

Art and Art Therapy with Forensic Populations

What is Art Therapy/Art as therapy?

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According to the American Art Therapy Association, “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.”

Engaging in non-verbal therapies, such as Art Therapy, appeals to those who may be intimidated by traditional talk therapy. Non-verbal therapies are especially beneficial with populations that do not have the capacity to participate or fully benefit from talk therapy. By engaging in the Art Therapy process, it is opening up the individual to an alternative and perhaps easier way to talk about difficult things that may be holding them back from being the person they want to be. Art Therapy has shown significant efficacy when working with individuals that have experienced trauma.

Using Art Therapy with trauma affected individuals allows them to externalize the sensations, memories, and visual images shaped by trauma. Since trauma impacts the individual’s physical and emotional reaction, Art Therapy engages the body’s relaxation response which helps counteract the adverse reaction to the trigger. These interventions can result in improved coping-strategies, self-esteem, self-regulation, and overall awareness and better understanding of their body’s responses and how to better manage them in the future.

Research and Results

Ongoing studies throughout the nation of “male and female incarcerated individuals receiving art therapy services will exhibit marked improvement in mood, socialization, problem-solving abilities, and locus of control within the correctional environment” have repeatedly shown “significantly greater levels of improvement when compared to their control group” (Gussak, 2020). Gussak’s research also indicate that prison art programs serve well-established functions including providing alternative to damaging behaviors which in turn creates a safer environment for everyone. His ongoing research highlights eight key benefits of using art and Art Therapy with the forensic populations.

1. Art is accommodating to disabilities common in forensic population, such as literacy and organic issues
2. Art allows for simple expression of complex material
3. Art allows for safe disclosure by forensic populations
4. Art promotes disclosure despite fears of vulnerability
5. Art can bypass intentional and unintentional defenses
6. Art can be clinically beneficial without verbalizing the intervention
7. Art encourages creativity and provides diversion and escape from the harsh prison environment
8. Art allows for the expression that is acceptable both with prison and outside the institution

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References

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