

# Art Therapy: Using the Creative Process for Healing and Hope Among African American Older Adults

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This article provides an introduction to the field of art therapy and the potential it can offer to address the emotional needs of the frail elderly. Two case studies are discussed, and examples of artwork are provided. The case studies and artwork were created under the guidance of an art therapist at a Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) site in an urban African American community. This article explores how art making addresses the specific developmental tasks of the elderly in a culturally competent manner. Included are practical considerations in the choice of art media and directives for working with elderly clients, as well as resources for further information on the use of art in therapy. (*Geriatr Nurs* 2006;27:309-316)

Addressing the emotional needs of frail elderly clients in today's health care environment can be challenging. At times emotional needs can be inadvertently overlooked because of the many physical health problems the client is experiencing. Art therapy is one way to address—respectfully, efficiently and comprehensively—the emotional needs of frail elderly in a culturally competent manner. Art therapy offers healing by providing social connection, the experience of control and the opportunity to both express and manage emotions. It offers hope by facilitating nonverbal communication and providing opportunity to create meaning through life review.

Case studies and artwork gleaned from a Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) serving frail elders in an urban African American community are discussed.

## What is Art Therapy?

Grounded in human developmental theory, psychological theory, and current research in the field, art therapy is “a meeting of the thera-

peutic process and the creative process”<sup>1</sup> (pp. 4–5). The field of art therapy combines the potent resource of art with the creative process to bring healing and hope, thereby helping clients make meaning of their lives. Art making is communication that can be felt, seen, and heard. It is an assertive act, giving the client a measure of control and opening up creative discoveries and possibilities for change.<sup>1-3</sup>

At PACE programs, older adults who are otherwise eligible for nursing home care continue to live in their homes in the community and are provided transportation to a center where they receive comprehensive health services in an integrated team model. Primary health care, including dental, podiatric, nursing, rehabilitative, recreational, and social services, are coordinated by an interdisciplinary team with the client and family financed by Medicare and Medicaid in a capitation payment model.<sup>4</sup> Art therapy, provided individually or in a small group format, has been a component of care at the PACE program described in this article.

## Art Therapy and Older Adults

Art is a concrete living expression of the lives which have created it and thereby a connection to tomorrow.<sup>3</sup> (p. 9)

In their book *Expressive Arts with Elders*, Weisberg and Wilder quoted octogenarian sculptor Edna Eckert: “I think creative people are often long-lived because we are always re-inventing life; what we did yesterday, we create anew tomorrow. Inherent in this process is hope”<sup>3</sup> (p. 25). Art therapy offers a unique opportunity to help elderly clients engage in the creative process to facilitate communication, manage emotions, and engage in the process of life review. The art therapy process offers social connection, opportunity for control and choices, improvement in physical and mental



**Figure 1.** "Colors"

health, and a vehicle for nonverbal assessment. Each of these areas are now discussed.

### **Communication**

Art therapy offers a nonverbal way for individuals to be seen and heard and provides an alternative form of communication for those with language impairment.<sup>3,5</sup> This artwork in [Figure 1](#), ("Colors"), created by a client who experienced a language deficit, reflects nonverbal expression through appropriate choice of materials and the opportunity to experiment with a variety of paint colors. The tangible product created by the client allows others, including staff and family members, to recognize the individual's expressive abilities.

### **Managing Emotions**

Participation in creating art provides a mechanism for portrayal and resolution of emotion. The multisensory experience of art making unleashes a creative process that can energize, stimulate memory, free emotions, and increase activity level.<sup>5-10</sup> Creating art had a calming effect on an agitated client, whose artwork is shown in [Figure 2](#) ("Dots"). This client, diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and agitation, could participate in creating art using paint markers. The structure and repetition of this media enabled her to focus and direct her energy into art making. As a result, she remained calm and felt a sense of pride in the completed artwork.

### **Life Review**

Telling of stories is a value held by African American older adults.<sup>11</sup> African American cli-



**Figure 2.** "Dots"

ents who are facing declines in cognition, health, and ability to communicate can use art as a means to share life stories. Furthermore, expressing oneself through art creation helps people understand the meaning of their lives. This can foster achievement of Erickson's eighth stage of development, that is, ego integrity versus despair, and can also help expand psychological development in this stage.<sup>12</sup> Telling their own stories through art allows clients to share wisdom, leave a legacy, and find meaning in their lives.<sup>12-14</sup> Art therapy creates a safe place for clients to tell their own stories in life review, promoting self-awareness and acceptance of past experience. [Figure 3](#) shows part of a small group timeline project that documented personal as well as national and international events. Sharing similar and common experiences invariably inspires other group members to tell their stories, lending a sense of universality and emotional connection.<sup>6,14,15</sup> The opportunity to reminisce and to have others participate in the reminiscence honors their histories and helps clients find meaning in their lives.

