to people of all ages, including adults who have emotional, cognitive, and /or physical disabilities. Our nation's Veterans often return home with acute psychological or medical conditions that impair functioning, disrupt family relationships, and prevent reentry into the workforce. Others may develop chronic disorders such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that require months or even years of counseling or rehabilitation. For Veterans who are receiving psychiatric care for PTSD and other emotional conditions, art therapy can be an effective form of treatment, either as a adjunct to other therapies or as a form of individual or group psychotherapy.

Senator Bob Graham (FL) emphasized the value of art therapy with US veterans in *The Congressional Record*, stating: "Art therapists provide effective treatment and health maintenance intervention for veterans, focusing on all of their life challenges, such as mental, physical, and cognitive impairments. Intense emotion and memory, often difficult to convey in words, often are more easily expressed in images with the guidance of a trained clinician...Given the number of veterans gradually returning from the current war in Iraq, art therapy has the potential to assist them as a form of rehabilitation."

Members of the American Art Therapy Association hope that the following information will give you a greater understanding of how art therapy can be used in the treatment of our nation's veterans and offers unique value in enhancing and improving mental health.

Art therapists use a wide variety of art-based techniques in the assessment and treatment of adults. For combat veterans of recent or previous conflicts, art therapy provides ways to express feelings and experiences that are difficult to express verbally. As a form of psychotherapy, art therapy helps veterans communicate and resolve traumatic memories, relieve stress, and reduce symptoms of trauma-related conditions. Art therapists encourage Veterans to reflect on the meaning of their artwork to



assist their psychological recovery, promote insight, and improve functioning.

For veterans in extended care facilities or hospitals, art therapy helps enhance quality of life by providing a meaningful creative vocation to increase self-esteem and a sense of personal self-worth. Based on their knowledge of art materials, human development, and physical, mental, and emotional conditions, art therapists select specific drawing, painting, or sculpting activities to augment cognitive, psychological, and physical rehabilitation.

Art therapy has been a valuable part of mental health services offered by Veteran's Hospitals (VA) since 1945 when the Winter VA Hospital in Topeka, KS, offered art therapy as part of their psychiatric services to returning World War II veterans. By 1980, a job series was established to facilitate the hiring of arts therapists nationwide--the GS638 series for Creative Arts Therapists and Recreation Therapists. Today, art therapists are employed in VA hospitals and offer therapeutic services to military personnel and their families in hospitals such as Walter Reed in Washington,

DC, and in clinics, mental health programs, and private practice. Depending on their credentials, many art therapists provide services to military personnel through TRICARE, managed health care, and other programs for military, reserve, and retired service men and women.

How Does Art Therapy Help Veterans with PTSD?

Art therapy helps Veterans in a variety of ways. For returning military with mental health conditions, art therapy provides emotional relief by encouraging expression of feelings and concerns. Art making is observed to relieve depression and anxiety as well as to improve reality orientation.

Currently, art therapists and researchers are studying *the value of art therapy in treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)*, a problem experienced by many combat Veterans returning from the recent conflicts in the Middle East and those who have returned from previous wars. PTSD is a widely recognized condition that includes a number of symptoms that interfere with day-to-day functioning, job performance, and family relationships. After World War I, PTSD was referred to as “shell shock,” and sometimes called “war neurosis” or “combat exhaustion.”

For returning military suffering from PTSD, art therapy is used to reduce debilitating symptoms, provide opportunities for expression and resolution of painful memories, and enhance stress reduction through art-based relaxation techniques and coping skills. In particular, art therapy helps by:

- **Reducing anxiety and mood disorders common to military personnel with PTSD;**
- **Reducing behaviors that interfere with emotional and cognitive functioning;**
- **Externalizing, verbalizing, and resolving memories of traumatic events;**
- **Reactivating positive emotions, self-worth, and self-esteem.**

In addition to the treatment of PTSD, art therapy is also used to address other problems Veterans may develop. *For military seeking treatment for substance abuse*, specific art techniques help Veterans understand their addictions, make a personal commitment to their sobriety, and experience spirituality through self-reflection. *In assisted care and hospices*, art therapy adds to the

overall quality of life of our nation’s Veterans. In these settings, art therapists capitalize on the strengths, courage, and pride of military personnel, helping them to create visual records of their autobiographies, memories, and legacies. In addition, art therapy helps these Veterans to sustain cognitive skills and reduce stress. Finally, *for Vet-*



erans undergoing physical rehabilitation, art therapy enhances fine motor skills, encourages reconciliation of physical changes and injuries, and promotes the discovery of new strengths.

How Does Art Therapy Compare with Other Therapies?

