

The Path to Wholeness: Person-Centered Expressive Arts Therapy

by Natalie Rogers

Therapist Natalie Rogers shares an overview of this growing field of humanistic psychotherapy.

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***When art and psychotherapy are joined**, the scope and depth of each can be expanded, and when working together, they are tied to the continuities of humanity's history of healing. —Shaun McNiff, *The Arts and Psychotherapy**

Part of the psychotherapeutic process is to awaken the creative life-force energy. Thus, creativity and therapy overlap. What is creative is frequently therapeutic. What is therapeutic is frequently a creative process. Having integrated the creative arts into my therapeutic practice, I use the term *person-centered expressive arts therapy*. The terms *expressive therapy* or *expressive arts therapy* generally denote dance therapy, art therapy, and music therapy. These terms also include therapy through journal writing, poetry, imagery, meditation, and improvisational drama. Using the expressive arts to foster emotional healing, resolve inner conflict, and awaken individual creativity is an expanding field. In the chapters that follow, I hope to encourage you to add expressive arts to your personal and professional lives in ways that enhance your ability to know yourself, to cultivate deeper relationships, and to enrich your methods as an artist, therapist, and group facilitator.

What is expressive arts therapy?

Expressive arts therapy uses various arts—movement, drawing, painting, sculpting, music, writing, sound, and improvisation—in a supportive setting to facilitate growth and healing. It is a process of discovering ourselves through any art form that comes from an emotional depth. It is not creating a "pretty" picture. It is *not* a dance ready for the stage. It is *not* a poem written and rewritten to perfection.

We express inner feelings by creating outer forms. Expressive art refers to using the emotional, intuitive aspects of ourselves in various media. To use the arts expressively means going into our inner realms to discover feelings and to express them through visual art, movement, sound, writing, or drama.

Talking about our feelings is also an important way to express and discover ourselves meaningfully. In the therapeutic world based on humanistic principles, the term *expressive therapy* has been reserved for nonverbal and/or metaphoric expression. Humanistic expressive arts therapy differs from the analytic or medical model of art therapy, in which art is used to diagnose, analyze and "treat" people.

Most of us have already discovered some aspect of expressive art as being helpful in our daily lives. You may doodle as you speak on the telephone and find it soothing. You may write a personal journal and find that as you write, your feelings and ideas change. Perhaps you write down your dreams and look for patterns and symbols. You may paint or sculpt as a hobby and realize the intensity of the experience transports you out of your everyday problems. Or perhaps you sing while you drive or go for long walks. These exemplify self-expression through movement, sound, writing, and art to alter your state of being. They are ways to release your feelings, clear your mind, raise your spirits, and bring yourself into higher states of consciousness. The process is therapeutic.

When using the arts for self-healing or therapeutic purposes, we are not concerned about the beauty of the visual art, the grammar and style of the writing, or the harmonic flow of the song. We use the arts to let go, to express, and to release. Also, we can gain insight by studying the symbolic and metaphoric messages. Our art speaks back to us if we take the time to let in those messages.

Although interesting and sometimes dramatic products emerge, we leave the aesthetics and the craftsmanship to those who wish to pursue the arts professionally. Of course, some of us get so involved in the arts as self-expression that we later choose to pursue the skills of a particular art form. Many artist-therapists shift from focusing on their therapist lives to their lives as artists. Many artists understand the healing aspects of the creative process and become artist-therapists.

Using the creative process for deep inner healing entails further steps when we work with clients. Expressive arts therapists are aware that involving the mind, the body, and the emotions brings forth the client's intuitive, imaginative abilities as well as logical, linear thought. Since emotional states are seldom logical, the use of imagery and nonverbal modes allows the client an alternate path for self-exploration and communication. This process is a powerful integrative force.

Traditionally, psychotherapy is a verbal form of therapy, and the verbal process will always be important. However, I find I can rapidly understand the world of the client when she expresses herself through images. Color, form, and symbols are languages that speak from the unconscious and have particular meanings for each individual. As I listen to a client's explanation of her imagery, I poignantly see the world as she views it. Or she may use

movement and gesture to show how she feels. As I witness her movement, I can understand her world by empathizing kinesthetically.

The client's self-knowledge expands as her movement, art, writing, and sound provide clues for further exploration. Using expressive arts becomes a healing *process* as well as a new language that speaks to both client and therapist. These arts are potent media in which to discover, experience, and accept unknown aspects of self. Verbal therapy focuses on emotional disturbances and inappropriate behavior. The expressive arts move the client into the world of emotions and add a further dimension. Incorporating the arts into psychotherapy offers the client a way to use the free-spirited parts of herself. Therapy may include joyful, lively learning on many levels: the sensory, kinesthetic, conceptual, emotional and mythic. Clients report that the expressive arts have helped them go beyond their problems to envisioning themselves taking action in the world constructively.

