



LETTERS: THE ART OF GRIEVING



STUDY GUIDE

www.epfmedia.com

Letters: The Art of Grieving reveals the powerful transformations of grief into art. The documentary explores the art that intertwines with the lives of three women artists: a poet and fiber artist who lost her husband to dementia, an artist whose 9-week-old son died unexpectedly, and a young painter who lost her mother to brain cancer. The film examines their art as a love letter to the ones they have lost.

Bolivia, Potosi and Mining

What is Art Therapy?

Art therapy is a type of therapy that utilizes the creative process of making art. Through this process of creating, people are able to explore their feelings and behaviors, and work to improve their emotional, physical, and mental well-being. The Art Therapy Credentials Board explains, “Art therapy uses art media, the creative process, and the resulting artwork as a therapeutic and healing process.” It says that through art therapy people of all ages can work to improve a wide variety of different issues: “Clients – young, old, and in-between – are able to explore their feelings, reconcile emotional conflicts, foster self-awareness, manage behavior, develop social skills, improve reality orientation, reduce anxiety and increase self-esteem.”¹

Experts have long observed that art can be used to improve people’s health and wellbeing. In a 2019 World Health Organization report on the topic, researchers reviewed many different different types of studies about art and health and came to the conclusion that the arts can help prevent illness and also help people manage and treat illnesses that they already have. They conclude, “Overall, the findings demonstrated that the arts can potentially impact both mental and physical health.”²



The American Art Therapy Association (AATA) explains that what makes art therapy unique is the fact that it is focused on artistic expression rather than verbal expression. It

¹ <https://www.atcb.org/what-is-art-therapy/>

² <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/329834/9789289054553-eng.pdf>

says, “Art therapy engages the mind, body, and spirit in ways that are distinct from verbal articulation alone. Kinesthetic, sensory, perceptual, and symbolic opportunities invite alternative modes of receptive and expressive communication, which can circumvent the limitations of language.”³

The History of Art Therapy

Art therapy is widely believed to have begun as a formal treatment in the 1940s. Many people believe that the term was coined in 1942 by British artist Adrian Hill, who spent time recovering from tuberculosis in 1938, and discovered the therapeutic power of drawing and painting. Researchers writing in the *Mental Illness Journal* explain that in 1946, Hill became the first formal art therapist when he was employed by a psychiatric hospital in the United Kingdom. Overall, they state, “Hill’s contributions became a milestone for the acceptance and practice of what we know today as art therapy.”⁴ In the United States, educator and psychologist Margaret Naumburg was a pioneer in the field of art therapy. She believed that art therapy could help psychiatric patients express themselves and could also help therapists better understand them. Naumburg wrote four books on the subject of art therapy.

As art therapy became more popular, a number of professional art therapy organizations were created. The British Association of Art Therapists was created in 1964. Hill served as one of its presidents. In 1969, the American Association of Art Therapists was founded. In 1993, the Art Therapy Credentials Board was created in the United States. It manages the credentialing and testing of art therapists in order to make sure that practicing therapists are competent and ethical.



³ <https://arttherapy.org/about-art-therapy/>

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4253394/>

Who Does Art Therapy?

Art therapy is used by a wide variety of people, and takes place in many different settings. The Art Therapy Credentials Board says, “Art therapy is practiced in mental health, rehabilitation, medical, educational, and forensic settings – as well as in private practice, in workshops and small-group settings.” In terms of who does this therapy, it says there is also great variety: “Clients come from all walks of life, facing a full array of challenges. Individuals, couples, families, and groups can benefit from various art therapy formats.”⁵ It is not just the participants and the setting that vary widely; art therapy can mean many different types of art. Tammy Shella is an art therapy manager. She says, “Patients may draw, paint, utilize fiber arts, sculpt, make collages and do much more,” adding, “Art therapists tend to offer numerous options to give patients a sense of choice.”⁶ A person does not have to be a skilled artist in order to participate in art therapy. As art therapist and bereavement counselor Kelly Gelhaar explains, they do not need to have any kind of experience with art in order to participate, because it is the action of creating that is important. She says, “Art therapy in its purist form is all about the process and nothing about the product.”⁷



Benefits

According to the American Art Therapy Association, art therapy has a wide range of benefits. It says, “Art Therapy is used to improve cognitive and sensory-motor functions, foster self-esteem and self-awareness, cultivate emotional resilience, promote insight, enhance social skills, reduce and resolve conflicts and distress, and advance societal and ecological change.”⁸

⁵ <https://www.atcb.org/what-is-art-therapy/>

⁶ <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/what-is-art-therapy/>

⁷ <https://hospicenorthcoast.org/2021/04/15/benefits-of-art-therapy-during-bereavement/>

⁸ https://www.arttherapy.org/upload/2017_DefinitionofProfession.pdf

One of the ways that art therapy can be beneficial is in dealing with grief. While there is still a lack of scientific research regarding the effectiveness of art therapy, there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence from therapists and from people dealing with grief, that shows that art therapy can be very helpful. For instance, in a 2018 study, researchers analyzed twenty-seven different studies on art therapy and grief and found that study participants “overwhelming” gave positive reports of their treatment. They state, “Across several studies, participants rated their well-being as significantly improved.”⁹



Contact

For inquiries, please contact EPF Media at info@epfmedia.com

Copyright. The Study Guide is owned by EPF Media. You may use the Study Guide solely for personal or educational, non-commercial use, and you may download or print any portion of the Study Guide solely for

⁹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5798551/>

personal or educational, non-commercial use, provided you do not remove the copyright or other notice from such Content. No other use is permitted without prior written permission of EPF Media.