The Benefits of Creative Therapy for Bipolar Disorder

by FLISS BAKER

Creative Therapy for Bipolar Disorder

I can’t tell you the value of art therapy to my recovery. Back in 2008 my workplace paid for me to have private medical treatment for my bipolar disorder. I was in and out of hospital four times that year. I received a timetable on admittance but I didn’t participate in anything initially due the severity of my illness. I reverted to basics focusing on eating, sleeping and taking medication but once I was at a level of stability to interact with others and focus on activities I was encouraged to get involved. 450 million people experience mental disorders around the world and I believe involvement in art therapies could be beneficial to all.

My Creative Therapy

There was a range of therapies available. Twice a week we had art therapy and about eight patients would gather in an art room full of color, paintings, crayons, art brushes and a paint splattered sink. Sometimes I sat there with my brain bursting with creative ideas. Our art therapist would guide us with inspirational images or themes but somehow whatever filled my head found its way onto paper. Other days I struggled to think of anything and the art therapist would talk to me and coax ideas based on my thoughts and feelings. Painting was a release. It was like turning a tap on and my artwork was the gush of water escaping, giving my head space to reflect. The art therapist always asked us towards the end what our creations meant and I often found myself exploring deep ideals about my happiness, pain, family, relationships and although it could be difficult for those thoughts to surface, I always felt relieved and left the room holding something I had created. It felt good.

Here are some examples of the artwork I produced. It’s interesting how the images reflect how changeable my moods were. At the time I was rapid cycling between mania and suicidal depression:

Jason's Experience With Art Therapy

I made some amazing friends in hospital and one person in particular was a man called Jason who was also experiencing his first major bipolar episode. He was older than me and very protective. I felt safe with him. Jason excelled at art. He used the same black pens every time and created intricate, enthralling and interesting pictures that reflected the light and shade of his moods. Some were haunting with very dark themes but every creation told a story and I loved to stare at them. He is now an accomplished artist regularly showcasing his work all over England. When asked how he feels about his artwork, he emphasizes the importance of art therapy and how it positively affected his life:

"I draw to clear my head. I have bipolar disorder and it shapes my life. Art helps me to manage my illness, it is an absolute necessity. If I was offered life without bipolar I would turn it down. It is who I am and without it there would be no art work. I started drawing while in hospital four years ago. Before this first admission my head was a ticking time bomb. I thought my life was normal. I thought the way I conducted myself and viewed others was normal. Once in hospital I unraveled, unable to cope as my illness worsened. I was introduced to different therapies and found that art helped me the most. It allowed me to focus, emptying my head of all the bad thoughts

and visions weighing me down. I haven't stopped drawing since."

Here is an example of his artwork:

Types of Creative Therapy

There are of course many other expressive therapies including, music, drama, dance, movement and creative writing. I experienced most and loved all. In music therapy our therapist would bring in a stereo with a selection of CDs. Each of us would pick our favorite music tracks and listen to them. After a couple of weeks I asked to use my iPod with the speakers and played a moving, classical track that always made me feel emotional. It is easy to forget the beauty of such sounds and how they can evoke strong feelings when you are overwhelmed by an illness. The music interrupted our ruminating, negative thoughts and it was an escape from our daily struggles. For that hour we just listened and were transported into different worlds.

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Creative Writing Was the Breakthrough Therapy for Me

I looked forward to creative writing the most. I reconnected with something that felt so natural and my words flowed with ease. I wrote poetry in minutes that captured my feelings and I was often taken on unexpected journeys. I'd always written imaginative stories from a young age and in later years studied English Literature. I loved to read, absorb and analyse. Through living a stressful life and spiraling into depression, I had simply forgotten my love for it. Writing is now the light of my life and is the only way I can truly express myself. I now use my writing to advocate mental health, reduce stigma and inspire others. It is incredibly rewarding and helps me focus on managing my own mental health. Creative writing saved my life and provided me with a vocation that now shapes my life.

So What Is the Objective of Creative Therapies?

They are useful to anyone, not just those experiencing mental ill health. They allow someone to express their thoughts and feelings unique to them. Some connect with visual activity whereas others feel more physical activities are effective. The key objectives encourage self-expression, active participation, using the imagination and connecting with the mind and body. Discussion is encouraged to assess problems, challenges and how they can be overcome. It is not about drawing out raw emotion and asking people to experience traumatic memories. Instead, it is about enhancing that person's understanding of themselves and enabling them to resolve issues in their head. It is interesting with my poetry that even when I wrote a dark poem, full of depressive and negative thoughts, I somehow managed to write a hopeful ending. I found I came to conclusions that motivated me to make changes. I used to read my poetry over and over and as the words were there in black and white they always resonated and gave me strength.

The Development of Art Therapy

Arts alongside medical treatment emerged in the 1800's and 1900's alongside the development of psychiatry. Creative therapies became widely recognized during the 1930's and 40's and it was recognized that self-expression through non-verbal methods might be helpful for those struggling with mental ill health. Dr Adolf Meyer was a major influence and was regarded as one of the founders of occupational therapy in the USA. In 1895 his wife worked as a social worker and introduced regular activities into a mental institution in the state of Massachusetts so that:

"A pleasure in achievement, a real pleasure in the use and activity of one's hands and muscles and a happy appreciation of time began to be used as incentives in the management of our patients." - "Occupational Therapy and Mental Health" by Jennifer Creek, Lesley Lougher

It was identified that patients with mental health problems responded to activities they could accomplish and as a result their self-esteem increased. It was recognized that creative therapies had a positive effect on the health and wellbeing of patients. We know that in order to maintain our mental health we must build emotional resilience and having a skill, being able to problem solve, socialize and participate in physical activity helps with this. Creative therapies can give a person a purpose and develop self-worth and value. Instead of being a high flying career girl, chasing perfectionism and never feeling good enough, I realized my purpose was to be a good person, caring for others, a daughter, a sister, an auntie and an advocate for mental health. Those are the things that motivate me to get up in the morning.

Fully Recommended

I am a true supporter of creative therapies. They are proven to be extremely effective and I have experienced this first hand. I needed encouragement to interact with others and I needed confidence to feel self-worth. I can’t describe the feeling when you write or listen to music or create a piece of artwork. No matter how small your efforts are, you have been part of something, you have tried to rationalize your thoughts and you can walk away feeling as though you have accomplished something. From feeling like a ‘nobody’, creative therapies can help you feel like a ‘somebody’ and this is invaluable in the management of our mental health and wellbeing.