What Is Person-Centered?

The person-centered aspect of expressive arts therapy describes the basic philosophy underlying my work. The *client-centered* or *person-centered* approach developed by my father, Carl Rogers, emphasizes the therapist's role as being empathic, open, honest, congruent, and caring as she listens in depth and facilitates the growth of an individual or a group. This philosophy incorporates the belief that each individual has worth, dignity, and the capacity for self-direction. Carl Rogers's philosophy is based on a trust in an inherent impulse toward growth in every individual. I base my approach to expressive arts therapy on this very deep faith in the innate capacity of each person to reach toward her full potential.

Carl's research into the psychotherapeutic process revealed that when a client felt accepted and understood, healing occurred. It is a rare experience to feel accepted and understood when you are feeling fear, rage, grief, or jealousy. Yet it is this very acceptance and understanding that heals. As friends and therapists, we frequently think we must have an answer or give advice. However, this overlooks a very basic truth. By genuinely hearing the depth of the emotional pain and respecting the individual's ability to find her own answer, we are giving her the greatest gift.

Empathy and acceptance give the individual an opportunity to empower herself and discover her unique potential. This atmosphere of understanding and acceptance also allows you, your friends, or your clients to feel safe enough to try expressive arts as a path to becoming whole.

The Creative Connection

I am intrigued with what I call the *creative connection*: the enhancing interplay among movement, art, writing, and sound. Moving with awareness, for example, opens us to profound feelings which can then be expressed in color,

line, or form. When we write immediately after the movement and art, a free flow emerges in the process, sometimes resulting in poetry. The Creative Connection process that I have developed stimulates such self-exploration. It is like the unfolding petals of a lotus blossom on a summer day. In the warm, accepting environment, the petals open to reveal the flower's inner essence. As our feelings are tapped, they become a resource for further self-understanding and creativity. We gently allow ourselves to awaken to new possibilities. With each opening we may deepen our experience. When we reach our inner core, we find our connection to all beings. We create to connect to our inner source and to reach out to the world and the universe.

Some writers, artists and musicians are already aware of the creative connection. If you are one of those, you may say, "Of course, I always put on music and dance before I paint." Or, as a writer, you may go for a long walk before you sit at your desk. However, you are not alone if you are one of the many in our society who say, "I'm not creative." I hope this book entices you to try new experiences. You will surprise yourself.

I believe we are all capable of being profoundly, beautifully creative, whether we use that creativity to relate to family or to paint a picture. The seeds of much of our creativity come from the unconscious, our feelings, and our intuition. The unconscious is our deep well. Many of us have put a lid over that well. Feelings can be constructively channeled into creative ventures: into dance, music, art, or writing. When our feelings are joyful, the art form uplifts. When our feelings are violent or wrathful, we can transform them into powerful art rather than venting them on the world. Such art helps us accept that aspect of ourselves. Self-acceptance is paramount to compassion for others.

The Healing Power of Person-Centered Expressive Arts

I discovered personal healing for myself as I brought together my interests in psychotherapy, art, dance, writing, and music. Person-centered expressive therapy was born out of my personal integration of the arts and the philosophy I had inherited. Through experimentation I gained insight from my art journal. I doodled, let off steam, or played with colors without concern for the outcome. Unsure at first about introducing these methods to clients, I suggested they try things and then asked them for feedback. They said it was helpful. Their self-understanding increased rapidly and the communication between us improved immensely.

The same was true as I introduced movement, sound, and freewriting for self-expression. Clients and group participants reported a sense of "new beginnings" and freedom to be. One group member wrote: "I learned to play again, how to let go of what I 'know'—my successes, achievements, and knowledge. I discovered the importance of being able to begin again." Another said: "It is much easier for me to deal with some heavy emotions through expressive play than through thinking and talking about it."

It became apparent that the Creative Connection process fosters integration. This is clearly stated by one client who said, "I discovered in exploring my feelings that I could break through inner barriers/structures that I set for myself by moving and dancing the emotions. To draw that feeling after the movement continued the process of unfolding."

It is difficult to convey in words the depth and power of the expressive arts process. I would like to share a personal episode in which using expressive arts helped me through a difficult period. I hope that, in reading it, you will vicariously experience my process of growth through movement, art, and journal writing in an accepting environment.

The months after my father's death were an emotional roller coaster for me. The loss felt huge, yet there was also a sense that I had been released. My inner feeling was that his passing had opened a psychic door for me as well as having brought great sorrow.

