



PHOENIX PLACE

Expressive arts therapy (or, why we love using the creative arts in therapy)

At Phoenix Place, we take an integrative approach to therapy. Our interventions draw from a range of different types of therapy (“therapeutic modalities”), depending on the client’s unique needs, interests, and presenting problem. In the same way that different people have different preferences for learning, or for giving and receiving love, one therapeutic modality may work deeply and powerfully for one person, but not connect at all with another. And that’s OK – we’re all individuals!

All of the techniques we use at Phoenix Place are backed up by a solid base of research. Put simply, we choose what fits best for the individual, and we choose what we know works. Alongside the classic Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and “talk therapy”, which many people are familiar with now, we really love expressive arts therapies. Since they’re a bit less familiar to people, we thought it might be helpful to explain a bit more about them, and why we like them so much.

Important Note: Play Therapy incorporates most of these different subtypes of expressive arts therapy (plus others) as different techniques and tools that the Play Therapist might choose to use. The rationale for each one is the same whether you’re using it with teens and adults, under the title “Expressive Arts Therapy” or whether you’re using it with kids, under the title “Play Therapy”.

Expressive arts therapy is an umbrella term referring to the use of the creative arts in therapy. So that includes things like art, dance, music, writing, sandtrays, and drama.

Traditional therapy is heavy on brain-engagement – thinking, talking, reasoning. This is great sometimes, but we are a lot more than just our brains, and not all of our experiences can be summed up in neat, ordered words. That can be where the creative arts can be incredibly helpful.

All of the arts therapies involve **imagination, creative energy, and an ability to engage emotions physically and directly.** All of them...

- Enable self-expression in literal and symbolic ways.
- Enable the client to make sense of their emotions and experiences, and provide emotional release, reducing stress and tension, and increasing calm and relaxation.
- Are tangible and physical, involving the body in the process. They utilise the senses, which helps to orientate the client in the present, reinforcing a sense of safety, which facilitates the doing of more (and deeper) therapeutic work. Through doing activities and reflecting on them afterwards, the connections between the body and the mind is strengthened.
- Use different parts of the brain, which facilitates integration between the brain’s left and right hemispheres (which in turn, is hugely important for learning emotional regulation).
- Are usually experienced as less confronting than sitting talking directly about a problem can be.

- Enable preverbal or nonverbal experiences to be accessed and worked with.
- Provide images and symbols which can then be used to structure words and thoughts around, and with these, to enter into dialogue with others about them.
- Prompt insight through the process of creation and reflection, which can then lead to intentional change.
- Are often genuinely fun and engaging. Experiencing joy in therapy is a wonderful benefit in and of itself.

We think that's a pretty impressive list of benefits! Now, let's look at a few of the specific modalities that we like to use with our clients (and how and why we use them).

Art – clients use a range of art media (pencils, collage, oil pastels, paints, etc) to construct artworks. The focus is not on the product (i.e. making it aesthetically pleasing) but on the process (i.e. what it is *like* to make it, what it means to you). Even so, art (and writing too) does offer a tangible, lasting product – something that can be looked at, thought about, and discussed not just in the moment but at various points along the journey, providing a record of “Where I was” and “How far I’ve come”.

Clay – clients use clay to make sculptures and structures. They might be directed to make particular sculptures (e.g. “Make a sculpture that represents joy” or “Make you”) or they might just “play” with the clay. Both of these approaches can prompt a discussion on what’s happening for the client, and/or provide a concrete visual that aids in grasping or reflecting upon an abstract idea.

Expressive Writing – journaling, poetry, writing letters and making lists are some of the writing exercises that you might do. Writing enables self-reflection, which facilitates insight into one’s thoughts, behaviours, and problems. Writing can provide emotional release, and a way of processing experiences. Interestingly, research into the use of writing in therapy has found that it improves both emotional and mental health, but also physical health – researchers have identified a range of physical health benefits, including increased immune functioning and improved lung strength.

Music – music therapists operate in a very wide range of ways. At Phoenix Place, we mostly keep it simple, using musical instruments playfully to connect, communicate nonverbally, release emotions, and encourage left-right brain integration. Drumming in particular is a highly regarded treatment modality for trauma, as it is an excellent way to get alternate right-and-left brain activation, which decreases stress, and helps to integrate memory, process emotions, and enable insight to occur.

Sand – clients use figurines (and the sand itself) to construct a picture or story in the sandtray. Sand trays are projective, expressive, and externalising – like other art therapies, they get what is inside, out. Using the language of symbols, and working with both the conscious mind and the unconscious, sandtrays make thoughts tangible, and make concepts concrete. They are also (generally) very soothing to do.

So that is some of the ways that we “do therapy” here at Phoenix Place. If you would like more information, please feel free to check out our Contact page for how to get into contact with us!

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