



How Art Heals Us

By Anna Reyner, MA

Art is a language that gives voice to how we feel inside.

How does art magically help us heal our pain and reconnect to each other? How does art help us to get in touch with our true selves, our authentic feelings - even the feelings we may hide from the world and from ourselves?

As we experience the world we face pains and disappointments. Especially if we come from a home with violence and abuse, painful feelings are often debilitating and devastating. Whether our traumas are mild or severe, we may try to “suppress” our hurts and fears so we can move on with our lives. In some cases we have become so successful at ignoring or stifling our feelings that we may have no idea how we actually feel. We have lost touch with our authentic self and may either be trying to feel nothing at all, or be living in a state of anxiety and confusion about our conflicting feelings. In other cases, we may actually be in touch with our feelings but not know how to articulate them or put them into words. Or we may even be afraid if we talk about them that we will become overwhelmed and feel vulnerable or unsafe.

Art is a safe way to express our feelings; it helps us express ourselves slowly and at our own pace. Art goes beyond words and tells our story for us. It helps us delve into our true selves and express our pains and heartaches that language does not have the ability or power to convey.

Feelings that stem from trauma, violence, or abuse are often overwhelming and words alone rarely capture or convey their true intensity. Pictures tell us far more than words can ever express. Tapping into our artistic selves and creative mind can help provide a whole world of self-discovery.

Art is the best healing tool possible when we are feeling emotions that are too painful, too deep, too hidden to access—much less to express.

Sometimes we have mastered defending ourselves from our pains and we tuck them away even from ourselves. In an attempt to get clear of or avoid feeling pain, we lock ourselves away from all our feelings, both good and bad. Art is the bridge that allows us to reconnect to those feelings.

Why art? By participating in art we suspend our everyday logical thinking and place ourselves in a relationship with lines, colors and the flow of active discovery.

We disconnect from our left-brain “logical” selves when we engage in art activities. Art provides the medium through which we stop thinking and start a more direct form of expression; the language of sensations, emotions and pre-verbal memories. Many of our early memories are stored in the right hemisphere of our brain, the non-linear artistic side. When we immerse ourselves in right brain activities like art, those early sensory memories are activated. By stimulating those memories, we are better able to bring them to consciousness and express them. Art has the power to penetrate the subconscious layers of our mind and enables us to “make conscious that which was unconscious.”

Art is also a way to actively meditate; to be present and experience the here and now. Through collaborative art experiences, we connect with others and experience the healing potential of creativity and community.



Healing From Trauma: Art And The Brain

By Carol Caddes, MFT

Trauma: our reality is tainted, our trust is shattered, and our emotions are unpredictable.

The greater the trauma, the more impact on the neurological function of the brain. The brain is clever—it protects itself from overload by cutting off parts of the brain. Thus the imprints of the trauma are organized as fragments-sensory and emotional traces that don't make sense.

Yet the mind seeks wholeness, and it lets us know through disturbances and distress that things are not right. Healing from trauma consists of reactivating the brain, reconnecting the disconnected parts, and making the unconscious. One way to do that is through making art.

Making art seems to reconnect parts of the brain and hence help heal trauma in four ways. First, because trauma seems to have no boundaries, and often has no physical boundaries, the edges of the paper provide those boundaries and a container for images and emotions that may not be able to be expressed verbally. With trauma, the left hemisphere, specialized for perceiving and expressed language, and the Broca's area (within the left hemisphere), which puts feelings into words, are often disconnected from the rest of the brain.

Secondly, the physical act of making marks, especially repetitive movements, activates a part of the brain called the cerebellum vermis, which stimulates affect regulation. This starts the containment of negative emotions in the right limbic area, which is where traumatic memory is stored.

Third, as the image appears the left hemisphere is activated to assess the complex situation through its ability to process logically, linguistically, and linearly. Through the image, the right hemisphere expresses its internal reality. Yet the distress is externalized without re-experiencing it because the left hemisphere is now on-line, and there are words and a symbolic representation to express feelings.

Fourth, the externalized image of the distress puts the trauma into a context of time and place. The mind discerns that the trauma happened "there and then" and is not happening "here and now." Therefore, "I am safe now," the mind says. This deactivates the amygdala, which is the decoder of sensory input. If the sensory input computes to be unsafe, the amygdala floods the limbic area of the right hemisphere with stress hormones and negative feelings are activated. Making art can reset the amygdala to a here-and-now orientation.

With the reconnection of the disassociated parts of the brain, information processing is returned, the brain is balanced, and distress is relieved. Thus healing can begin, as the mind is able to see the tragic event as a whole, in a new way, and then to make personal meaning out of it. There may be no way to compensate for an atrocity, but there are ways to transcend it. Art is one such way as it bears witness to and processes the horror and helplessness of a traumatic event.