

# **The Ripple Effect in the Expressive Therapies: A Theory of Change Explored Through Case Studies**

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**Abstract:** The expressive arts therapies use the arts to facilitate growth and healing and to create social change for both individuals and communities. Expressive arts therapists are certified or credentialed therapists who are specialists in using the arts (or one specific artistic medium) as therapy. In this article, the authors describe theories of how the expressive therapies cause personal and social change and explain why the arts are uniquely poised to produce such change. They also present the metaphor of a ripple to describe the effects of such change as it spreads from the individual to that individual's inter-personal relationships, and to that individual's many communities. In this metaphor, it is the art that is the figurative pebble causing the ripples of change, growth, and healing. Four narratives are presented from the United States, Israel, and Canada, giving an international look at ripples caused by use of art therapy, dance/movement therapy, and music therapy. In each of these narratives, the authors explain how the relational process of the expressive arts therapies provided an opportunity for clients to utilize their own creative abilities to explore their world, to produce a tangible artifact of that exploration, and to be the seed of social change via the artistic process.

**Keywords:** art therapy, dance/movement therapy, expressive arts therapies, healing, music therapy, ripple effect, social change

The genesis of this article was a conversation among five expressive arts therapists. We all use the arts to facilitate growth, to promote healing, and to create social change for individuals and communities. During our conversations, we shared our insights about how and why each of our preferred media (visual art, music, and movement) is a powerful tool for therapy. We found that we were describing a similar process: The arts create a ripple of growth that starts with the client and expands out to affect the clients' relationships and communities. We further agreed that the power of the arts in this process was often not recognized outside of the expressive arts therapies. In this paper, we explain what the expressive arts therapies are, and why they are unique in both their ability to cause change or growth in the individual and their ability to affect the wider community.

## **Expressive Arts Therapies**

The expressive arts therapies include art therapy, music therapy, dance/movement therapy, and drama therapy. Expressive arts therapists are certified or credentialed therapists who have been trained in the use of the arts (or one specific artistic medium) as therapy. Since the arts provide a non-verbal access to experiences, thoughts, personal history, and healing, they offer a unique way for clients to deepen their self-knowledge (Allen, 1995). Expressive arts therapists are skilled in using the arts to help people access a deeper understanding of themselves and an increased capacity to learn and grow. As therapists, we use our own art to understand our reactions and deepen our understanding of our clients, thus we also benefit from this non-verbal,

non-linear way of knowing.

Much of the art, movement, and music that we describe here is called “improvisational.” By this, we mean that both the client and therapist are approaching the medium with an openness to paint, move, or create music, as guided by their imagination. The improvisational aspect implies that there may not be an attempt to paint an accurate picture of what can be seen, to move in a choreographed manner, or to play music off a score. Although expressive arts therapists may use scripted material, Halprin (2002) noted that the power of improvisation is that it offers the opportunity to express feelings that need release, face traumatic events from the past, or feel the pure joy of our bodies, minds, and spirits in communion. She suggests that in this creative realm a person can try things out, make discoveries, take risks, and do it again if it does not feel right. As a person expands their repertoire of ways to learn, know, and express, he or she is also expanding an ability to play (Halprin, 2002).

### **Creativity and Play at the Center**

Play is a central element in much of the work done by expressive arts therapists. Play encourages and permits the exploration of the reality and boundaries of external society and of one's inner world; it is therefore crucial for the development of health and healthy relationships (Chavez-Eakle, Eakle, & Cruz-Fuentes, 2012). According to Winnicott (2012), it is in playing that a child or adult can be creative, and it is only while in the non-purposive state of creative self-exploration that a person can grow or discover the self. Moreover, suggested Knill (2005), since creativity is tied to the development of the imagination, creativity can be a tool to liberate one from the limitations of analytic thought and functional logic, encouraging and allowing an expanded understanding of what is possible. Knill suggested that experiences in creativity and play may result in a person becoming a more active participant in life, feeling less alone, and recognizing available choices and possibilities. In this way, the creativity can lead a person to become less of a victim of circumstances.

