



Find a Creative Outlet for Your Pain With Art Therapy

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Art Therapy for Osteoarthritis Pain Management

Art therapy is gaining credibility as a therapeutic treatment for pain conditions, including osteoarthritis (OA). It is currently being used in hospitals, wellness centers, schools, senior centers, and in the clinical practices of mental health professionals.

What Is Art Therapy?

Art therapy is considered a type of behavioral therapy in which you use the creative process to create artwork to manage emotions, reduce stress and direct pain. The general goals of art therapy for OA would be to improve both your physical and emotional functioning and also overall wellbeing.

Art therapy comes from a theory that being a creative promotes healing through emotional and mental processes.

Your osteoarthritis pain doesn't just have physical characteristics; it also has psychological aspects. So it makes sense your doctor may include art therapy as part of your treatment plan.

Creative Outlet for Pain

An art therapist can teach you how to intentionally and creatively communicate your pain. Research studies have been in favor of art therapy as a creative outlet for pain management.

One 2003 study of 14 chronic pain patients in New Zealand who participated in art therapy found a strong association between partaking in a valued activity and maintaining and redefining identity, experiencing oneself as able, and being optimistic about the future.

Another study, reported in the *Canadian Journal of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, described a 79-year-old woman with severe arthritis who got pain relief by creating a painting depicting her pain as an actual monster.

She painted her way to defeating this monster — it is very possible being able to express her frustrations may have helped her to better cope and manage her pain.

Role of the Art Therapist

There is more to art therapy than simply drawing and painting as a method of depicting on your feelings on a piece of paper. An art therapist can walk you through the creative process in ways that promote healing.

The American Art Therapy Association (AATA) requires art therapists to have master's degrees in art therapy and extensive clinical practice experience. And because of the exclusivity of the study and practice of art therapy, art therapists must have been trained by an AATA-approved and recognized program.

Your art therapist offers an art-based theory tailored to you and your health needs. But the choice to engage and participate is up to you.

The types of art you may make will depend on your interests and what benefit your art therapist thinks those may offer. One day your therapist might think working with clay benefits you, another day it may be painting or creating a collage or working in a visual journal (art diary of words and sketches).

The Focus of Art Therapy

The focus of art therapy is on the creative process rather than a finished piece of art. No one has to see your work and your art therapist won't show it to anyone without your permission.

The art materials themselves also have healing qualities. Your art therapist has extensive expertise in assessing which materials to use based on the struggles you are dealing with, your mindset during the sessions, and a whole bunch of other factors.

Much like other mental health professionals, art therapists use different approaches to managing your care. However, your art therapist will not attempt to analyze your art, as their role is to assist you in exploring how best to express your OA pain and emotions in a creative way.

It may sometimes be difficult to put your pain in words, but painting, drawing or sculpting may help you to transfer your pain and find the right words. Your art therapist will also encourage you to talk about your art to find insight and meaning in what you are feeling and how that transfers into your work.

Art therapy may also offer symptom relief because it demands your focus and draws your attention to other senses besides pain and depressed feelings. If your attention is directed elsewhere, your mind is less able to process pain stimuli and responses.

Benefits of Expressing OA Pain Creatively

People who paint and create art in various forms tend to become fully engrossed in their work, so it is no wonder art can be a refuge for people living with OA pain. After all, art is a distraction and helps us relax and decrease stress, which results in reduced pain and gives you more reasons to keep going despite health challenges.

You can use your art to express emotions that often come with living OA pain and challenges. There can be beauty in art — no matter the form — and it can give many reasons to feel excited and help you manage OA anger and grief creatively.

Art therapy is an easy and safe form of osteoarthritis therapy and you don't need to be an artist or even interested in art. All you have to do is express your thoughts in a safe and creative environment.
