How Using Art Therapy for Chronic Pain Can Help

by BRENDA VANTA

Try Art Therapy for Chronic Pain Management

Art therapy for chronic pain or any other chronic condition is not new. The use of art for its healing qualities had been used for centuries and is connected with other fields such as psychology, anthropology, art history, and psychiatry.

Anthropologists suggest that art was used even during the prehistoric times in rituals that involved dance, music and visual imagery.

Art therapy is now defined as a specific form of psychotherapy that uses art-making as the primary form of communication and self-expression with the goal of improving and enhancing the physical, mental and emotional well being of people of all ages.

According to the principles of art therapy, the process of making art is therapeutic and can help to resolve emotional problems, increase coping skills and interpersonal relationships, develop strategies to solve problems and boosts the self-esteem and self-awareness.

The patient does not need to have special artistic skills or background because this process is focused on self-discovery, self-expression and personal growth.

Why Use Art Therapy for Chronic Pain

Why use art therapy for chronic pain? The mind and body are strongly connected.

If the chronic pain is not well managed, it leaves a person feeling hopeless and discouraged, and the link between pain and depression is well established. By using art therapy, a person will be able to express their feelings and emotions, resolve internal conflicts and get a better inside of the nature of the pain.

The role of art therapy for chronic pain is based on the biopsychological approach to pain and the “gate control theory “ (GCT) pain.

According to GCT theory, the pain is primarily influenced on the impulses transmitted from the site of injury to a region in the spinal cord labeled “the gate.” In the “gate” the signals are processed before continuing to the brain and feel the sensation of pain.

Emotional and cognitive factors influence the messages that arrive at the brain and art therapy works precisely at these levels.

In one study, the participants used music, visual art and writing, and some other forms of psychotherapy for chronic pain management. The study suggests that these therapies helped with depression, anxiety and decrease

pain levels.

About Art Therapists and the Methods Used in Practice

How is different an art therapy session from a regular art class? Of course, you can start using art at home, or take a class- it will help you become more relaxed, calm and creative. However, for optimal (and therapeutic) benefits you should talk to an art therapist

In addition to helping you create art, a medical art therapist will encourage you to employ various methods (like drawing, painting, sculpture, and collage), talk about the images you created, and discover their insight and meaning.

Carl Jung developed so-called active imagination, where you use an image to freely associate your thoughts and feelings that would come spontaneously and your mind and associate with that image. Other techniques involved Gestalt therapy or so-called “the third hand” technique.

When it comes to academics background, art therapists have a masters degree in art therapy or a related field in addition to training in psychology, while some have specialized knowledge of studio art.

Next page: Read about Erin Scott's experience using art therapy for chronic pain and how it has helped her cope with her condition.

Erin Scott's Experience Using Art Therapy for Chronic Pain

I have had chronic pain, to some extent, for many years now. Thanks to a genetic deformity in my neck (Klippel Feil Syndrome), herniated cervical discs, and a host of other issues from past injuries, and my chronic illnesses, I can’t remember a moment without pain in well over a decade.

Before I left teaching, I taught English. One of the things I enjoyed the most about my job was engaging in the creative process with my students. What it meant to take your emotions, your feelings, your instincts, and throw them out there into the world.

In our class, that often meant in poetry, or prose, but in reality being creative could mean using any medium. My sister is amazingly talented at crocheting and can come up with unique, artistic patterns. Others might knit, sculpt, paint, take photos, restore furniture, sew, do graphic design, or any number of ideas.

Using Creative Writing as Therapy

To deal with the complex emotions of chronic pain, I always relied on writing and poetry. I love words. The way they can be blended and molded to convey something powerful and meaningful. I found comfort in being able to speak my truth on paper when my mouth failed me.

My chronic pain and illness has become worse in the past few years. This lead me to start a blog this past winter. I decided that I'd use my love of writing to write about my journey with chronic pain and illness. It’s been incredibly healing to me as I’ve felt a sense of freedom, releasing my words into the world.

Have you ever heard of people writing something on a piece of paper, usually something that’s upset them, putting it in a balloon, and then releasing it to fly away? That imagery is how I feel when I press publish on a blog post. I have released it. I spent creative energy on it, and then I no longer need to worry about it anymore.

Writing Has Helped Me Connect to Others In the Chronic Pain Community

Writing and putting my story out there publicly has also helped me connect with others in the chronic pain community. I’ve become part of a blogging network and get to engage with my readers as they comment and

write to me. That is invaluable, as being part of a community and having a support network bring light into dark days.

Writing has become a significant part of how I deal with my chronic conditions.

At Easter, my mother-in-law gave me some art supplies as a gift. Due to my gastroparesis, I can't eat chocolate, so instead, I got a bunch of stuff to paint with. Now, I do some craft stuff, but I do not know how to paint. I took music as my art option in high school (and continued throughout... I played the trumpet!), so I hadn't touched any visual art since middle school. Faced with several canvases and paints, I had no idea what to do.

Finally, I decided to use this opportunity to do some art therapy for my chronic pain and my symptoms.

"This Is What My Pain Looks Like"

I started off my painting a representation of my chronic migraines. I painted a head, separated down the middle. The left side was surrounded by darkness, was red, and had angry flecks in it.

By contrast, the right side was lighter and wasn't surrounded by darkness. The lips had multi-colored dots on them to represent the tingling sensation that I get when my migraines start. A teardrop falls from the left eye.

My first reaction to seeing the final product was sadness, but after a few minutes, I felt empowered. Even though I felt that pain almost every day, seeing an abstract painting of it made it feel validated.

I could also use it to show people and say, "this is what my pain looks like." Being able to point to a visual of your pain makes it feel more real, and it somehow makes it harder for people to ignore, and it can be an excellent teaching or advocacy tool.

At that moment, I decided to not only just paint, but to blog about my paintings so that I could write an explanation of what was happening. I recognized that I am both not the world's best painter and that my works are relatively abstract, so they are probably best seen with an explanation.

I've since completed a few more paintings on my arm pain, nausea, and even one dedicated to my indoor walker!

Card Making and Spreading the Love

Something else that I've always done for fun since I was a child involved making cards. They have never been very professional looking... In fact, until the last couple years, I made do with just colored paper and markers. It was just a fun little thing I did for my close family.

The past couple years though, I decided to step up my card making game with fancier paper, material, buttons, a die cutter, etc. I've had a lot of fun being creative, and I've enjoyed spreading my love to others by giving them homemade cards on special occasions.

In Conclusion...

Working on creative projects, whether it be writing, painting, knitting, card making, or anything else, can help release stress. I've found that even though a lot of my creative work focuses on my pain because I'm focusing on the creative process, I'm not focused on the pain itself.

If you are looking for some social interaction or being part of a community, there are all sorts of groups that creative projects can help connect you with. Writing and reading clubs, knitting groups, art classes, etc. If you struggle to get out of the house, look online! Facebook and other social networks have groups that you could be interested in.

I'd encourage you to try out something creative! It can be anything that you might get some enjoyment out of.

Don’t worry about being good, but just focus on enjoying the creative process and allowing yourself to heal from the stress and anxiety that chronic pain can bring.