ART THERAPY FOR THE TREATMENT OF PTSD — JEFFREY STADLER, MA, LPC

In efforts to better address issues of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Veterans, the VA Palo Alto system has instituted pilot programs known as the PCT (PTSD Clinical Team), comprised of a psychologist, social worker, and art therapist. The PCT offers trauma-focused therapies, and is unique in its multidisciplinary approach, involving traditional (i.e., verbal) evidence-based therapies that are complemented by the right brain (i.e., creative) interventions of art therapy. As the combination of these left- and right-brain approaches has demonstrated improved treatment efficacy, the VA has made strides in supporting creative arts therapies as legitimate treatment modalities.

Art therapy serves a number of functions in this type of treatment that cannot always be successfully achieved using solely traditional psychotherapy. Art serves as a non-verbal means to express unresolved memories and feelings, which have often been suppressed or avoided since the time of the trauma. In Figure 1, this Vietnam Veteran powerfully characterized in this cut-out image how it feels to be traumatized. For many with PTSD, traumatic memories and distressing emotions are too difficult to talk about. Creating visual imagery works using the right brain and results in concrete, external representations of those internal experiences, which are often nebulous, abstract, and overwhelming. Many Veterans find imagery more accurate than words in conveying how they think and feel, and less threatening to talk about than the thoughts/feelings themselves.

Figure 1

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Once an art therapist, always an art therapist, regardless of detours from conventional clinical practice. When art fills the heart, it leads us to where we are supposed to go. Excited that the American Art Therapy Association chose me to be apart of their Canadian spotlight, I hope experiences and discoveries I can share here prove inspirational and informative.

British by birth, Canadian by residency, and American through education, I am grateful for the unique opportunities, and the positive results industry and perseverance bring. I arrived in Canada in 1981, a language assistant with a French/Sociology BA and Post Graduate Certificate in Education. Though I’d studied at Goldsmiths College (a hub for art therapy in Britain), I had no knowledge of art therapy’s existence then.

Fast forward to the early 90s. I initiated a visual arts program for a Toronto French middle school. Instruction was in French, but images some students produced made me realize, in plain English, that art as therapy was intriguing. Next, after developing Art FIT (Fun, Interest and Therapy) workshops at Canyon Ranch (a leading US health spa), I decided to pursue formal art therapy training. From Dr. Martin Fischer Toronto Art Therapy Institute (which is no more) to Lesley College (now University), to the Union Institute (now Institute and University), I credentialed and built my career.


Then, as the 20th century drew to a close, so did my seven years’ pioneering clinical practice at Toronto General Hospital. Not only did I succeed in developing a premier arts therapies program for inpatients with eating disorders, I also shared generously with students, visitors, and colleagues, many incorporating my tools as their own. On-the-job learning there demonstrated how professional art therapists thrive when supervision, respect, teamwork, and boundaries are healthy. Otherwise, challenges arise that jeopardize progress and purpose.

The year 2000 heralded my transition to “heart-therapist-at-large”: a private practice that melded personal coaching and creative arts problem-solving techniques. Today, however, it takes second place to a burgeoning fine art vocation. In 2006, after four years of intense studio practice, I graduated from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston) with a Fine Arts Diploma. Then, in 2007, I accepted the invitation to exhibit at the Florence Biennale (on behalf of Canada) with a 20-canvas installation entitled “Buon Appetito!” Following this, a personal visual arts-making mission seems to have spontaneously evolved: to help stimulate positive surroundings and bring smiles. No matter how gray the day, my unconscious keeps life on track with imagery that elevates mood.

Over the years, importing to Canada knowledge and enthusiasm acquired abroad has been an important goal. I love this country, but there are drawbacks. Disappointing but true, not one of my books has ever appeared on a Canadian art therapy training program reading list. Paintings (even offered for free) have also been impossible to place locally (in Toronto). But, as donor-artist with Boston’s Art Connection (since 2006), three dozen plus artworks of mine have been chosen by close to two dozen non-for-profit organizations. Giving as well as gleaning has proven more rewarding in the US. Celine Dionne, Michael J. Fox, William Shatner, and David Altmejd set other artistic examples.

