

Debra Cowen is an art therapist who runs both private and group classes in Newtown. NSW

What is your educational background?

I have an Advanced Diploma in Fine Arts, Transpersonal Art Therapy and Counselling. I am trained as an accredited supervisor for the Australian Counselling Association. I have trained in Shamanic Practices and Expressive Group Work, in the Arts as well.

How did you become interested in the profession and do you have an area of expertise?

Going through a personal experience myself, I got to understand the benefit of using art as a healing tool. The exploration and self-realizations that came out of exploring my imagination, created a new perspective for me, in how I saw things. By going into my imagination and creating art and stories, I was able to make meaning of my situation and it became a wondrous journey, leaving me in a position of wanting to help others, to move through their situations, in a way that honoured their imagination and sense of agency.

What are the advantages of art therapy over conventional psychotherapy?

The client is in charge of the story and it is their story that comes through. At the groups I run, taking participants into a visualisation, they have the opportunity of exploring their imagination, with no limits to their creativity. Watching them create beautiful works of art, at any level and learning not to be judgmental of their works is part of the process. Participants, with the help of their fellow group members, link their imagination to their own experience and their own meaning and self-realizations come through, which speaks for itself. It's really about creating a space, where people are able to go into that magical place of image and story, taking themselves back to the joy of those formative years, allowing them to start changing things for themselves.

I also bring automatic writing, and poetry, into the process, which proves to be really helpful, in unraveling those mixed up thoughts and emotions.

I'm not artistic – is Art Therapy suitable for me?

The less artistic you are the easier it may be for you to just let yourself draw, without any expectations. If you are artistic you may be concentrating too much on technique, which can get in the way. I always smile when someone tells me they can't draw, because we all could and we can. I have seen many people come through the groups and not one of them has been unable to draw. It's just about letting go and enjoying yourself with the materials. The results are usually surprising.

What equipment or tools do you use in a private or group session?

Mostly pastel crayons and water colour paints. The reason for the crayons is we want to go back to our formative years. We also use A1 sheets of paper in the groups, which may seem big for someone who doesn't draw and paint much, or at all. The interesting thing is, that after the visualisation, there is hardly a peep in the room for the full hour, whilst attendees are so absorbed in their work. If they get stuck, it takes a few minutes for me to have a chat and help them move through it, creating a way to continue the picture. I also have collage and bits and pieces for anyone who feels drawn to use them.

How would you encourage a resistant or fearful patient to participate in art therapy?

Just come along and have a go. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The participants are all like minded, caring, people just like you and if you are drawn to do it, you will have the same ideas of wanting to explore your imagination and share in beautiful conversations about the imagery and stories that are being created. Also something to remember is that you are helping others, whilst you help yourself as well and that is a great thing to do for yourself.

How do you tailor art therapy sessions to meet patients' needs?

There are many ways to meet a clients needs. It is very much about understanding their cosmology. There is always a way to get creative with someone, even when they say they are not creative. If we think about the way people dream, for example an architect often dreams in imagery that is related to buildings. If we try and link where a person is drawn to, with taking them into that kind of imaginative scenario/ metaphor, that is where we will be able to help move someone from a stuck place to something new.

What should I expect from a typical session?

In my private sessions, I will be interested in what is going on for the client. We will eventually get to a place where there is some kind of charge, a place where they are triggered and then I will take them into an imaginative scenario/metaphor, which may play out in a completely different way to what they might or even I might have expected. The outcome mostly allows them, to either explore the challenge/situation in depth and coming to some kind of peace with it, or shows a way through as to how they might deal with the situation through their own self realizations. What I feel is important is to encourage curiosity in the client, rather than a stance that keeps you stuck.

Should only people struggling with big issues seek Art Therapy?

Absolutely not. Art Therapy can actually just be an adventure of "how far can I stretch my imagination". You may just want a break from what you always do and want to nourish yourself by getting curious and imaginative. There is always something to learn about oneself that can only be helpful.

Can art therapy help with anxiety and those living with Meniere's Disease?

Art Therapy is a very relaxing process. In the groups I run, I first take participants into a meditation, which is somatic based. This part of the process allows them to get in touch with their bodies, feel body sensations, just for what they are, without judgement. For most people, this is very relaxing, as well as it taking them out of their ordinary everyday mind state.

I then take participants into a visualisation, each time having a different theme. This is where the imagination takes over, which allows for letting go of the anxiety and putting ones focus into something else, in this case the imagination. When participants come out of the visualisation, they have usually come back with a story or some imagery or even a few words. It is almost like the anxiety gets bracketed whilst the imagination takes over. The concentration is then on the drawing/painting as they create the imagery. I have many people in the groups who have anxiety problems, but it always feels as if it gets put away for the duration of the session, whilst they delve into their creative pursuit. Being part of a group, where one gets to see that others are also dealing with issues, is also helpful in feeling safe, held and with other like-minded people.

I would say, art therapy is helpful for any condition. I personally believe that when we have a challenging situation, if we take it into a creative area, we can have surprising results for ourselves. It takes on a whole new meaning and with meaning we can gain peace and understanding.

How long is an art therapy session?

A session is 1 hour. The groups run for 2 to 2.5 hours.

What does art therapy include?

All materials are provided and what is included is you may mostly get to walk out feeling lighter and better.

How much does art therapy cost?

\$130.00 for 1 hour and \$25.00 for a group session.

What is expressive art?

Expressive art is your opportunity to get as expressive and creative as you like, drawing something that is sitting in you and seeing it for yourself, as some kind of image in front of your very eyes rather than it sitting unrealized inside you.

Is art therapy covered under any health fund?

No, unfortunately not.

Can anyone attend your group therapy classes?

Yes, anyone can attend. If you are able to be part of a group and involve yourself in the process, we would love to see you there.

How can you be contacted?

Through my **website**: artandyou.com.au

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