Art therapists are master’s level professionals who have a degree in art therapy or a related field. They generally hold a credential in the field of art therapy such as Registration (ATR) or Board Certification (ATR-BC). Many art therapists also hold an additional license in counseling, psychology, or marriage and family therapy.

Art therapists are skilled in using drawing, painting, sculpture, and other media in assessment and treatment and the clinical application of methods of psychotherapy and counseling to achieve treatment goals and objectives. Like other forms of psychotherapy or counseling, art therapists may use a specific approach or theory. For example, an art therapist working with a Vet-

eran with PTSD may combine drawing and collage activities with cognitive-behavioral therapy to help the individual reduce symptoms and reframe negative thinking. Or an art therapist may use a humanistic approach such as person-centered counseling to enhance a Veteran's personal strengths and promote a sense of self-worth through the creative process.

As a form of rehabilitation, art therapy promotes social skills and cognitive and physical functioning. In VA hospitals, art therapists may work in activity therapy departments to help Veterans make drawings, paintings, and sculptures for personal satisfaction or artwork to share with the public through shows like the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival. These unique aspects of art therapy help Veterans find value and meaning in their creative expressions, engage in purposeful activities, and improve the overall quality of their lives.

What Veterans Are Saying About Art Therapy

Veterans who participate in art therapy report that it helps understand and cope with symptoms, enhances their strengths and abilities to reenter their communities, and improves their outlook on life. Here are a few quotes from our nation's Veterans about the value of art therapy:

Roy Meaders of Topeka, KS, a Veteran who spent four and one-half months in Vietnam, and who was awarded the CIB Purple Heart and Bronze Star writes: "Art therapy gave me a non-threatening place for social interaction. But more than that, it helped me to express my feelings through my art work and has given me confidence to pursue other activities, helped me to develop the skill needed to become an accomplished artist. It also gave me the right to meet my congressman, and to speak to the national news-broadcast. [Art therapy] changed my life and the lives of my PTSD peers."

Steve Piscatelli, a Vietnam Veteran, worked for several years with doctors who wanted to explore his childhood. Piscatelli recalls that they, "couldn't hear me when I tried to tell them: combat broke me down." Doctors then consulted with art therapist Deborah Golub who helped Piscatelli express the terrifying experiences he encountered through pictures, paintings, and sculptures of specific combat incidents. When the medical staff

saw the artwork, then they finally understood. He says, "If art therapy programs had been there when I returned from Vietnam, I would have taken advantage of them and would most likely be able to work today, but I suffered with it too long. Not only would art therapy have helped me it would have saved a lot of money in the long run. If I hadn't found art therapy I would probably have



committed suicide. I needed art therapy to purge the horrific experiences. So many returning veterans did commit suicide."

Piscatelli goes on to recommend, "The government should have reentry programs with art therapy — it works wonders. You have to purge the sound, the smell, the feel in your fingers otherwise you grit your teeth and might end up exploding. There are good men and women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan that need to get the poisons out, clean the wounds of war — it will help them talk about and purge the gruesome events so that they can heal. The faster you get art therapy treatment the fewer problems there are down the road — and you need follow-up — that's the operant word, follow-up art therapy is very important too."

Courtesy of *The Washington Post*, April 15, 2007: Eric Edmondson, a newly returned soldier writes, "I cannot express in words what I remembers about the fall day in Iraq 18 months ago when a roadside bomb and then a heart attack left me with shrapnel wounds and brain damage."



The 26-year-old veteran is no longer able to eat, walk or talk. But he can pick up a paint brush. When he does, his father sees in the former Army sergeant's face glimmers of memory and healing as he seeks to paint his thoughts on

blank paper. "I can tell by his expression he's enjoying it," Ed Edmondson said of the art therapy class Eric has taken in the weeks since he left a VA hospital in Richmond for a private rehabilitation center in Chicago. "I don't care what it looks like. It's beautiful to me."

Jackie Spinner, military affairs correspondent for *The Washington Post* and the former Baghdad bureau chief in Iraq, summarizes the value of art therapy, stating:

"Veterans with traumatic combat injuries often find healing power in art. They communicate through pencil and charcoal drawings, sculpture and painting. Their images range from calm, colorful landscapes to mangled vehicles, prisoners and carnage. It's a therapy recognized as especially helpful to those with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)."

The American Art Therapy Association (AATA) is dedicated to initiating art therapy programs that will help our returning combat military and our nation's Veterans recover emotionally, cognitively, and physically. In particular, AATA is committed to the development of outcome research that will ameliorate the effects of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health problems Veteran's experience as a result of active combat. Our national initiative is to provide military with access to art therapy services in Veterans Administration Hospitals as well as in clinics, medical centers, and other facilities where Veterans receive treatment.

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