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## ART THERAPY: AN APPROACH TO WORKING WITH SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVORS

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Because sexual abuse is a recurring problem in our culture, it is likely that counselors and educators will encounter people who have been victimized by this type of abuse. Although there are a variety of therapeutic approaches for working with survivors, art therapy is one that may be less threatening. The purpose of this pilot study was to determine the effectiveness of art therapy in raising levels of self-esteem in a group of sexual abuse survivors. Specifically, the following questions will be addressed: Will the use of art therapy significantly raise a survivor's level of self-esteem? What aspects of self-esteem will be affected (personal, social, general)? What qualitative changes, if any, will take place in the group? The pilot study emerged from research on art therapy in group settings and the use of art therapy in raising self-esteem.

### Group Work With Sexual Abuse Survivors

Corder (1990) and her colleagues conducted a pilot study using art therapy in conjunction with play therapy with a group of child survivors. Eight sexually abused girls, ranging in age from six to nine, met for 20 group sessions that lasted five months. The focus was on cognitive relabeling of the experience and development of self-esteem. The group started with the sexual abuse coloring books that explored fantasy and reality situations faced by sexually abused children. Interviews with parents, teachers and social workers were used to measure changes in the group. The researchers reported fewer sleep disturbances,

more compliant behavior and more assertive verbalization. Although the study took some interesting and creative approaches to working with the survivors, changes made by the participants were not quantitatively measured.

Powell and Faherty (1990) designed a 20-session treatment plan for sexually abused girls that combined group therapy and art therapy. The main goal of the plan was to strengthen the participant's ego. Self-portraits, puppet play, role play and drawing perpetrators were just a few of the exercises listed by the authors. Although some artwork was presented, most of the article was spent delineating the goals and plans for each session. Only qualitative outcomes were discussed. "The combination of the creative arts therapies and group process promotes positive, empowering, and dramatically corrective resolutions in the treatment of sexually abused girls" (Powell & Faherty, 1990, p. 47).

Spring (1985) used drawing as a method for working with sexually abused, chemically dependent women. Fourteen women, ranging in age from 19 to 55 years, had admitted problems with alcohol and drugs. Spring found that the women would draw disembodied faces, bodies of water and single red flowers. There was a consensus among the women in the group that red flowers symbolized love and beauty; that people symbolized the need for relationships and longing for family; and that water symbolized drinking alcohol, nurturing, peacefulness and relaxation (p. 14). No agreement was reached about the disembodied faces or lack of pupils. Spring saw two repeat-

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ing symbols in the artwork of sexual abuse survivors: eyes and wedges. The higher the level of post-traumatic stress, the greater the frequency of eyes and wedges. As with Spring's work, a large body of the literature on sexual abuse examines common themes in the work of survivors. As the focus of this study is on self-esteem, it is beyond the scope of this research to examine sexual abuse indicators. The reader is encouraged to examine the following authors for additional details on sexual abuse indicators: Burgess and Hartman, 1993; Jones, 1989; Kelly, 1984; Malchiodi, 1990; Riordan and Verdel, 1991; Sadowski and Loesch, 1993; Sidun and Rosenthal, 1987. The next section presents information on the use of art therapy in raising self-esteem.

#### Art Therapy and Self-Esteem

Within the umbrella topic of self-concept (identity) is the most researched subject of self-esteem. Although this term has a variety of definitions, for the purposes of this study self-esteem refers to self-evaluation and having a strong appreciation of one's self (Franklin, 1992). Coopersmith (1967) attributed characteristics such as the ability to direct behavior, make decisions and take risks as components of self-esteem. One may ask, how does high self-esteem differ from low self-esteem? Elevated self-esteem is marked by trust in one's personal abilities and developing an attitude of self-worth (Franklin, 1992; Penrod, 1983). Lack of empowerment, feelings of worthlessness and depression are often evident in people with low self-esteem (Forward & Buck, 1989). Basically, shame is equated with low self-esteem whereas pride relates to high self-esteem. Sexual abuse survivors characteristically suffer from low self-esteem (Oates & Forrest, 1985). Dysfunctional relationships and shame negatively impact self-esteem:

Unacknowledged shame almost always evolves into anger and, ultimately, rage and violence. The mask of anger skillfully covers the felt shame. Strategies to manage anger and acknowledge shame, both strongly avoided emotions, are key elements in developing self-esteem. (Franklin, 1992, p. 81)

There are a variety of methods for elevating an individual's self-esteem. Assertiveness training and developing one's sense of empowerment are some strategies for improvement (Mecca, Smelser & Vas-

concellos, 1989). One procedure for developing a sense of empowerment is expression through art: "Allowing clients to create their own images and participate in their unfolding contributes to the theme of empowerment" (Franklin, 1992, p. 80). According to Franklin, empowerment ensues from the art-making process:

To create something and ultimately confront that creation, even if it represents traumatic material, allows one to reabsorb the event in a restructured form. Viewing these self-directed visual solutions demonstrates that internal chaos can be formed and redefined often without overwhelming the client. Self mastery, empowerment and assertiveness become possible as the ego recognizes victory over once elusive and frightening internal forces. (p. 80)

Also at a general level, the mode of art expressiveness can be considered a paralleling of Freire's (1971) methods. He found, working with devalued and low self-esteem groups (Minkler & Cox, 1980), that a crucial method was the decoding of emotional themes that included drawings by the participants depicting their relationships with their oppressors. In fact, in his work with Brazilian workers, Freire presented a series of examples of drawings used to elicit the themes of oppression and barriers to empowerment. This would suggest that the group method can be considered generic and cross-cultural as a means of deriving the thoughts and feelings of almost any group of persons experiencing psychological difficulties (Freire, 1971). Artwork then appears as an effective method for working through feelings of shame, anger and other strong emotions. By viewing the art product, old patterns can be redefined and new attitudes can develop that may lead to elevated self-esteem and higher levels of psychological development.

Singer (1980) agreed with Kramer (1971) that the creative process can be a means for integrating conflict as well as fostering self-awareness and personal growth. Malchiodi (1990) noted that art expression can be used to reduce sources of guilt (or shame) and increase self-esteem. Intervention through art is even utilized by teachers who attempt to elevate the self-esteem of their students (Omizo & Omizo, 1988). Omizo & Omizo (1989) examined children's self-esteem using group art therapy. The researchers noted that Hawaiians who are poverty-stricken with low-paying jobs, and lower levels of education, reportedly

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