

Chapter 41

Healing Together: The Lid Project

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ABSTRACT

This chapter emphasizes several key concepts concerning mental illness in today's society. The author strongly believes that mental health recovery is possible and that it is an individualized journey. People struggling with mental health issues can find hope and healing through the use of artistic expression. This chapter is designed to encourage and inspire others to use everyday items and turn them into art. The author describes how collaboration can be a key ingredient to the success of the healing that takes place while doing art together.

INTRODUCTION

While trauma disorders are currently receiving significant attention, countless other mental health disorders often remain undiagnosed, ignored, and stigmatized. Statistically, 1 in 4 adults struggle with a mental illness in a year (Johns Hopkins Medicine). That is 1 out of every 4 people in a family, 1 out of every 4 coworkers, students, friends and neighbors. In other words, a quarter of the population is struggling with a mental illness at any given moment. Mental illness is non-discriminatory and crosses all cultural lines, age brackets, and economical statuses. So while communities and schools rush to become trauma-informed, it may be more poignant to acknowledge, educate, and respond to the extremely high percentage of people living with mental illnesses beyond those associated with trauma.

Fortunately, the benefits of art making do not discriminate either. Regardless of diagnosis, the arts have repeatedly demonstrated an ability to heal. Engaging in music correlated to a form of relaxation, a decrease of tension and anxiety, and control of chronic pain. Making art led to a reduction of the stress producing hormone cortisol, and also gave participants a sense of identity. The findings of movement expression and expressive writing are similar, but added findings of a boost in immune functioning, significant improvement in physical health, and an overall improvement in quality of life (Stuckey and Nobel, 2010).

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Collaborative art projects seek to intertwine people traveling similar paths; building trust and connections in an effort to simultaneously decrease feelings of isolation while providing movement towards coping and healing. This chapter shares the story of The Lid Project, a collaborative art project set at Transitions, a psychiatric rehabilitation program. While the story may offer the reader a project to replicate, the more substantial takeaway is the richness of metaphor for the healing journey found within the story and the process of creating art together.

Collaborative Art Making

Strategically planned arts based experiences can play a very valuable role in healing for those living with mental illness. The arts have been shown to improve focus, mood, brain function, communication, and social skills, all of which are necessary for working toward healthy living and thinking (Nurrie-Stearns, 2013). The arts offer choice and opportunities to take control. For those who have experienced trauma or live with a mental health diagnosis, art making can promote skills to help regulate emotions, build confidence and self-esteem, and foster therapeutic communities and relationships through collaboration.

The shared experience of group art making in particular has many benefits. First it provides safety, which aids in building trust and stronger relationships among members of a group. The art maker is able to be vulnerable and understood by the group, without having to verbalize his experience, making it a safe form of communication and expression (Moon, 2010). Secondly, collaborative work lessens the pressure for one person to achieve an end goal successfully on their own. Both the individual and the community around him are empowered as they work together to achieve their goals (Moon, 2010). Finally, according to art therapist Dr. Bruce L. Moon (2010), “Making art in the presence of others is an expression of hope” (p. 8). When an individual is free to express and be understood by others through his artwork, he can begin to trust in something outside of, or greater than, himself. Ultimately, working collaboratively can move the participant away from feelings of isolation towards being part of a community (Rossetto, 2012).

Feelings of isolation are common among people who are in the midst of mental illness, addiction, grief and other traumatic experiences. These experiences may be difficult to talk about, which is why art making can be a valuable and effective method of therapy for many. Moon says, “In art-based group therapy we often witness creative expressions of feelings that are beyond the communicative abilities of conventional speech” (2010, p. 29). Making art within a group context allows people to share their stories without having to verbally articulate their experiences. This helps to establish an atmosphere of safety and trust, which is key to successful group therapies.

Artwork in any form (dance, music, painting, writing, etc.) can be considered a “partial self-portrait that metaphorically represents that artist’s life” (Moon, 2010, p. 67). This makes one very vulnerable to the group when they share their work. However, when other group members are able to see and relate to the experience of the art maker, organic relationships begin to form, and the power of understanding that one is not alone in the world begins to establish feelings of hope. Moon says, “Acts of creating are invitations to relate. By making things, artists take images from within and give them visible form in the world” (2010, p. 4). Art making offers an alternative way for one to reconnect not only with himself, but with the world beyond.

When in a group, an individual is part of a collective whole working to achieve a common goal. This can set a participant at ease because he/she is not solely responsible for a final outcome of a project. The potential for creativity magnifies as ideas from one participant are able to expand off of ideas of

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