Noticing appreciation shown for my artwork in New England’s public spaces, licensing imagery has made sense. An innovative arts and technology company, Arta, added me to their “featured artist” roster this year, and I look forward to more collaborations like this. In Boston, my original artwork is displayed at 450 Harrison Avenue (Terry Levin’s Studio: 415A), in the SOWA District. Boston Art also represents it.

Coinciding with Vancouver’s 2010 Olympic Winter Games, I participated in a Portrait Society of Canada show pairing athletes and artists. Unfortunately, the honor of painting Blueberries, Mosaic Tile, from Susan’s Florence Biennale Collection (2007), shown in vitreous glass, by Boston based Arta, 2010. However, to date, not one show sale has been made (from 34 artist/athlete pairings).

Nathalie Lambert (Canadian Winter Games Team Leader) and Alex Baumann (Chief Technical Officer for Canada’s Own the Podium) was eclipsed by underwhelming marketing, interest, and attendance. Ultimately, funds raised from my athletes’ portraiture will go to Earthquake Disaster Relief via the Child Art Foundation. However, continued on page 9

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This Newsletter features two Canadian art therapists who share their diverse and interesting experiences, careers, and perspective.

SUSAN R. MAKIN, PHD, ATR-RCAT, AKA DOCSUSAN

www.DocSusan.com
HEART THERAPY AT LARGE, THERAPISTE DE COEUR ET EN ARTS, SANS FRONTIERS

Susan R. Makin

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INTERNATIONAL SPOTLIGHT — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

Recommendations: If you can’t get support locally, or from expected sources, approach other communities (and countries) or go on-line, and pursue alternatives like the International Art Therapy Organization (IATO). Don’t let politics or personalities dampen enthusiasm. Favor reciprocity and harmony over competitiveness and limited perspectives.

None of my accomplishments would be possible without my faithful Poodle Pal companions, Lev (black mini, aged 13) and Sage (champagne toy, aged 10): co-therapists, studio assistants, and editors.


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six students and provides a rich training opportunity to work with diverse clientele and a knowledgeable dynamic team of therapists – much of who are creative art therapists!

Since its founding 19 years ago, Expression LaSalle’s reputation has grown considerably within the Montreal mental health network. Each year we gain respect and recognition among our network partners for our distinctive and innovative creative arts therapy programs. The Centre is now synonymous to a safe haven for individuals as they manage their psychological and emotional difficulties through the use of different artistic processes. Today the majority of our programs use creative processes as a primary mode of communication with the goal to help people reach a greater wellbeing and better equip themselves to live in the community with their mental health problems.

Taking part in an art therapy group is empowering and meaningful. Our members feel less isolated and establish important bonds. They improve their self-esteem and increase their independence. They express and work through tough emotions and manage difficulties associated to psychiatric malaises such as bi-polar disorder, depression, suicidal ideation and sexual abuse. Art therapy can make a huge difference in the lives of individuals who are suffering with severe and persistent mental health problems. As the director and art therapist of Expression LaSalle, I am committed to helping our members reintegrate into the community, prevent hospitalizations and pursue activities such as contributing to family life, volunteering, completing studies, and returning to work.

For more information on Expression LaSalle, you may visit our website at www.expressionlasalletherapies.ca.

Ms. Olivier is a graduate of Concordia University Art Therapy Program, the only Canadian graduate art therapy program recognized by the American Art Therapy Association. She is a professional member of the Association des art-thérapeutes du Québec (ATPQ), as well as a credentialed professional member of the American Art Therapy Association (A.T.R.). She received an Honorary Life Membership to the ATPQ in 2008; in recognition of her many years of service to the Quebec art therapy community.

Figure 1: A roller coaster of emotions.

Figure 2: Hiding, feeling safe, but alone.

Figure 3: Asking for help when it all gets too much.

Figure 4: A survivor’s prison: Hear, speak and see no evil.