Throughout history there have been instances when individuals were stripped from all personal belongings, rights, and dignity, yet have found a way to be creative in some form. Frankl (1959), who wrote about his horrific experiences in the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II, suggested that creativity can emerge even when we think it is not possible. The barren concentration camp was devoid of creativity; Frankl was seen as less than human and treated barbarically. Yet, even there, Frankl was able to connect to aesthetic pleasure. Years after the war, he remembered and described a moment when he saw a beautiful flower and took in every part of that flower, its perfection, and grace. Without anyone knowing or forbidding him to do so, he was able to engage with the creative source. Frankl credited this engagement with giving him the will to survive.

Pioneering art therapist Allen (1995) noted that many individuals who are disconnected from their soul become sick in some way. Creativity, she said, is the path to restore one's connection to the soul. Indeed, Rogers (1993) argued that all individuals have not simply a desire, but a deep need to fulfill their creative capacities. A reconnection to the innate human impulse for creation allows one to access the energy of the foundational life force that is constantly moving in us and

around us. Through creativity, one develops a capacity to tolerate tension and learns how to integrate new insights; eventually this leads to the release of static or constricting forms that block the healthy and creative flow of life energy, the very flow that makes change possible (Halprin, 2002).

Although the connection of the creative arts to the soul may be abstract, the connection to our senses is more concrete. The creative arts give us opportunities to use all parts of our brain: painting provides a visual manifestation of the inner world; music allows one to listen to oneself and others; and drama and movement allow the acting out of or moving through an experience. Furthermore, each art form accesses various parts of one's conscious, unconscious, and physical planes, providing access to a greater, more complete understanding of oneself (Rogers, 1993). As such, the arts begin an intra-personal ripple of witnessing, awareness, and transformation.

### **The Ripple of Change**

The actions, and thus the growth and health of any individual, will affect the larger communities of which that individual is a part. As Holland (2014) argues, social systems such as communities cannot be isolated; when one part of the system is changed, the entire system changes. Because the expressive arts can be shared with and witnessed by others, they are particularly potent in creating such a ripple through a social system. In the field of music therapy, Pavlicevic et al. (2013) noted that when music therapy is conducted in nursing care settings, the music has a “temporal, social and physical contagiousness” (p. 660), which does not stay limited to the client-therapist relationship. They found that the music therapy helped the patients increase their own verbal and non-verbal communication, and then, because it could be heard in the space, it rippled out to affect the patients' relationships with their caregivers. Eventually the music therapy work was drifting “around the entire social and physical space” (p. 674). The music did not stay constrained to a single time or place, but instead became part of the daily context of the nursing facility. This example from the literature described the ripple effect on three levels: an intra-personal level occurred when the patients increased their attention and communication as a result of the music therapy; an inter-personal level occurred when the music was heard in the space, thereby engaging the care-givers and affecting the relationships with the patients; and a cross-community level occurred as the music affected the whole nursing facility. These levels are described in more detail below.

#### *Intra-personal*

Many expressive therapists (Boxill & Chase, 2007; Halprin, 2002; Johnson, 1982; Knill, 2005, McNiff, 2014) have described the intra-personal awakening of a client. Regarding the expressive therapies in general, Knill (2005) suggested that the arts provide a doorway into the unknown, as unconscious forces are tapped to create an artistic expression of one's inner world. Such expressions in verbal and non-verbal media create avenues to alleviate one from distress, to penetrate barriers to the soul, to create new thinking and behavioral possibilities, and to develop self-efficacy and resilience, all in the process of emotional growth (Knill, 2005). Knill challenged traditional pathology-based theories by suggesting that the unconscious, rather than being the source of disorder, actually contains the seed that can begin the ripple of individual

psychic growth.

