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The Power of Creativity in Healing

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Self-awareness is a foundational element of both mental and spiritual health. At times we find we are just going through the motions of everyday life. When on autopilot, we are not always conscious of the choices we make, how we respond to others, or the negative thoughts that occupy our minds.

In real terms, this might mean praying without confidence or intention, hurting a colleague's feelings, or abusing food or a substance to manage anxiety or sleeplessness. Choosing to look at what

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is underneath our thoughts, feelings, and actions requires courage and forms the basis for an authentic relationship with God, self, and others.

Fear can also drive us to hide our real selves, so we smile when we are sad or ignore a family member when angry. The self we often share with others may only be a small portion of who we really are. When we become well-practiced at sharing only our external mask

we may lose touch with the fearfully, wonderfully made being created in God's image (Psalm 139:14).

Art therapy is one tool that helps us gain insight into our personality, motivations, and behaviors. The focus is on the individual expressing his or her inner world. It is introspective. The art makes visible what is unseen or unacknowledged. Creativity can lead to greater self-awareness, helping us perceive the world in new ways, find hidden patterns, and make connections between seemingly unrelated experiences.

By engaging our imagination, we can learn to take risks, ignore lingering doubts, and face our fears. Creativity's therapeutic value lies in its ability to bypass the patterns of intellectualization and rationalization that undermine healthy thinking and decision-making.

Foundations of Art Therapy

Art therapy encourages people to convey and understand emotions through artistic expression such as collage, painting, sculpting, or poetry. At Saint Luke Institute, this specialized therapy offers each client a permanent and tangible record of their experience. As a primarily non-verbal intervention,

art therapy allows images to present themselves and open the door to thoughts, feelings, and memories previously unexpressed, thus opening a path to verbal expression. These visual or sensory images accessed through a creative process support the expression of suppressed experiences for which words are inadequate (Naumberg, 1987).

A range of materials are used for creative expression, but two mainstays are collage and mask making.

Collages create a picture from seemingly disparate published images. They are an introduction to art therapy and provide an opportunity for creative problem-solving by fully activating the logical and creative sides of the brain. The artist has control of the process with support from peers and the art therapist. This sense of control is important as a client becomes acclimated to residential treatment. Clients are often surprised when their selected imagery moves emotions or experiences from the unconscious to the conscious.

Mask making brings order to chaotic thoughts, feelings, and experiences and serves as a container for expression. Through the mask, the client artist acknowledges how he presents himself to others compared to how he feels on

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Case Study **Sister Cecilia**

Sister Cecilia was raised in a small Polish town but often felt like an outsider as the only girl of nine children. Her father regularly drank to excess and was emotionally and verbally abusive. Her mother cowered from her husband's anger and did not intervene for the children. Bullied in school, Sister Cecilia again felt like an outsider of little worth. As she had learned not to depend on her parents, so she also distrusted other people. This wariness eventually affected her relationships with community members and co-workers, leading to frequent angry outbursts, biting comments, and attempts to control people and situations.

. . . art therapy helped her safely voice her challenging feelings, thoughts, and experiences.

As a child, Sister Cecilia visited the nuns at her church, with whom she felt affirmed, to escape family tensions and bullying. She flourished in this spotlight and went on to attend the university, where she built friendships and had academic success. Responding to God's call, she entered the convent after graduation. During initial formation, her anxiety increased, and her self-esteem plummeted when she heard her formators' guidance as criticism. Despite these issues, she professed final vows and enjoyed her work as a nurse at the order's hospital. She returned to school, earning a degree in social work, and began working as a hospice counselor.

Sister Cecilia felt rewarded by her work with hospice patients and their families. Positive feedback from her patients increased her self-esteem.

However, the hospital staff had a different response to her. They resented Sister Cecilia when she challenged the quality of their patient care and publicly criticized the staff. Angered by her interference, the staff asked for her removal. Instead of taking this permanent action, Sister Cecilia's superior counseled her about her interference and negative exchanges with the staff.

In the short term, Sister Cecilia responded to the feedback and tried to adjust her exchanges with coworkers and community members, but the problems resurfaced as she grieved a patient and family member's death. This led to her reassignment to an independent hospice facility. Unfortunately, Sister Cecilia's superior received new complaints about her interactions with others. A more significant intervention was needed.

A New Beginning

The Mother Superior recommended an evaluation at Saint Luke Institute in the United States in response to Sister Cecilia's difficulties with interpersonal relationships. Sister Cecilia felt concerned about travelling outside of her homeland but was relieved to leave the conflict of community life. She hoped that this opportunity would lead to understanding her impatience and irritation. She knew of other sisters who had been referred to Saint Luke Institute; they returned to community life with an inner calm and spoke positively of their experience. She wondered if the same could be true for her.

When she arrived at Saint Luke Institute, a team of clinicians listened to Sister Cecilia's personal history and completed clinical, psychological, and



SLI client made masks

spiritual assessments. These provided the team with a full picture of Sister Cecilia's life experiences and a deeper understanding of her needs. The evaluation team concluded that the women's residential program (Talitha Life) would best support Sister Cecilia as she addressed past wounds.