### **Social Connection**

The small-group format of art therapy groups (5 to 7 clients) can help to decrease social isolation and offer connection and support.<sup>3,6,10,15</sup> An art therapy group can provide a safe place for social exchange, personal stories, and the experience of working together. Sharing materials and assisting one another provides the experience of altruism. A client who can only use 1 arm can be helped by another client to open markers or to tape down her paper while she paints. One who can see clearly can help a client

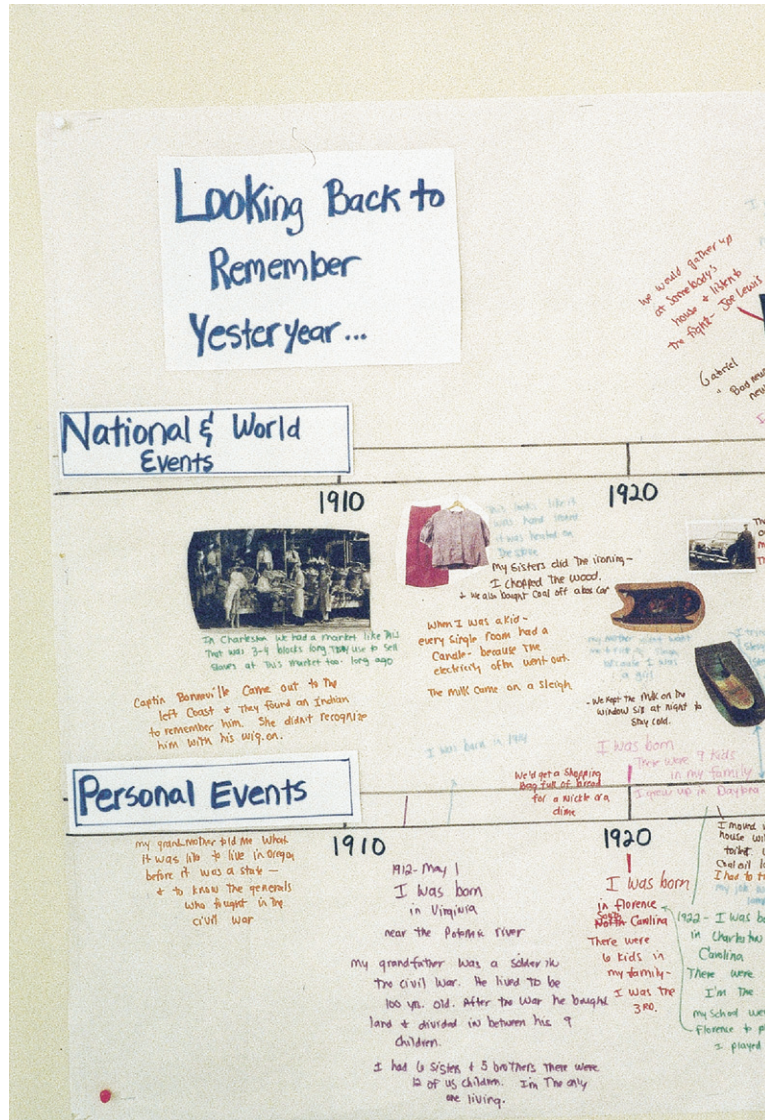


Figure 3. Timeline Project

who is visually impaired. This can help clients realize their strengths and is a reminder that they still have something to give.<sup>16</sup>

### Instilling Hope

Learning new things through art making builds the confidence that one can successfully learn and adjust to new roles required by present circumstances. Sharing wisdom and stories in a small-group format can help integrate past and present circumstances, resulting in a decrease in depression and an increased sense of hope.<sup>1,8,10,16,17</sup>

### Offering Control

Using art in therapy provides the client the opportunity to make decisions, take responsibility, and have control. This is often a profound experience for a population in which much opportunity for control and choice has been lost.<sup>6,10,15-17</sup>