Therapists in each of the individual creative arts therapies have described similar processes. Movement therapist Halprin (2002) posited that movement is the primary language of the body, and therefore that an individual's psychic history is revealed in his or her movements. Expressing ourselves in movement can bring us to revelations of whatever resides in our body—memories, feelings of despair, confusion, fear, anger, or joy. Halprin claimed that blocking the energy from one's creative source can cause an inward collapse and descent into depression or anxiety. She suggested that conversely, opening up the creative channel can restore access to the unconscious and to the interior world of the intuitive self, allowing one's thinking mind to flow freely, to meander, and to stumble upon the material that wants to emerge.

While movement may reveal history, drama provides a means to revisit moments. Through play, action, or reliving those moments, drama gives a tool with which one can move through and resolve inner conflicts or blockages that stem from different life stages. Drama therapist Johnson (1982) suggested that the overall goal of drama therapy is to increase the range of an individual's expression and responses to the outside world. For a person to revisit moments and situations armed with a new repertoire of responses can be transformational; it may lead to resolved inner conflicts and increased interaction.

If drama therapy provides increased expression, Boxill and Chase (2007) suggested that music therapy might provide increased awareness. They described “A Continuum of Awareness” (p. 97) in which the music therapist first works to contact the individual through music. This contact may itself cause a greater intra-personal awareness for the client, described by Evans (2007) as “...coherence between the person and some aspect of his or her experience” (p. 94). This intra-personal awareness, or awakening, transforms the client's awareness; eventually a new piece of self is recognized and integrated. The therapist gradually works to bring the client's conscious awareness along the continuum to greater awareness, to expression, and eventually to purposeful outer action (Boxill & Chase, 2007). In this case, it is the music that first awakens the client and then causes growth in an outward direction.

McNiff (2014) stated that art-making can be a way for all people to become more aware of their own experience in the present moment; this can help one understand, accept, and transform an experience. The resulting artifact has additional value because the creator and others can observe it. Thus, small creative acts may spread to other aspects of one's life, and can then stimulate “a larger contagion in social experience” (McNiff, 2014, p. 41). As others witness the art, and the effects of the art spread beyond the individual, the phenomenon enters the inter-personal realm.

### *Inter-Personal*

In a therapeutic relationship, the therapist may be the first to experience an individual's art. McNiff (2014), a pioneering art therapist, suggested that a key role of the therapist in the client-therapist relationship is that of an active, supportive witness. Through non-judgmental witnessing, the therapist holds a safe, creative space where clients can explore, express, and understand themselves and their relationships. McNiff stated that the presence of such a witness

establishes a partnership that enables people to do things they would not have done if alone. The therapist/witness becomes a supportive anchor allowing the client to experiment and ultimately reconnect with Self. That inter-personal relationship may then model or encourage healthy relationships with others (McNiff, 2014).

Such interactions can develop through degrees of improvisational forms in all art modalities. Movement therapist Marian Chace used techniques in group work that encouraged each individual to first increase awareness of self and then gradually interact with others as part of a greater whole (Chace, Sandel, Chaiklin, & Lohn, 1993). Chace's techniques included detailed stages in group development: in the warm up phase, the therapist and group members acknowledged each participant's individual way of movement through verbal and kinesthetic mirroring; in the development stage the group members explored and shared expressions with each other; in the final stage they prepared to separate and move into their own communities.

The very act of creating together involves a shared experience, therefore affecting inter-personal relationships. Overy and Molnar-Szakacs (2009) found that when people create music together they experience being together on a measurable neurological level. Overy and Molnar-Szakacs suggested that music becomes a “shared affective experience” (para. 5) because music activates mirror neurons, those brain cells that fire not only when a person performs an action, but also when the person sees someone else do the same action. Thus, they concluded, music is not simply a passive auditory stimulus; instead, it is an activity that communicates social and affective information, in the moment of creation. Indeed, thanks to increased knowledge of mirror neurons, we understand that this is likely the case in many of the arts: the very act of creating together causes inter-personal ripples as people witness each other creating.

