

ART THERAPY

HEALING THROUGH CREATIVE EXPRESSION

The growth of art therapy in Lebanon will bring benefits as long as it is done right, says therapist Myra Saad.

Quick, what's the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of art therapy? If you're thinking coloring books, you're certainly not alone. Although coloring can relieve stress and help clear your mind, the benefits and the importance of art therapy delve much deeper than the pages of any coloring book.

Art has evolved through the centuries as a form of self-expression and communication. The beginnings of art therapy trace back to the 1940s in America and England. Only recently did it become an officially recognized form of psychotherapy.

So, what exactly is art therapy? It is a form of psychotherapy, aiming to develop self-awareness and healthy strategies to deal with personal challenges. It integrates traditional psychotherapeutic theories and techniques with a unique understanding of the creative process and its ability to aid in the healing process.

According to the American Art Therapy Association, "Art therapy, facilitated by a professional art therapist, effectively supports personal and relational treatment goals as well as community concerns. Art therapy is used to improve cognitive and sensorimotor functions, foster self-esteem and self-awareness, cultivate emotional resilience, promote insight, enhance social skills, reduce and resolve conflicts and distress, and advance societal and ecological change."

Myra Saad is the founder of Artichoke Studio and one of the very few qualified art therapists in Lebanon.

"First and foremost, art therapy provides a safe, nonjudgmental environment where individuals can freely express themselves and build a therapeutic, confidential relationship with the art therapist.

"By reflecting on their work, and with the guidance of the art therapist, they become more self-aware of their

emotional, behavioral and cognitive patterns," she said. "Eventually they feel empowered to explore new ways of dealing with challenges and reaching their goals."

Whether you're suffering from chronic physical or mental illness, passing through a difficult time (divorce, death, separation, stress, any kind of loss or trauma) or simply looking for self-development, this form of self-expression therapy will help awaken your own problem solving capacities and aid in the healing process, said Saad.

What can one expect from an art therapy session? "I personally use a person-centered approach, allowing individuals to lead the pace," Saad said. "In individual sessions, the person can choose to talk or create, to use any materials or ask for some directives. The artmaking can be drawing, collage, claywork, journaling, etc. Sometimes I use a bit of movement, music, guided imagery and writing."

Children and adults alike can benefit from this form of therapy. While children take a spontaneous and playful approach, adults must be frequently reminded that they are in a confidential, nonjudgmental space and that the aesthetics of their work are never judged.

A new concept to Lebanon, art therapy is a steadily growing trend, said Saad. "On the one hand, a lot of people in Lebanon are drawn to trends. Combining 'art' with 'therapy' makes this form of psychotherapy more exotic and less of a taboo, so some people are being more open about it," she said. However, the trend has also caused a rise in self-proclaimed "art therapists" with little to no adequate professional training, which can cause more harm than good, according to Saad.

Also, the use of coloring books has become almost synonymous with art therapy, which is definitely not the case. The AATA website notes that "while the AATA does not discourage the use of coloring books for recreation and self-care, coloring activities must be distinguished from art therapy services provided by a credentialed art therapist."

Presently, there is a growing need for more qualified art therapists in Lebanon and across the MENA region, said Saad. If you, or someone you know are interested in pursuing a career in art therapy, Saad's advice is, "Do it! But do it right." Art therapy should only be administered by a licensed professional who has training in both art and psychology, with extensive graduate-level studies in mental health counseling and specifically in expressive therapies, she said.

As for the future of art therapy in Lebanon, Saad looks forward to seeing it continue to blossom. "I hope to have more qualified art therapists in the country, set up a graduate degree program in expressive therapies in Lebanon and create an association that regulates the practice. I believe my colleagues in the field and I share a similar vision."

By Vivecca Chatila

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But do it right.

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