

Preface

One of my earliest childhood recollections is of a reparative experience involving the arts and imagination. My maternal grandmother had just died and it was the first time I lost a close and beloved relative. My father somehow sensed that his little girl needed something more than comforting words to help her heal from this loss. He let me use leftover house paint and a wall in our unfinished basement to create whatever I wanted. I used those paints to cover that wall with images of birds, animals, and the dense woods in back of our Connecticut home. I also remember simply taking the brushes and moving the paint rhythmically across the surface, sometimes while listening to music on the radio. After school each day and on weekends, I looked forward to spending time alone with what became a canvas for expressing feelings while dancing to favorite songs.

I never forgot this experience and many others involving the healing capacity of the arts during childhood and adolescence. I always returned to drawing, painting, dance, theater, and music as ways to untangle my emotions and restore a sense of aliveness when experiencing distress or loss. These moments eventually led me to want to become an artist and to study the visual arts and theater in college. But I always carried the belief that the arts were more than an exhibition, recital, or performance. I recognized that imagination and play had another, larger purpose, because when engaged in creative experiences I was able to transcend crises more easily.

Later, when I pursued a doctorate in psychology, it was natural for me to want to continue my quest to understand just how and why the arts and imagination were reparative. In graduate school I bumped up against prevailing “talking cure” approaches that continue to be the dominant ways

of treating traumatic stress. Language is, of course, a necessary means of communication, but it is only an approximation of our experiences when it comes to articulating distress. Ultimately, words never quite convey just how the brain and body experience trauma. Sooner or later, they inevitably fail us when it comes to feelings and sensations of anxiety, terror, dissociation, and loss of pleasure in living that come with unresolved trauma's aftermath. Long before the talking cure became a "thing," humans turned to arts-based expression as a way of transforming difficulties when confronted by crisis, tragedy, or loss. As a species we have been turning to the healing rhythms and synchrony of the arts to confront and resolve distress for thousands of years. These actions emerged not only as individual forms of reparation, but also through social engagement, capitalizing on connection with others and community as agents of healing. In recent years, nonverbal approaches, including an emphasis on the body's response to trauma, have emerged as accepted and effective methods to address and resolve traumatic stress. Some of these approaches, like neurofeedback and reprocessing protocols, focus on literally changing the brain's perceptions and responses to traumatic memories and reactions. Others are more somatically based and emphasize the recognition and transformation of the body's response to trauma.

Despite this increase in recognition of the role of nonverbal and implicit communications in the treatment of trauma, expressive arts therapy—the integrative use of movement, music, sound, art, improvisation, theater, creative writing, and play—has often been left out of the array of recognized psychotherapeutic approaches to traumatic stress. One reason for this derives from the marginalization of the arts themselves within modern society; their impact on quality of life, mental health, and general wellness is often misunderstood or devalued. Science is now providing the evidence for what humans have always known, making it increasingly plausible to explain just why the expressive arts may be uniquely effective when it comes to addressing traumatic stress.

WHY INCORPORATE EXPRESSIVE ARTS IN YOUR WORK?

The primary intention of this book is to describe the psychotherapeutic benefits of expressive arts therapy in work with trauma. It also explains key frameworks and approaches that all practitioners can apply to their work with traumatized individuals to help them actively address overwhelming reactions and harness the power of the arts, play, and imagination for health and well-being. When speaking to audiences about how to apply expressive arts therapy with children, adults, and families, I often ask them to consider these questions: "What if you could actually enhance your current approach to helping individuals with traumatic stress? What

if you could introduce them to approaches that support self-regulation and assist them in experiencing the body's response to trauma in a safe manner? What if you could help individuals learn and practice these skills in playful and enlivening ways? And what if you could help them to use imagination to create new, reparative narratives that transform the traumatic memories that reside in both mind and body?"

Expressive arts therapy is a circumscribed form of psychotherapy grounded in arts-based methodology and "bottom-up" approaches that capitalize on the sensory-based qualities of movement, music and sound, visual arts, dramatic enactment, and other forms of creative communication. However, expressive arts therapy is also "valued added" when combined with effective approaches therapists already use to successfully effect change. These include verbal forms of psychotherapy, somatically based models, mindfulness practices, and even brain-based methods involving reprocessing and neurofeedback. If you are a psychotherapist using one or more of these approaches, this book is an invitation to begin to integrate drawing, movement, music, creative writing, improvisation, and play in your work. These expressive methods will enhance your relationship with your clients and teach them sensory-based approaches that support affect regulation and a sense of safety. These approaches will also help both children and adults identify their bodies' responses to distress, transform trauma-laden stories into resilient narratives, and relearn how to experience pleasure and aliveness once again. Even if you have had minimal arts experience, I hope you will be convinced that these approaches are powerful means of communication that capture not only the brain's explicit imprint of traumatic stress, but also the body's implicit experience that does not translate easily through words alone.

If you are an art therapist, dance/movement therapist, music therapist, or drama therapist, you may already have many of the foundational skills described in this book. But you may not have considered how you can strengthen your approach by strategically including other art forms in your work, ones that you may not have considered, such as drawing, movement, sound, improvisation, play, and storytelling. It is this integrative experience that can make a difference in clients' ability to more quickly and effectively address traumatic stress and engage their own healing processes. For expressive arts therapists, I hope this book becomes a framework for arts-based approaches to traumatic stress that are based not only in neurobiology, but also in our growing understanding of culturally relevant healing practices that are found only in the arts.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

The first three chapters of this book provide an overview of major concepts and frameworks. Chapter 1 explains the origins of expressive arts therapy

and its long history as a form of trauma reparation and integration and provides eight key reasons to integrate expressive approaches within psychotherapy. Chapter 2 reviews trauma-informed frameworks, including the role of adverse events, historical and intergenerational trauma, and social justice. It also outlines the basic principles of trauma-informed expressive arts therapy and a four-part culturally relevant model for the arts as healing practices. Chapter 3 explains how the expressive arts can be used to address trauma through a brain-body framework and how to apply a bottom-up or top-down approach to trauma intervention.

Subsequent chapters describe how to integrate expressive arts therapy into psychotherapeutic practice with children, adults, families, and groups. Because expressive arts add a unique dynamic to trauma work, Chapter 4 addresses how they can be used to develop and support safe, resonant, and reparative relationships. Chapters 5 and 6 explain how specific arts-based approaches can enhance an internalized sense of safety and the ability to self-regulate and stabilize trauma reactions. Chapter 7 provides multiple strategies for applying expressive methods to working with the body and helping individuals safely identify traumatic stress in their bodies. Strategies for unpacking trauma narratives are explained in detail in Chapter 8, including how stories are told not only through verbal communication, but also through movement, imagery, and other arts-based expressions. Chapter 9 covers the role of resilience in trauma work and how expressive arts provide unique opportunities to support an internal sense of mastery and competence necessary to overcome distress. Finally, Chapter 10 takes on the topic of meaning making, a critical element in trauma recovery, and explains how expressive arts therapy develops and supports imagination in the healing process.

If you work with traumatized children, adults, families, or communities, you probably know that the individuals you see in your agency or practice often struggle with communicating their experiences through talk alone. You may also recognize that they need action-oriented, participatory, and safe experiences that address immobilizing hyperactivation or dissociation and withdrawal. Effective therapists appreciate and support both their clients' styles of communication as well as strategies that help bring out the best in their clients within the psychotherapeutic relationship. I hope the concepts and practices described in this book help your clients safely express the impact of trauma on their lives and support them in actively mobilizing their own resources to repair, restore, and recover.