### *Cross-Community*

Various arts disciplines are increasingly being used in relational contexts in couples, family therapy, and group therapy (Gerson, 2001; Kaplan, 2007; Riley, 2004; Wiener, 2010). Kaplan described community-based expressive arts groups that address social issues, such as homelessness, violence, and trauma: the groups create art to explore the impact of these issues on the individuals and communities who are affected. Because community art projects can then be witnessed by those outside of the community, such art has a significant impact: the art carries messages about the social issues and realities being faced by that community. This starts a ripple of awareness and empathy that spreads to other communities, lending support to and awareness of the need to address these social justice issues.

Rogers (1993) emphasized that it is essential for individuals to access the realm of self-understanding so that they can put forth energy into the world to understand others. The feminist movement in the United States during the 1960s presented the notion that “the personal is political,” suggesting that one's actions in personal life are affected by and reflected in the socio-political context in which that person lives (Sajani, 2012). Individual change is intrinsically linked to social change. Sajani (2012) suggested that the expressive therapies encourage “response/ability, the ability to respond amidst suffering and against oppression” (p.191). In order to promote growth, expressive therapists must help clients examine how the

narratives (or stereotypes, beliefs and tacit knowledge) held in the larger society affect their own narratives about themselves (Hadley, 2013). According to Sajani, expressive arts therapists are uniquely able to provide a platform for communicating human experience, and for causing individual changes that will ripple out into a larger socio-political community. If the dominant narratives in society are too narrow or restricting to a person, Halprin (2002) suggested that art can be used to understand those narratives and to create new stories about one's destiny.

Whitehead-Pleaux et al. (2012), in writing about therapists' responses to the LGBTQIA community, reminded therapists to first explore their own biases, and then seek training and supervision, thereby expanding their knowledge and understanding in ever-widening circles. Whitehead-Pleaux et al. suggested that therapists must begin the process of understanding themselves before they can examine the needs, issues, and norms of non-dominant communities. Thus, inward introspection is a necessary step for therapists, just as it is for our clients; not only for personal growth, but also so that therapists can support ripples of community growth. Reflective writing is one way to achieve this introspection; as expressive arts therapists, we find that we also use the arts for our own self-exploration and in our responses to clients.

The above literature describes how the creative arts can be a figurative pebble whose effects cause radiating change at each level: intra-personal, inter-personal, and cross-community. The following narrative case studies further illustrate this. They are drawn from our work in Canada, Israel and the United States, and they include work done with the media we are each trained to use: music, visual art, and movement. (As none of us are drama therapists, we have not included a case study using this medium.) It should be noted that these narrative studies also illustrate how the therapists use their artistic discipline as a way of knowing about and understanding their reactions to the clients. You will read that in the first narrative, the therapist used her own art to hold, understand, and reflect upon Joey's process. In the second narrative, movement was the tool that the therapist used to connect with and respond to Adam. In the third narrative about Alex, the group members and the therapist all responded musically to Alex's poetry in order to amplify, validate, and give it increased meaning for Alex and for the group. In the fourth narrative the therapist did not respond artistically during the group process. In this example, it was later that she engaged in research about her own artistic response to the topic.

Art also can be a way of presenting. The paintings and drawings reproduced in the first narrative, below, were the therapist's responses to the client and reflections on the sessions. She used art as a way of understanding the client and her own practice, and therefore the artwork is part of her narrative. Although music and movement can also be witnessed at the time of creation, it cannot be reproduced in an article as easily as visual art.

All of the clients' identifying information has been altered to protect confidentiality.

### **Narrative One: No Matter How Much He Bends, He Will Not Break**

While working at a community art therapy studio in the Midwestern United States, I received a call from a woman looking for an art therapist to “fix” her 15-year-old son, Joey, who had been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. The woman explained that her son had worked with many

different therapists using different approaches; they had all been unsuccessful. Joey suffered from episodes of extreme rage, in which he would black out, do horrible things, and not remember anything. One time he had choked his mother and pushed her down the stairs in a fit of rage. She was afraid of Joey. At times Joey would hide in the house and his family would not be able to find him for hours. He would also leave home for hours, walking through rain and snow, and not answer his cell phone or tell his parents where he was or where he was going. Joey often isolated himself, had attempted suicide numerous times, and had been arrested for breaking curfew and for theft.

