
Art Therapy: An Intervention for People with Alzheimer's disease

Art therapy can help reduce anxiety, provide meaningful activity, encourage interaction with others, lessen isolation and marginalization, and ultimately provide a better quality of life and vital involvement in old age.

by Elizabeth M. Ginn, BFA, BA, Graduate Diploma



Elizabeth M. Ginn, BFA, BA, Graduate Diploma is currently working on her MA in Art Therapy at Marylhurst University in Portland, Oregon. She is a former arts administrator, curator and is a practising artist from Edmonton, Alberta.

An emotional disturbance can also be dealt with in another way, not by clarifying it intellectually but by giving it visible shape. Patients who possess some talent for drawing or painting can give expression to their mood by means of a picture. It is not important for the picture to be technically or aesthetically satisfying, but merely for the fantasy to have free play and for the whole thing to be done as well as possible.¹

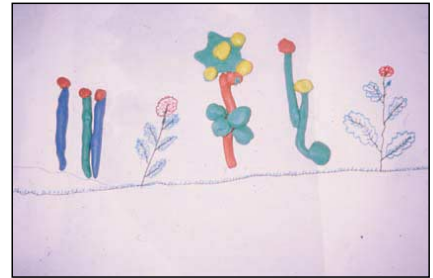
The above quote by Carl Jung is very fitting to the art therapy technique and other modalities of intervention for the older adult, particularly those with dementia. Art therapy can help reduce anxiety, provide meaningful activity, encourage interaction with others, lessen isolation and marginalization, and ultimately provide a better quality of life and vital involvement in old age.¹⁻³ Meaningful recreational activities are therapeutic, and a trained art therapist can implement such a program.

Collage, free association painting and theme-related drawings facilitated by an art therapist are quite different from the traditional arts and crafts activities offered in therapeutic recreation programs. The emphasis is on process, not product, and the resident does all of the artwork him or herself. This is based on the fundamental premise that honors the creative process of the individual.

One activity of art therapy is sandtray, sometimes referred to as sandplay. Using a box with dimensions averaging 28" x 20" x 4" deep, filled with sand, participants are given a choice of objects from an assortment collected and provided by the therapist. These objects represent archetypes, animals, buildings, the four elements, nature etc. Participants then create a picture within sandtray. This approach has evolved from theories put forth by psychoanalysts Carl Jung,⁴ Margaret Lowenfeld⁵ and Dora Kalff.⁶ It has been used as a psychodynamic



Group from the Venta Nursing Home, Edmonton, Alberta painting objects from the ocean. May 1999.



Artwork by Venta residents. Top: paintings by 94 year old and 87 year old residents. Bottom: a free association painting by an 80 year old AD patient. A plastiscene and color pencil design by a 94 year old AD patient.

approach to therapy with children, families, youth at risk, trauma survivors, adults and seniors, and is particularly successful for people with dementia. Regression through the transitional object⁷ and the process of play allows elderly people with Alzheimer's disease (AD) to experience an activity that was meaningful in their formative years.

Using Sandtray in a Long-term Care Facility

Sandtray can be used as an intervention or diversion with residents in a long-term care facility (LTC). It is suitable for people at any level of cognitive functioning, and is especially successful with people with dementia of the Alzheimer type. In sandtray, residents are able to use the creative process to reminisce, reflect and project. The exploration of creativity and the

process of creating little "worlds" out of objects allow residents to pass time in a constructive manner.

Residents in LTC facilities are not always comfortable in or familiar with group activities. To implement the program, new activities can be in a small group (ideally with four to six participants) or on a one-on-one basis. Because of staff shortages and budgetary restrictions, this is not always possible. Volunteers therefore play a considerable role in enabling the social interaction of residents. Staff members and volunteers must receive training in sandtray; the world technique is crucial to its success. The experience of working with objects within the sandtray milieu can be very positive for people with AD.

One of the most important aspects of sandtray is allowing residents to select their own objects; choosing

objects for them or suggesting what to use defeats the purpose. Passive participation is also therapeutic; looking at or holding objects can stimulate participants and result in changed behavior. Ultimately, it all becomes part of a meaningful activity that allows people to remain involved even in old age.²

References

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