### Improving Physical and Mental Health

A growing body of research suggests that creative activity can to restore, maintain, improve mental and physical health, and increase activity levels.<sup>1,3,7,8,10,16</sup>

The authors of a study of 55 patients undergoing treatment for cancer reported a statistically significant reduction in pain, tiredness, anxiety, and fatigue that patients experienced after undergoing an art therapy session.<sup>7</sup> Many participants commented that participation in art therapy actually gave them energy. In another study of 300 senior citizens, the authors noted that individuals who participated in the art groups made fewer visits to the doctor, fell less often, used less medication, and were less likely to be depressed than the control group and also experienced an increased sense of well-being.<sup>17</sup>

### Providing Assessment Opportunities

In addition to the artwork itself observing and assessing the process of creating art can provide a nonverbal avenue for assessing cognitive and developmental deficits.<sup>18</sup> Equally important, whether through taking the risk to try to learn something new or rekindling an interest from the past, art making can help the individual, and the staff or family, recognize his or her available strengths and resources that often could not have been uncovered in any other way.<sup>1,6,9,10,13,15,16</sup>

The continuity of aging theory espouses that individuals incorporate lifetime coping strategies to adapt to changes in later years.<sup>19</sup> Art therapy is an adjunct that can be used to support coping skills when an older person faces loss of independence, loss of choices, or loss of health. Individuals with dementia, who may have lost verbal skills can express their feelings through use of bright colors and tactile interaction with painting materials. Art therapy can facilitate use of successful coping skills that have been accumulated throughout an older adult's life by enabling the expression of satisfaction in group work as well as individual self-reliance as the art is produced and shared with a community. The opportunity to support other group members can help clients identify and use their own strengths. Working together on a group project, such as a mural, can link people together, giving a sense of ownership and belonging (Figure 4, group artwork). The artwork is a visual reminder for participants that they can still accomplish and learn new things despite limited mobility or cognition.



Figure 4. Group Artwork

### Challenges to Art Therapy and Tricks of the Trade to Overcome Them

Because art making can tap into emotions at a very deep level, the client's defenses must be protected through careful choice of media and structure of art task.<sup>1,16</sup> An art task or media that provides insufficient structure can result in frustration, regression, and further agitation on the part of the client. Structured media is easy to control and allows for controlled expression of affect and correction of mistakes. Graphite pencils are such a medium. Less structured media can be messy and difficult to control but allow for emotional expression, as with the use of paint or clay. A client who feels like she is losing control may grow anxious if given clay but may do well, successfully managing her anxiety, when using a pencil and stencils.

Art tasks need to use clients' strengths to provide success in art making. Whereas some clients respond well to a multistep task, such as painting and rinsing the brush between colors, other clients need an approach that requires only one step, such as receiving a paintbrush already dipped in paint. For some clients, having choices is invigorating. For others, having choices is immobilizing, and limiting their choices facilitates their successful participation. Some clients are capable of abstraction and imaginative play. For these clients, appropriate questions can elicit stories, poetry, and increased affect and energy. Group stories and poetry (Table 1) can be created in response to a shared experience or artwork. Sometimes talking about the art they created helps clients to verbalize, tell their stories, and share memories. At other times, clients cannot verbalize about

## Table 1. Group Poem

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### Windy Day in the Fall

You can't see it,  
But you can hear the wind blow, and the nuts fall  
from the trees.

I watch the wind  
moving the bushes back and forth,  
blowing the trees back and forth,  
blowing a branch from a tree down in front of my house,  
blowing a plastic bag up and down.  
(I never saw a plastic bag until I was a grown woman!)

I hear the wind rush by,  
Whistling at my window as I lay in bed at night,  
Rattling the windows until it sounds like  
they will come off The house!

My mother would tell me to put warm clothes on when it  
was windy.

My grandson thanked me for telling him to dress warm.  
My daughter was afraid she would blow away.  
I was afraid I would blow away and thought I should put  
some bricks in my pockets to keep me from blowing  
away!

Now we are inside looking out,  
Watching other people blow by.

—Group poem created by seven LIFE members, November 14, 2003

their artwork, and being asked to do so can result in agitation and frustration.<sup>5,13,15</sup>

Although clients can benefit from any opportunity to create art, there are times when consulting an art therapist is beneficial. Art therapists are graduates of master's degree programs with developed expertise in the use of art in therapy.<sup>16</sup> An art therapist can be a consultant, a team member, or a collaborator. Guidelines for considering when to consult an art therapist are listed on Table 2.