The first moment that I met Joey, I knew he was special. I was expecting to see a large and menacing adolescent but instead met a slender, energetic young man. Joey would not make eye contact at our first meeting as he explored everything in the studio, from the murals painted on the walls to all of the art supplies. He thought art therapy was 'cool' even though he did not really know what it was or what he wanted to work on. Joey did not talk much during our beginning work together. This was challenging for me at times, but I forced myself to sit with the silence and hold the space. Per Joey's request, I created alongside him at every art therapy session. Thus, many of our sessions were spent creating in silence with me positioned slightly staggered across the table from Joey. A large portion of our work involved the witness: me witnessing Joey and his artwork coming to life, or Joey witnessing me and my artwork coming to life. My art provided both a container for the sessions, and a reflection of what was happening in our shared moments.

Joey had an extremely challenging time connecting to self and connecting to others. As our work deepened, Joey shared that he had been adopted from China, a fact that his mother had not mentioned. Joey said that he did not know who his birth parents were, and he would never know, because there were no records. I confirmed the adoption with his mother who also shared that when Joey was born there was cocaine in his system, resulting in numerous cognitive and behavioral deficits.

I went on to meet with Joey once or twice a week for over two years at the community art therapy studio. Joey's mother remained very involved in his treatment and continued to ask me to fix her son. Joey's father also came to the studio a few times with Joey over the course of the two years.

The overarching treatment goals were for Joey to not have any more episodes of destructive rage and for Joey to use art-making as a way to connect with himself, to self-express, and to manage his emotions. When Joey first began art therapy treatment, he would only use the controlled media of pencil and eraser on white drawing paper. He would re-create album covers from his favorite bands and create fictional characters. Joey was not interested in verbally processing his artwork; most of his communication happened non-verbally. He eventually moved on to create on a variety of surfaces and began to use more colorful, fluid, and malleable media such as markers, sharpies, paints, and model clay. His willingness to use more fluid media seemed to mirror emotional growth in other areas.

Some of the images I created during sessions with Joey are shared below; I will not be sharing

any of Joey's artwork as it contains identifying information. My images are my artistic reflections of the sessions. They provided a witness and holding container for Joey, his creations, and the sessions. Much of my imagery portrayed the constant dance of connection between Joey, myself, and our artwork. The studio provided a safe place for Joey to artistically explore and play with connection; I could only hope that he might eventually take some of it outside the studio.

Figure 1 reflects my attempt to connect with Joey, which was no easy feat. I see myself in the pinks, yellows, oranges, and even the purples. I had a constant flow and was attempting to hold the space for Joey to piece himself together. I see Joey in the purple and black: although he was verbally quiet much of the time, he had quite a presence and took up a lot of space.



**Figure 1.** Untitled, M. Hedlund Nelson, 2012, 10" x 7", markers on matte board

Figure 2 was a more playful image. Again, it reflects my attempt to reach out and connect, as demonstrated by the tentacle-like arms coming off of the circles. The more I reached towards Joey with my presence, art-making, and energy, the more he retreated.



**Figure 2.** Untitled, M. Hedlund Nelson, 2010, 8" x 12", markers on drawing paper



Figure 3 captures a repetitive movement using acrylic paints. Before this session, Joey had only created with resistive media that he could readily control, but on this day, Joey decided he would like to experiment with acrylic paints, which are more fluid and harder to control. Thus, this image is a dance and celebration, reflecting my response to Joey's expansion, experimentation, and letting go of control.



**Figure 3.** Untitled, M. Hedlund Nelson, 2010, 10" x 8", acrylic paints on matte board

Figure 4 depicts my response to the tremendous anxiety present in this session. The many pieces in the drawing are pieces of Joey, who had contemplated suicide some days prior to this session. This piece represents the artistic grounding I provided as I held the space and held Joey in his creation.



