

5 Quick Facts about Art Therapy

The very words “art therapy” can sound abstract (no pun intended!), and many people have little understanding about its origins, principles and purpose. That can easily create myriad misconceptions. Here, we lay out five facts about art therapy.

1. Art therapy has many uses.

According to Cathy Malchiodi in her book [The Art Therapy Sourcebook](#), art therapy is “a modality for self-understanding, emotional change and personal growth.”

A vast field, art therapy has been used on a variety of populations, with everyone from young kids to the elderly, war veterans to prisoners and people with physical disabilities to those with psychological disorders.

In her own practice, Malchiodi helps clients with everything from processing emotions to gaining personal growth.

In her book, she explains her role:

I believe that my role as an art therapist is to help people explore and express themselves authentically through art. Through this process, people may find relief from overwhelming emotions, crises or trauma. They may discover insights about themselves, increase their sense of well-being, enrich their daily lives through creative expression, or experience personal transformation. I recognize the power of art to expand self-understanding, to offer insight not available through other means, and to extend people's ability to communicate. I also view art expressions as personal narratives conveyed through images, as well as through the stories that people attach to those images. Finding personal meaning in one's images is often part of the art therapy process. For some people, it is one of the most potent therapeutic qualities of art expression. It is a powerful way of knowing yourself and a powerful form of healing.

2. Art as therapy dates back to the 1940s.

[Margaret Naumburg](#), an educator and therapist, was one of the first to define art therapy as a distinct form of [psychotherapy](#) in the 1940s. Oftentimes she's actually referred to as the founder of art therapy.

According to Malchiodi, Naumburg “viewed art expression as a way to manifest unconscious imagery, an observation resonant with the predominant psychoanalytic viewpoint of the early twentieth century.” She was actually one of the first people to experience psychoanalysis in the U.S., and she believed in the importance of uncovering the unconscious and was very much influenced by Freud. In her practice, she had her clients draw their dreams in addition to talking about them.

3. Art therapy focuses on your “inner experience.”

Art therapy isn't about focusing on the images around you but those emanating from inside. In other words, according to Malchiodi:

Art therapy asks you to explore your inner experience—your feelings, perceptions and imagination. While art therapy may involve learning skills or art techniques, the emphasis is generally first on developing and expressing images that come from inside the person, rather than those he or she sees in the outside world.

4. Art therapists must have a master's degree, among other requirements, in the U.S.



The American Art Therapy Association (AATA), a national organization of art therapists founded in 1969, requires that art therapists have an MS in art therapy or a related field. According to the AATA, art therapists are licensed in Kentucky, Mississippi and New Mexico. In New York, they're licensed as creative arts therapists. Also, licensure laws for counselors include art therapists in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Texas.

Interestingly, as Malchiodi writes, most graduate art therapy programs require classes in not only psychology but also studio art and may even require an art portfolio that shows the candidate's proficiency in drawing, sculpture and painting.

You can learn more about AATA's educational requirements [here](#).

5. Art therapists use a variety of techniques.

In addition to creating art, most therapists encourage their clients to talk about their images in therapy because this helps in discovering insight and meaning.

Many use a technique called active imagination, which was created by Carl Jung. Basically, clients use their image to freely associate other thoughts or feelings that come spontaneously to their minds. The goal is to help clients gain a deeper understanding and growth.

Some therapists also use gestalt methods. Gestalt focuses on the whole picture in the here and now. A gestalt art therapist may use a client's image to jumpstart a discussion. Interestingly, clients might be asked to describe their image from the image's perspective. Malchiodi gave this example: "I am many red circles, and I feel crowded, happy, passionate and playful." You're still talking about your own experiences but doing it through the artwork.

Another technique art therapists use is the "third-hand" approach, a term coined by art therapist Edith Kramer. Without distorting the client's artwork, Kramer believed in the importance of getting involved in the process to help them convey an image to their best ability. For instance, Malchiodi helped a client with cancer cut and glue pieces for his collages. He picked out the images, and Malchiodi helped with applying them.

She also uses this approach to develop the therapeutic relationship with her clients. She had one client, a little girl, who didn't feel comfortable talking. So Malchiodi started drawing the client's portrait, and after some time, the client began drawing alongside her.

Art therapists also draw from lots of other genres, including music, movement and writing.

If you'd like to learn more about art therapy, one blog created [a list of 50 blogs on art therapy](#).

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