The Shift

Sister Cecilia loved art, but she questioned art as a form of therapy. She discovered that her worry lessened as her art began to speak for her, especially as she was initially uncomfortable conveying her thoughts and feelings in English. During one session, she expressed her self-image through a mask; it was blank on the outside with a big smile on the inside.

As she shared her mask with her peers, they questioned the mask's message and her attitude within the

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Sister Cecilia *continued*

group. They voiced their fear of her harsh comments and her reluctance to fully engage in the group process. Sister Cecilia revealed to her primary therapist how hurt she felt by the feedback. As they explored her hurt feelings together, the therapist helped her reflect on how their response paralleled the comments from her community members and coworkers.

Gradually, as she poured her energy into the art therapy sessions, Sister Cecilia's attitude changed. Her irritation, mistrust, and anger began to subside,

and she gained the self-awareness to accept her peers' constructive feedback, recognize that it was not connected to previous wounds, and offer feedback with kind assertiveness. Sister Cecilia realized how art therapy helped her safely voice her challenging feelings, thoughts, and experiences. With the clinical team's approval, she began individual art therapy.

The art therapist planned individual sessions to address Sister Cecilia's self-criticism, need for control, and anger. On a weekly basis Sister Cecilia was

asked to identify positive actions and thoughts that increased her self-worth. To prepare for discharge, Sister Cecilia created a collage reflecting her hopes for her return to community identifying the recovery tools best suited to support her healthy reintegration into community life.

For confidentiality, reasons, names, identifying data, and other details of treatment have been altered.

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the inside. Masks are frequently shared with the primary therapist and often serve as a starting point for individual and group therapy sessions.

Stages of Change in Art Therapy

Clients often express an initial resistance to art therapy, as they may lack experience with painting or collage making and feel uncomfortable. Many clients protest, "I can't draw," or "I'm not an artist." Gradually, this initial reluctance yields to an exploration of life experiences, such as parental alcoholism or divorce, and hurtful incidents, such as childhood bullying or peer rejection.

Throughout the art therapy process a client's knowledge base increases as she shares the meaning behind her creative

projects and receives both critical feedback and affirmation from peers. As clients begin to relate to each other's experiences, closer bonds are formed within the group. In time, clients connect their reactions to current life situations and how these interactions relate to foundational life experiences.

As this awareness develops, clients become leaders in art and other therapy groups, serving as a role model to new members, thus perpetuating the circle of healing. The clinical team may recommend individual art therapy to support this deeper exploration of issues. Through group or individual art therapy many clients discover creativity as an essential tool for self-care. In preparing for discharge, clients

formulate a Continuing Care Plan with their therapist that articulates several strategies and concrete actions for maintaining health after residential treatment. Ultimately, Saint Luke Institute clients are empowered to maintain their recovery and health using tools such as art, mindfulness, prayer, and 12-step programs.

Naumberg, M. (1987). *Dynamically Oriented Art Therapy: Its Principles and Practices*. Chicago, IL: Magnolia Street Publishers.

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Worthy of the Call

November 1, All Saints' Day, allows Catholics, indeed all Christians, to reflect upon the men and women who have preceded us in the Christian life. Saints are ordinary people, who, born into this world of sin and confusion, heard the call of Jesus, and followed his example.

While this definition may seem simple, it is not without demands. For example, we all know the formula for losing weight: eat less, exercise more. If it were easy, there would be no “diet” business. If it were easy, all of our BMIs (body mass index) would be in the healthy range! Being a Saint requires

an openness to God’s voice, the mental discipline to choose the right path, and a courageous heart to follow God’s will even in the darkest moments.

Remembering the canonized Saints throughout the ages can help us reflect on the saints in our midst. This living communion of saints can spur us to deeper worship and greater service to others. Our connectedness as Christians strengthens each one of us to “live in a manner worthy of the call” we have received “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through

the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3).

When reduced to their essential elements, Gospel values are often and rightly seen as foundational principles—as simple—but, never easy.

All Saints Prayer

Father, All-Powerful and ever-living God,
today we rejoice in the holy men and women of every time and place.
May their prayers bring us your forgiveness and love.
We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Liturgy of the Hours

Annual Benefit Snapshot

The Saint Luke Institute Annual Benefit, held virtually this year, raises over \$300,000 to support the men and women we serve. In accepting the Saint Luke Award during the Virtual Benefit, Archbishop Broglio thanked Saint Luke Institute for its ministry. He said, “. . . In more than one instance, the intervention of the Institute staff has enabled a priest serving in the Archdiocese to be able to

return to his ministry. That intervention was priceless and enabled effective ministry to hundreds of others.”

Help us continue this critical ministry. We have achieved 77 percent of our goal to date and need your donation today to meet the needs of our clients.

View the Benefit

Go to SLI.org/VirtualBenefit.



Your Generosity at Work

FY'19 Service Expenses

\$511,518—Psychological Evaluations
\$355,958—Outpatient Treatment
\$231,345—Education and Outreach

Let's Reach Our Goal

SLI.org/donate/Annual-Benefit



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