Expressive arts served me well during that time of mourning. Two artist-therapist friends invited me to spend time working with them. Connie Smith Siegel invited me to spend a week at a cottage on Bolinas Bay. I painted one black picture after another. Every time I became bored with such dark images, I would start another painting. It, too, became moody and bleak. Although Connie is primarily an artist, her therapeutic training and ability to accept my emotional state gave me permission to be authentic.

Also, I went to a weekend workshop taught by Coeleen Kiebert and spent more time sculpting and painting. This time the theme was tidal waves—and again, black pictures. One clay piece portrays a head peeking out of the underside of a huge wave. My sense of being overwhelmed by the details of emptying my parents' home, making decisions about my father's belongings, and responding to the hundreds of people who loved him was taking its toll. Once again, my art work gave free reign to my feelings and so yielded a sense of relief. Coeleen's encouragement to use the art experience to release

and understand my inner process was another big step. I thought I *should* be over my grief in a month, but these two women gave me permission to continue expressing my river of sadness. That year my expressive art shows my continued sense of loss as well as an opening to new horizons.

As is often true when someone feels deep suffering, there is also an opening to spiritual realms. Three months after my father's death, I flew to Switzerland to cofacilitate a training group with artist-therapist Paolo Knill. It was a time when I had a heightened sense of connectedness to people, nature, and my dreams. Amazing events took place in my inner being. I experienced synchronicities, special messages, and remarkable images. One night I found myself awakened by what seemed to be the beating of many large wings in my room. The next morning I drew the experience as best I could.

One afternoon I led our group in a movement activity called "Melting and Growing." The group divided into pairs, and each partner took turns observing the other dancing, melting, and then growing. Paolo and I participated in this activity together. He was witnessing me as I slowly melted from being very tall to collapsing completely on the floor. Later I wrote in my journal: I loved the opportunity to melt, to let go completely. When I melted into the floor I felt myself totally relax. I surrendered! Instantaneously I experienced being *struck* by incredible light. Although my eyes were closed, all was radiant. Astonished, I lay quietly for a moment, then slowly started to "grow," bringing myself to full height.

I instructed the group participants to put their movement experiences into art. All-encompassing light is difficult to paint, but I tried to capture that stunning

experience in color.

Reflecting on these experiences, it seems that my heart had cracked open. This left me both vulnerable and with great inner strength and light. A few days later another wave picture emerged. This time bright blue/green water was illumined with pink/gold sky.

These vignettes are part of my inner journey. I share them for two reasons. First, I wish to illustrate the transformative power of the expressive arts. Second, I want to point out that person-centered expressive therapy is based on very specific humanistic principles. For instance, it was extremely important that I was with people who allowed me to be in my grief and tears rather than patting me on the shoulder and telling me everything would be all right. I knew that if I had something to say, I would be heard and understood. When I told Paolo that I had the sensation of being struck with light, he could have said, "That was just your imagination." However, he not only understood, he told me he had witnessed the dramatic effect on my face.

Humanistic Principles

Since not all psychologists agree with the principles embodied in this book, it seems important to state them clearly as the foundation for all that follows:

- *All people have an innate ability to be creative.*
- *The creative process is healing.* The expressive product supplies important messages to the individual. However, it is the process of creation that is profoundly transformative.
- *Personal growth and higher states of consciousness are achieved through self-awareness, self-understanding, and insight.*
- *Self-awareness, understanding, and insight are achieved by delving into our emotions.* The feelings of grief, anger, pain, fear, joy, and ecstasy are the tunnel through which we must pass to get to the other side: to self-awareness, understanding, and wholeness.

- *Our feelings and emotions are an energy source.* That energy can be channeled into the expressive arts to be released and transformed.
- *The expressive arts—including movement, art, writing, sound, music, meditation, and imagery—lead us into the unconscious.* This often allows us to express previously unknown facets of ourselves, thus bringing to light new information and awareness.
- *Art modes interrelate in what I call the creative connection.* When we move, it affects how we write or paint. When we write or paint, it affects how we feel and think. During the creative connection process, one art form stimulates and nurtures the other, bringing us to an inner core or essence which is our life energy.
- *A connection exists between our life-force—our inner core, or soul—and the essence of all beings.*
- *Therefore, as we journey inward to discover our essence or wholeness, we discover our relatedness to the outer world.* The inner and outer become one.

My approach to therapy is also based on a psychodynamic theory of individual and group process:

- Personal growth takes place in a safe, supportive environment.
- A safe, supportive environment is created by facilitators (teachers, therapists, group leaders, parents, colleagues) who are genuine, warm, empathic, open, honest, congruent, and caring.
- These qualities can be learned best by first being experienced.
- A client-therapist, teacher-student, parent-child, wife-husband, or intimate-partners relationship can be the context for experiencing these qualities.
- Personal integration of the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions occurs by taking time to reflect on and evaluate these experiences.

