



WHAT IS **ART THERAPY**?



Art Therapy is a form of psychotherapy that uses a wide range of creative art processes to improve general wellbeing or address mental health issues. It is a stand-alone form of therapy but is based on various psychological and human developmental theories within a psychotherapeutic relationship.

Art therapy can be used to help children, teenagers, adults and the elderly to address a wide range of difficulties, disabilities or diagnoses. These include emotional, behavioural or mental health problems, learning or physical disabilities, neurological conditions and physical illnesses.

Art therapy can help participants to explore emotions, improve self-esteem, manage addictive behaviour, relieve stress, improve symptoms of anxiety and depression, and cope with crisis and challenges in one's day-to-day life.

What is involved with art therapy — what does 'treatment' consist of?

Treatment can be in the form of individual or group meetings in a variety of settings, including private clinic, hospitals, social service centres, schools, rehabilitation facilities, elderly homes, and other community organisations. The emphasis is on the therapeutic process, artistic talent is not necessary for the art therapy to succeed.

At the beginning of the process, it's essential for the therapist to understand the need and expectations of the patient in order to discuss the treatment plan. A therapist will make an assessment depending on the mental and cognitive abilities of the patient.

Participants will be invited to engage in creative activities actively with or without suggestion by the therapist. Meanwhile, the therapist observes without interference or judgment. The understanding and reflection of the process and artwork is part of the treatment where psychological disposition could be constructed. Through finding associations and exploring or understanding a participant's inner thoughts and feelings,



the art process and artwork become a safe outlet to express, examine or integrate what is needed.

Who are art therapists, do they have qualifications; how are these achieved?

A qualified art therapist must have the minimum of a master's degree with a background in both visual arts and psychology. Art therapists need to be knowledgeable in arts and are trained to understand the role that colour, texture, and various art media can play in the therapeutic process. More importantly, they must be educated in psychology, human development and behaviour.

Accredited programmes require trainees undertake significant hours of supervised clinical practice before they can be licensed or registered by the approved institution of each country. The requirement varies from country to country, yet all are strictly guided by ethical standards and scope of practice, and there are post-graduate requirements to maintain the credential or registration. The Hong Kong Association of Art Therapists is the official resource providing relevant information and listed qualified art therapists in Hong Kong.

Is art therapy particularly successful with children, why? Is it common in Hong Kong?


Children benefit from art therapy as the art process allows them to express

non-verbally at a time when their language acquisition and development is not yet flourishing, meaning it is difficult for them to articulate their feelings verbally. The free but structured creative art process can meet their developmental, psychosocial and emotional needs on many levels. Art can help them communicate thoughts and feelings more spontaneously. More importantly, children tend to be more open to creating art, which aligns with the therapeutic arts framework effectively.

The application of creative arts for child development has gained recognition due to increased clinical research in the last decade, but the practice of clinical art therapy for children in the general public is still developing in Hong Kong. There has been an increase in the need for art therapy for children with special education needs (SEN) both at schools and private settings in the past few years.

With the current situation in HK, have you seen an increase in clients, can art therapy help?

At the moment, people in Hong Kong are experiencing a lot of stress, anxiety, change and emotional disturbance that they might struggle to articulate or express verbally. People who were affected by SARS in 2003 may especially find the current situation difficult, acting as a trigger for post-traumatic stress disorder. Art therapy can provide a non-threatening, non-judgmental and tangible space for positive venting and may help transform underlying emotions for positive change.

The creative activities encourage creative thinking, one of the key components in coping with stress. Additionally, there is an increasing amount of scientific evidence that art can enhance brain function. Active engagement in the art process requires concentration and focus on the moment, like meditation, and allows the brain to relax and reduce stress. 

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