### Practical Considerations

A variety of art supplies can offer a range of structure and expressiveness and need not be expensive. Safety must be considered, and all supplies must be nontoxic. A basic list is provided on Table 3.

The technique of collage using precut magazine pictures from which clients may choose is a structured yet expressive art task. A client who is hesitant to try drawing may be engaged

## Table 2. Consult a Board Certified Art Therapist If

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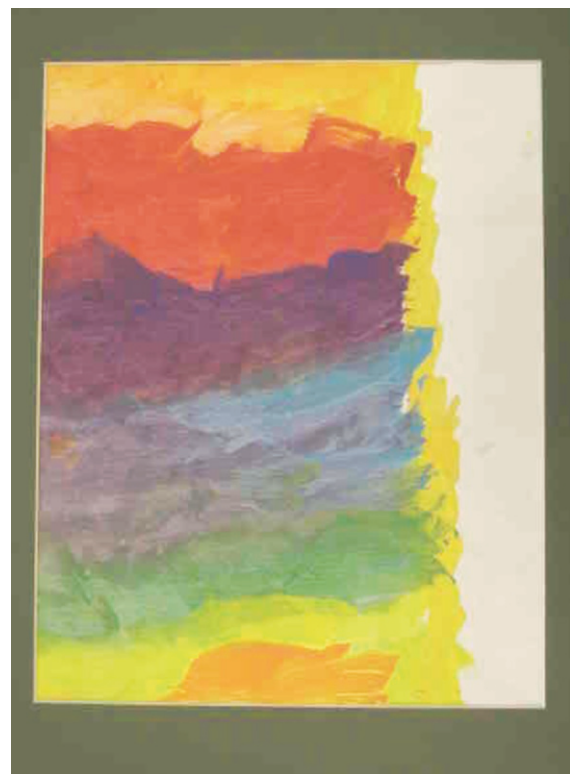
1. you want further information about the therapeutic uses of art.
2. your client experiences intense affect during or after an art process.
3. your client has unresolved trauma or grief.
4. you client has difficulty verbalizing.
5. the verbal ability and the art ability don't seem to match (a minimally communicative client whose artwork is organized and seems to include a great deal of information and detail or an apparently alert and oriented client whose artwork seems bizarre).
6. your client's artwork is disturbing or if you have questions on how to respond to it.
7. your client has physical or cognitive limitations that make it difficult to know how to provide success-oriented media and tasks.

**Table 3.**  
**Basic Art Supplies**

Activity	Supplies
Drawing	Pencils (colored pencils, drawing pencils) Markers (water based both thin and thick) Oil Pastels
Painting	Water colors Tempera paint (liquid or cakes) Brushes (a variety of thicknesses)
Construction	Collage: a variety of papers, precut words, phrases and pictures from magazines Plasticine (oil-based clay) Homemade dough (to bake or air dry) Other Supplies Adhesives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● White glue</li> <li>● Glue sticks</li> <li>● Tapes</li> </ul> Papers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A variety of sizes of drawing and water color paper</li> <li>● A variety of colors of construction paper</li> </ul> Tools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Scissors (safety)</li> </ul>

through collage making. For a client who has lethargy, sifting through pictures can be invigorating and can stimulate memories. When Ms. R was offered art therapy, her invariable response was, “Oh honey, I can’t do art, not today. I don’t feel well.” When encouraged to come and watch others participate, she was willing. While watching other clients look through the collage pictures, she became engaged and created her own picture, proudly telling the following story to the group: “I grew up in Georgia, and I raised eight boys. I raised all my own vegetables and canned them for the winter. We used to milk the cow by hand. My flowers were always beautiful!”

A client with expressive aphasia, Ms. W, created Figure 5. Although aware of what was happening around her, she could not verbalize. Writing was slow and tedious because a stroke left her dominant hand paralyzed. Her sense of frustration was often evident in her outbursts and crying. Ms. W. was given paint because of the expressive nature of the media. When it became apparent that she wanted more choices, she was given many colors to choose from. She used each color, and with some reinforcement, she learned to clean her



**Figure 5.** “Untitled”

brush between colors and filled page after page with color. As she finished each painting, she carefully lifted it up for everyone in the group to admire. Her pride and joy was evident, in her body language as well as in her paintings. She used paint as an alternative to verbal communication.

