

Mosaics as Art Therapy for Grief

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“Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole”

Derek Walcott

“If we’re willing to give up hope that insecurity and pain can be exterminated, then we can have the courage to relax with the groundlessness of our situation. This is the first step on the path”

Pema Chodron

Broken Open

I am an artist and an art therapist. I am also a trauma survivor. I came to art therapy, as many do, through my own intimate familiarity with the creative process, and its power to heal. I am most passionate about my role as witness and guide to others as they embark on their own journeys of healing, while sharing my love of art, and particularly mosaics. In art therapy, we are trained in the theories and practice of psychotherapy, in fine arts, and in the many nuanced, deliberate approaches of combining the two. We explore the symbolic and metaphorical content of the finished work, as well as the creative processes which led to its creation. Both art-making and engaging in creative exploration of art materials with no particular product in mind, can amplify and accelerate the healing process for people recovering from grief, trauma, and addictions.

Art makes the amorphous, overwhelming or hidden feelings of sorrow, shame and rage visible. Externalizing these feelings from our bodies onto paper, paint or clay, can concretize them, allow them to be more fully seen and worked through. Over time, the art therapist and client may review together the entire record of imagery produced during the course of art therapy, vividly documenting the healing process, and leading to new insights.

Art therapists typically offer a wide range of materials, including those which are wet and dry, those which are loose and precise, familiar and unfamiliar to the client. We explore the inherent sensory/kinesthetic, metaphorical qualities of various art materials, and help guide our clients by carefully selecting materials and techniques which are tailored to that unique person and their difficulties in that moment. The use of art helps us to assess developmental ruptures, traumatic experiences, and diagnoses. It also provides a safe container or buffer to allow clients to express themselves more openly, bring the unconscious to consciousness, and allow the person’s imagery to speak for them. In art therapy, sensitivity to “windows of tolerance”, the breadth of stimulation or challenge within which a person can comfortably participate, is critical. A skilled art therapist will continually modulate the offering of materials and pacing of directives, to match the client’s changing needs.

When we talk about addiction, we are often also talking about trauma, grief and loss. For some, substance abuse was provoked by loss, and that subsequently disrupts the normal grieving process. When the person becomes sober, the unresolved grief becomes apparent, although it may at first appear as anger, resentment, guilt or depression. For others, significant losses are experienced during the course of their addiction. Art therapy is uniquely equipped to reveal loss and trauma, reaching people who are shut down emotionally due to substance abuse or other reasons. Those for whom more traditional forms of talk psychotherapy are ineffective or only partially effective. Images, symbols and metaphors are key to our unconscious lives, our dreams, and our stories. They are a primary way we make sense and

meaning of the world. Pre-verbal, nonverbal, right brain and repressed experiences of trauma often arise spontaneously via the art making process, sometimes dysregulating clients with a flood of triggering memories. This is precisely why using art without proper training within psychotherapeutic contexts can be risky. As clinicians we have the duty to treat (not harm) our clients.

It is common knowledge within art therapy circles (and largely unknown to others) that art has the potential to harm. It is imperative that art therapists have proper training and credentials, in order to provide the best possible care for our most vulnerable clients; particularly those with complex histories of trauma, poor reality testing due to dissociative or psychotic conditions, and those with suicidal and/or homicidal tendencies. This describes many individuals seen today within addiction and mental health treatment centers. In the US, each state regulates the scope and practice of art therapy, in coordination with the national Art Therapy Credentialing Board, to ensure the safest, best possible care for those seeking our treatment.

Putting the Pieces Together

What is broken can be mended, but often not in the way we first imagine. Perhaps what we perceive as fragmented, shattered, hopelessly chaotic is not quite as it seems. In these times when our lives are shattered by grief, loss or trauma, we are also receptive, broken open to new opportunities for insight, growth and healing.

Much of my work over the years has been with mosaics. Making mosaics deliberately as a form of art therapy has many benefits. It involves several distinct phases, each of which has unique metaphorical/symbolic/healing properties. Other forms of art, such as collage and quilting, share some similar therapeutic qualities; however they differ in significant ways from mosaics.

A mosaic is, simply, an image made of many pieces of something (usually broken tiles aka “tesserae”), glass, mirror, or stones. The breaking phase is satisfying in its cathartic nature, allowing the artist to acknowledge and release anger and pain. We may also spend time gathering and scavenging for treasures to include. Arranging is the phase where we “put the pieces together”. It is somewhat like a puzzle, but one where we ourselves determine the outcome, re-experiencing the variety and sharpness of each shard as we reassemble them into a new image. This phase is not always neat or pretty, but it does lead to a satisfying sense of clarity and order. We glue the pieces into place. Next, grouting involves a covering the entire piece with a mud-like substance called grout. Grout, like mud and clay, tends to naturally conjure up primal associations with night, death, the seasons, and functions of the body. It is also the strongest part of the mosaic. The image is present, but still rough, and temporarily invisible. In the uncovering phase, the new, complete image is revealed.

Beauty from the brokenness

Japanese ceramicists have an ancient tradition called kintsugi. In this technique, fractures in beloved ceramic objects (vases, dishes, sculptures) are repaired with a resin mixed with pure gold, thereby imparting more value and beauty. The histories of these objects, sometimes turbulent, are viewed not with disappointment, but rather with awe and reverence.

In mosaics, we undergo a metamorphosis, a profound transformation. Our new image which emerges from the blanket of grout, has a renewed sense of wholeness, integrity, and permanence. The brokenness is preserved, as a necessary element in creating the beauty and strength of the finished product.

Is it possible that we humans are like mosaics? That not despite, but because of our wounds, fractures and imperfections, we are paradoxically stronger, more complex, more cohesive and more beautiful?

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For more information about Art Therapy, or to find a credentialed professional in your area, check out The American Art Therapy Association via: www.arttherapy.org and the Art Therapy Credentialing Board: www.atcb.org