

NHS Tayside

Learning Disability Service

An Introduction to Art Therapy

For Carers and Staff

Art Therapy Department
Craigmill Skill Centre
Strathmartine Hospital
Dundee DD3 0PG

What is art therapy?

Art Therapy is a form of psychological therapy in which the making of art work (paintings, drawings, clay modelling, etc.) and reflecting on this in the presence of the art therapist is the main means of communication. It is not necessary to have any artistic skill whatsoever to benefit from art therapy.

Through making visual images or simply by using the art materials, it is often possible to express thoughts and feelings that are difficult to put into words. This can lead to 'seeing' things more clearly or in new ways. People are often surprised by this and it leads to the possibility of exploring more creative alternatives through the art work, within the safety of a supportive therapeutic relationship.

Pictures are not 'interpreted' or judged by the art therapist but accepted as a communication which has meaning for their creator. The art therapist will not tell people what to paint or make but will support them in whatever needs to be expressed.

Painful or confusing feelings, frightening or traumatic experiences can gradually be explored, supported by the art therapist, at a pace that is tolerable and under control. This helps to reduce the effect that such feelings can have on feelings of well being.

What sort of service do people get?

Art therapy appointments are usually for a weekly group or individual session. People come to art therapy for an agreed period of time which will be negotiated. Usually this will start with some assessment sessions before the client and the art therapist decide if a longer period of therapy would be helpful. Ideally therapy will come to an end when the client and the therapist agree he/she has got the most out of it that they can. Sometimes therapy ends when a client leaves the service or residential unit.

How do people get referred to art therapy?

Usually people are referred to art therapy by their keyworker, their doctor or another member of the healthcare team, who feels it will be helpful. The person making the referral will write to the art therapist, saying why they think it would help, and the therapist will then arrange to meet them and discuss this. People can also refer themselves to art therapy but it is very important that their keyworker or doctor knows that this is happening.

Will art therapy sessions be private?

All art work done in therapy is treated as confidential, in the same way as any other medical or health treatment. Work will be kept safely by the art therapist and at the end of therapy client and therapist can decide, after discussion, what to do with it. The therapist will discuss confidentiality at the start of therapy and explain the guidelines by which they work.

What is an Art Therapist?

An art therapist is a highly trained healthcare professional. S/he will be a qualified and experienced artist, with a degree in art or a related field. She/he will have worked in education, health or social services before undergoing a two year post-graduate training in Art Therapy.

All art therapists practising in the NHS must be Registered with the Health Professions Council (HPC). This is a legal requirement and means they have completed their training satisfactorily and have to follow the codes of conduct and ethics laid down by the HPC and also have to ensure that they keep their professional skills up to date.

Art Therapists practice, in accordance with the requirements of the HPC and their professional body, the British Association of Art Therapists, to provide the best available care and treatment.

If you want to check that an Art Therapist is registered with HPC, you can do this on their website: www.hpc-uk.org

If you want to know any more about Art Therapy or to discuss anything mentioned on this information sheet, please feel free to ask the art therapy service.

Current staff in the Learning Disability Service are:

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