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Healing Art

By Keith Frederick • *Altoona Mirror*, May 16, 2010



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Susan Novak, a mental health counselor at Home Nursing Agency and a board-certified art therapist, knows art therapy works for one simple reason -- it worked for her.

After "a series of traumatic brain injuries" in a pair of car accidents, she suffered through eight years of chronic pain and upheaval in her personal life.

"It was through all that and all these things that didn't work, when I couldn't do anything else - couldn't watch TV, read a book, couldn't remember my phone number - that art came back into my life," Novak says. "That helped do a lot of neurological stuff to help with the head injuries, as well as the related depression."

She then went back to school to be-

come an art therapist. She had studied counseling before her accidents.

The American Association of Art Therapy defines the practice as "the therapeutic use of art making, within a professional relationship, by people who experience illness, trauma or challenges in living, and by people who seek personal development."

According to Novak, who works with clients in Cambria, Somerset, Blair and Bedford counties, many kinds of people can benefit from art therapy, from those with mental or physical conditions to those who have dealt with traumatic life experiences like accidents, assaults or veterans dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The art therapy program is another

step in Home Nursing's efforts to offer all sorts of options, according to Joel Zuiker, adult clinical services manager.

"Home Nursing has always been interested in alternative therapies and trying to reach people to help them heal," Zuiker said, noting that hundreds of people have gone through the agency's art therapy program. "It's an alternative, as well as a supplement to traditional therapy."

At Home Nursing - where Novak helped start the art therapy program three years ago - both partial-care patients and outpatients take part in the program. Both individual and group sessions are offered and no amount of art talent is necessary.

"I think one of the biggest misconcep-

tions is that you have to be artistic, which isn't true," Novak said. "In fact, sometimes, artists are more difficult because they are worried about making it perfect and balanced and (colorful)."

In her time at Home Nursing, she has worked with many different kinds of patients and the therapy can be as big a help in dealing with physical problems as it is with resolving mental issues, Novak said.

"It's really useful for people who have a lot of chronic physical conditions," she says. "Art-making itself - even if we're not exploring the meaning (behind the works) - creates a hypnotic state which can reduce pain. An hour of art-making can have the same effect as anti-depressants and anti-anxiety pills, and often that effect can linger for a couple of hours."

The calming effect appeals to Roy Patterson, 41, of Altoona. Patterson, who has bipolar disorder and has dealt with drug and alcohol addiction, has been doing art therapy for about three years.

"It's good to come here because I really can't take the time at home," Patterson says. "I come here and it's something to do. It's an outlet, a way to express (myself)."

Keeping busy is also one of the reasons Judith McKaig, 52, of Hollidaysburg, has gotten so much out of the Home Nursing program.

"It's done a lot for me," McKaig, who has been in the art therapy program since the fall, says. "It's been a release. I've been suffering through empty nest (syndrome) because I raised five kids. Not being able to go out and visit them, you get depressed. So (the art) is a form of release for me. It relaxes me."

For many of the clients in the art therapy program, though, the actual act of creating art helps therapists in diagnosing their deeper problems.

Like with Novak's own traumatic experiences, dealing with emotional issues

can involve unlocking the memories that someone has hidden away.

"I work with veterans, and the art therapy is a key part of working with their PTSD issues, because often the hand remembers what the brain forgets," Novak said. "Because it's external, you don't feel like you have to relive it."

The art itself can also serve as a conduit for a person's emotions to take center stage with no danger to a client's health or safety.

"Some people create images that they destroy," Novak says. "I had a client who created a figure of her attacker in clay and took it home and was running it over with her car in her driveway. Her husband came home and said, 'What are you doing? Get out of the car.' She got out and then he got in and started running over it, too, because he was just as angry at the man who had hurt her."

In those clients who have deeper issues, art therapy can sometimes shed a light on the thoughts and emotions that lie deep below the surface.

"Sometimes you can see signs of psychosis," Novak says. "Someone might not be experiencing reality at all, and that'll begin to come out (in their art). Sometimes they present really well and seem functional."

But it isn't just in cases of psychoses that examining the art helps the patients.

"She's shown us a different way of looking at things," McKaig says. "She'll show us, inside the pictures, what we're feeling inside and why it might not look that way to us."

There is no set time for a patient to take part in art therapy - each stage of therapy is different, depending on the patient. One of Novak's biggest successes came with a patient who was in an emotional crisis and had to be seen often.

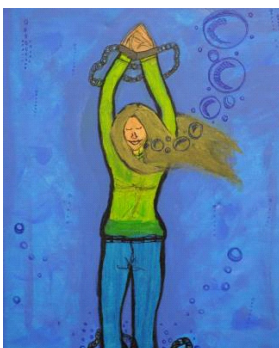
"A veteran I worked with, I saw a complete resolution of his PTSD, which was pretty intense," she says. "He went from the day I met him, where (his at-



titude was) 'I wanna kill everybody' and had been suicidal. Now that was very intense treatment - two weeks solid, all day long."

Not every result is quite so dramatic, she explains, but the progress is right there for the patients to see - in their very own handiwork.

"Sometimes when change is slow or when people are resistant, that's where the art is useful," Novak says. "They say, 'well, gee, are we getting anywhere?,' I can pull out the art and say 'This was your first piece. You can see it's so much healthier now.'"



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