



## Picture This: Healing Trauma through Art

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**The creative arts therapies are uniquely effective in the treatment of trauma. Board certified art therapist Erica Curtis, a leader in the field of art therapy, offers reflections on the power of art therapy in addressing trauma.**

“It was like reaching into your insides and pulling them out”, “like a war zone”, “a downward spiral.” These words, from those affected by the recent devastation at Sandy Hook Elementary, are more like an evocative painting than a chronicle of the event. And it is no surprise, given how our brains store and process trauma. Trauma is encoded differently than regular events that can be told like a narrative. Traumatic memory is not inherently verbal. It is felt physically. It is known emotionally. It is re-experienced visually. Yet, to prevent serious mental health issues from taking root, the brain must learn to analyze and understand the trauma as it does other events. As such, there is hope for healing in the sensory and visual experience of art.

Making art makes sense, quite literally. Art can help people make sense of the illogical experience of trauma by serving as a communication tool that is, itself, both visual and sensory. What's more, art therapy\*, the art based and visually informed psychotherapy practice, can harness these qualities of art to help survivors access, observe, and analyze memories that are stored as visual and sensory material. In this way, the targeted use of art (often in combination with the art therapist's knowledge of neurology, cognitive-behavioral intervention, somatic therapies, and more) bridges the visual-sensory realm and the verbal-logical functions of the brain. This aids in the meaning-making that is so important to coping and recovery.

Of course, art-making itself can be an inherently therapeutic experience for children and adults by allowing expression of difficult feelings, fostering support by bringing people together, or providing a soothing experience in an otherwise jarring existence. Art therapy, however, may be indicated when symptoms suggest the body and brain are under stress. In children these may include: repetitive play focused on the event, change in sleep or eating habits, rocking, social withdrawal, decreased interest or enjoyment in play, increased worries or fears, hypervigilance, tantrums, flat affect, irritability, distractibility, or hyperactivity. In this event, an art therapist can intervene with appropriate art directives and media to gently challenge the individual toward recalling the trauma without feeling re-traumatized. More than using art as just a communication or soothing tool, the art therapist can use targeted art-making to stimulate affective experience or cognitive processes when appropriate, identify internal resources, move toward the creation of narratives, reinforce a sense of safety, and temper fear responses that could be triggered during the process.

As declared by so many impacted by the Sandy Hook tragedy (or hurricane Katrina, or 9-11, or car accidents, or abuse): “There are no words.” But there are images and these images can find expression through art, which can lead the way toward healing.

\*Art therapy is a master's level psychotherapy profession that often requires a license or credentials to practice depending on state regulations. To learn more about art therapy, visit the American Art Therapy Association at [www.arttherapy.org](http://www.arttherapy.org).

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