Attention span and physical abilities of the individual and the environment need careful consideration. Tasks need to be success oriented but with enough challenge that there is reward for a task well done. If a client cannot do the task, it is more useful to give different tasks rather than do it for them. Clear instructions need to be given, keeping in mind that many art supplies are new to clients.

## Two Case Studies

Ms. J. was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. She perseverated on the dominant obsessive story of the events surrounding her husband's death. She had to leave the home she loved, moving to a new city to live with her daughter, and she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, all within a short time span. Over and over, she obsessed on this story, becoming more and more agitated as weeks and months went by.

Creating stories around artwork can help clients grieve as they honor significant people in their lives who have passed away. This often brings closure and healing. It is imperative, however, that professionals watch for and prevent dominant obsessive stories in reminiscence. Ms. J. could not cognitively process the grief and loss she had experienced. Through art therapy, she was assisted to create a story about her life using structured art materials (stencils, pencil drawings, and collage pictures) that allowed for maximum control. She told of her family, her pride in her children, her relationship with her father whom loved her very much, her loving husband, and the beautiful rose bushes she grew. What she talked about was included in the book, as was the artwork she had created. In focusing on her strengths and her happy and proud memories, she created a book that she could share with her family. The book could bring back those memories whenever she looked at it, providing a calming influence and a sense of pride in the knowledge that her life had meaning.

Ms. E. had a diagnosis of depression. With little motivation, she was losing her physical capabilities because of her lethargy. She frequently spoke of her mother and how much she missed her. In individual art therapy sessions, she created a memory book. Ms. E. was cognitively able to process the loss she felt, and creating the book helped her move through grief and honor her mother and other people she had lost. She brought in pictures of her mother and family members, which were photocopied and added to the book. She looked through magazines and found pictures of foods her mother cooked and taught her to cook. She found pictures to remind her of fun times she had had. Her book moved through memories of her mother, to memories of others she had lost, to the good times she had. The book ended with pages about her—pictures of her when she was younger. "Isn't that a beautiful picture? Aren't I beautiful?" She would say. There were also pages about what she could do well. The book gave her a tangible object to show others, which she did many times. Each time she showed another person and retold the story, she was honoring her mother, working through her own grief, reinforcing her own strengths, and reflecting on the meaning in her life.

## Conclusion

When effectively incorporated into their program, art therapy can help clients cope with the challenges that aging brings. Art therapy is a nonpharmacological, nonmedical intervention that can have a direct impact on the wellness of the elderly. As can be seen in the case studies and the artwork of the elderly African American clients in this PACE program, despite a variety of limitations, they were quite capable of using art materials and the creative process and benefited from the experience.

Although many clients benefit from the opportunity to create art, a board certified art therapist can bring highly developed expertise in the use of art in therapy and can become an integral member of the treatment team to help meet the emotional needs of the clients in a creative, flexible, innovative, and cost-effective way. An art therapist can work with other care providers as a consultant, collaborator, cotherapist, or researcher. Additional information on art therapy and ways to locate an art therapist in your area is available in [Table 4](#).

## Table 4. Additional Resources

1. The American Art Therapy Association: [www.arttherapy.org](http://www.arttherapy.org). Resources and contacts for using art in therapy.
2. Elders Share the Arts: [www.elderssharethearts.org](http://www.elderssharethearts.org). Technical assistance and training materials for developing community-based intergenerational arts programs.
3. National Center for Creative Aging (NCCA): [www.creativeaging.org](http://www.creativeaging.org). Dedicated to fostering an understanding of the relationship between creative expression and the quality of life of older people. Provides training education and resources.
4. National Coalition of Creative Arts Therapies Association (NCCATA): [www.nccata.org](http://www.nccata.org). Dedicated to the advancement of the arts as therapeutic modalities, including art, dance/movement, drama, music, poetry, and psychodrama therapies.

Art therapy can help facilitate communication, manage emotions, and provide an opportunity for life review. It can offer social connection and provides choices and control. It can bring about improved mental and physical health and offers a vehicle for nonverbal assessment. Perhaps most important, art therapy makes it possible for the staff and the family to see the client through the lens of their own life story and gain a glimpse into the core person, to see beyond their limitations to the strengths and beauty.

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