



PRACTICE NOTES

CREATIVE ARTS AND BODY-BASED APPROACHES FOR GROUP WORK WITH SURVIVORS OF TRAUMA

Recently, creative arts and body-base approaches have gained attention in work with persons who have experienced trauma. Research shows that trauma can successfully be treated through both the mind and body (Payne, 2019; van Westrhenen & Fritz, 2014).

Background

Professionals trained in creative arts and body-based approaches view trauma through a neurobiological lens, focusing on the how experiences shape brains and the entire nervous system. When an individual experiences a traumatic event, a cascade of neuro-biological reactions occur, shaping the brain and its circuitry. As a result of these reactions, the bulk of traumatic memories are stored in the right brain as implicit memories — unconscious memories held in the body as affective, somatic based experiences — instead of the left brain as explicit memories — conscious memories that can



CREATIVE ARTS AND BODY-BASED APPROACHES OFFER WAYS IN WHICH INDIVIDUALS RETRIEVE THEIR AFFECTIVE, SOMATIC-BASED MEMORIES THROUGH ENGAGING IN TECHNIQUES THAT AWAKEN THE SENSES.

be narrated and expressed verbally (Homann, 2010). Thus, in order for an individual to address and process their trauma, it is critical that they not only engage with the experiences at the forefront of their memories but also with the traumatic memories not readily accessible (Barton, 2011; Chong, 2015).

Creative arts and body-based approaches offer ways in which individuals can retrieve their affective, somatic-

based memories through engaging in activities that stimulate new neural pathways. These approaches usually include talk group work and art, music, and movement. By using talk, arts, and movement, persons can start the process of integrating their memories, verbal and body-based. Though all programs differ in design and model, many creative arts and body-based approaches include the following steps (Perryman, et al., 2019):

- 1. Grounding Activity** – Participating in a grounding activity, such as deep breathing or guided visualization, helps to regulate the nervous system and develop a sense of safety and comfort.
- 2. Creative Arts or Body-Based Activity** – Engaging in an activity that allows the participants to retrieve memories, tune into their bodies, and attend to their inner sensations. These activities help retrieve memories held at the deepest levels of the brain.
- 3. Corrective Emotional Response** – Processing these memories in a group environment creates a new experience that revises the original picture of the traumatic memory and appears to create neural circuits associated with effective coping.
- 4. New Narrative Established** – The revised memory is essentially the new narrative without the prior emotions attached; the memory can sometimes be verbally stated now.
- 5. Memory Reconsolidation** – Reconsolidation is the process of storing the new altered memory free of the debilitating inner sensations within the brain.



Practice Considerations

There are many ways that child welfare professionals can use information about creative arts and body-based approaches in their practices with minimal additional instruction or training. Below are ways to apply these ideas to child welfare practices.

- » Child welfare practitioners can seek creative arts and body-based services for their clients who are survivors of trauma and have issues coping.
- » If clients are anxious or agitated, child welfare workers can ask them to close their eyes and practice deep breathing or to focus on a happy memory or image. This can take a few minutes. They can breathe and focus with clients.
- » They can engage in conversations focused on the body by helping clients connect their thoughts and feelings to specific body responses. Example questions may be "What happens in your body

when you feel unsafe?" or "How does your body feel right now, now that you are calm?"

- » They can make time in each visit to move the body, whether it is taking a walk with your client or teaching simple relaxation techniques involving the body.

These are simple approaches that require capacities for empathy and relationship building with no special training. Before implementing more advanced and in-depth techniques, advanced training, certification, and licensure are necessary. For example, though the general therapeutic process of creative arts and body-based approaches are presented in these practice notes, group facilitation of these requires a level of competency regarding the basics of trauma, involves the use of body-based techniques often only taught by yoga instructors or dance-movement therapists, and requires training in creative arts approaches.

CASE EXAMPLE

Chelsea is 17-year-old, African American young woman referred to a local body-based group that focuses on mindfulness and trauma-focused yoga for the treatment of trauma, specifically sexual abuse. Chelsea has been an active member of the group for four months.

Chelsea was referred to the program by her case manager after being removed from her home and placed in foster care due to being sexually assaulted by her father for approximately a year and a half. From what she understands, her placement in foster care is relatively permanent, as reunification with her parents is not an option.

In the group, Chelsea often speaks about her academic, professional, and social successes. She maintains good grades, works a part-time job, and has an active social life. She is almost always busy and states that for her, being busy feels good and safe. As a group member, she listens attentively to her peers, offers advice,

and contributes to a positive and therapeutic environment for the group.

Recently, Chelsea has begun to open up about her struggles with trust, specifically with close friendships and intimate relationships. She has reported being physically abused by an ex-partner and regularly betrayed by close friends. Chelsea becomes verbally escalated during conversation regarding romantic relationships and insists that other members of the therapy group be careful. Though Chelsea is wary of getting close to individuals and talks about her lack of trust in others, she frequently comes to the group stating that she has a new love interest or close friend and that they have already become emotionally and physically intimate.

During the first four months of the group, the facilitators worked with Chelsea on listening and trusting what her body is telling her when she is around others. By doing this, Chelsea eventually became attuned to her

body's natural warning signs and was able to identify that when she was around her former partner her body felt "sick." Additionally, Chelsea talked about a new sense of trust in herself and her body, stating that she has control over who she lets into her life.

Have you ever worked with a client like Chelsea? If so, reflect on how you interacted with the client. Were you able to recognize that they experienced stress and trauma in their bodies? Were you able to be supportive? Were you able to find treatment options for them that would deal with the body-mind issues that trauma causes?

Based on the information presented in these notes, would you do or approach anything differently with the client? What are some creative arts and body-based strategies and techniques you could implement with your clients? Are you more likely to seek these kinds of services for your clients?

Summary

Evidence is growing that creative arts and body-based approaches have a significant part to play in helping persons cope with the effects of trauma. Backed by significant neurological evidence on how trauma affects the brain and the entire nervous system, creative arts

and body-based therapies complement traditional trauma treatments by focusing on not only the mind, but also on the body. Knowledge of these approaches can increase effectiveness of child welfare practice.

Reflection Questions

1. Does this information change your perspectives on ways that trauma processing can occur?
2. How can you use this information to inform your practice? What kinds of creative arts or body-based skills, techniques, and strategies can you use with clients as a child welfare professional?
3. How might you explain the reasoning for using creative arts and body-based techniques in your practice to another professional or even to a caregiver?
4. Create a short statement that you might use, including the neurological evidence available in support of creative arts and body-based in treating trauma.

References and Resources

Articles

- Barton, E. (2011). Movement and Mindfulness: A Formative Evaluation of a Dance/Movement and Yoga Therapy Program with Participants Experiencing Severe Mental Illness. *American Journal of Dance Therapy*, 33(2), 157-181.
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Videos

- Gilgun, Jane F. (2019) and the Family Enhancement Center (2019). Healing Motion Creative Arts Therapy Program.

Part 1: The Basics. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QoHYv9gjOaM>

Part 2: Program Components and principles. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=da18VAinJ8Y>

Part 3: Mindful interventions. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITKc-vyit8Y>.

Books

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- King, J. L. (2016). *Art therapy, trauma, and neuroscience: Theoretical and practical perspectives*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis.
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- Rappaport, L. (2013). *Mindfulness and the arts therapies: Theory and practice*. London: Kinsley.
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Organizations

- » American Dance Therapy Association
- » National Coalition of Creative Arts Therapies Association
- » International Association of Yoga Therapists
- » International Expressive Arts Therapy Association

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