**Figure 4.** Untitled, M. Hedlund Nelson, 2011, 12" x 8", markers on drawing paper

Figure 5 was a reflection of Joey as he went further in treatment and began developing characters in his artwork. The pieces in black and purple are disconnected and reaching for one another. I intentionally left space in this creation as I energetically left space for Joey at the studio. It was during this time that Joey began to assimilate some of what he learned about himself through the art-making process.



**Figure 5.** Resiliency, M. Hedlund Nelson, 2011, 6" x 12", markers and ink on matte board

Much of the time that I worked with Joey I wondered if anything I was doing was making a difference. I struggled with how much verbal communication I should share during each session; there were many times Joey would not speak unless asked a question. I had to sit with the silence and trust the process, as Joey continued to return to session after session and create. I desired to explore Joey's response to his adoption and help him process any anger or grief he may have had, amongst other things, but I found myself pulling my energy back during the sessions to make space for Joey. He needed a safe place to come and create and to be in connection with himself and another. Although Joey had been let down by the school system, friends, and his birth parents, I never saw him cry over the two years. He never verbally addressed any of his emotions; rather he shared them non-verbally in his artwork. Many of his images were of characters that had weapons and the same slender physique as himself.

Joey's images told a story of who he was in the world and how he viewed the world. Joey shared that he was a 'rockstar' and a drummer, and he greatly connected with old-school rock 'n roll

bands that he idolized and emulated. In early sessions he had re-created album covers in pencil; in later sessions he transitioned to creating characters he developed in colored inks, paints, and model clay. As he progressed in treatment, Joey let go of control more and more, which was evidenced by his media selection. Joey began to tell stories about his characters, who were full of life. His favorite character was Jungo, a strong and powerful half human and half mutant who had no family. Jungo went on to destroy individuals who harmed people, but over time he became more and more connected to others. As treatment progressed, Joey created a wife and a home for Jungo. Jungo no longer fought atrocities by himself, but instead he connected with his community and developed a family of his own. It appeared that Joey was working out his own story through his imagery. As Jungo became more and more comfortable and accepting of who he was, so did Joey. Jungo was incredibly resilient, a half human and a half mutant. He was ridiculed and ostracized by society, much like Joey had been by the public school system and his birth parents. Yet, Jungo grew, found his way, and brought good to his community.

The ripple effect started the moment Joey started coming to treatment. His mother would check in weekly with me, giving me the gift of knowing the influence of the art therapy treatment. After two months, Joey no longer had destructive fits of rage. During the time we worked together, he was not arrested; he joined a few social clubs at school and two different bands; he performed to a live audience for the first time; he obtained his driver's license; and he developed a healthy romantic relationship with a young woman.

I have not worked with Joey for quite some time. Recently, his mother emailed me to share that Joey had started college and was enjoying school. The ripple effect was initiated during our first session, when Joey used a pencil and eraser to add marks to a white piece of drawing paper. He gradually transformed himself, gained a greater understanding of self, learned to express himself more effectively, and changed his behaviors. This rippled out to affect his family, school, and community. Had Joey not engaged in art therapy treatment, he may have gone down a very different path, perhaps ending in death or imprisonment.

The ripple of Joey's growth also affected me. Many of my reflections were contained in the artwork I created during our sessions. Art was my way of knowing Joey, understanding his energy, and holding the space for the sessions, just as it was Joey's way of learning about himself. He taught me a great deal about non-verbal communication, connection, patience, resilience, and trusting the client's process. Joey had not been fixed by art therapy, as one cannot be fixed, but he was able to connect with an inner strength and a resiliency that reminded him time and time again that no matter how much life and circumstances caused him to bend, he would not break.

### **Narrative Two: Dance Movement Therapy in a Youth Obesity Clinic in Israel**

Adam, an 11-year-old adolescent who suffered from obesity, was treated in a youth clinic in an Israeli medical center. His interdisciplinary treatment plan included meetings with a physician-nutritionist and individual expressive therapy sessions. When I first met Adam, his weight was seriously impacting him physically, mentally, and emotionally. He was struggling with his studies and had only a few friends. Adam's parents had a complex relationship. As their

only child, he was subjected to their frequent fights, finding himself in the middle of them while trying to care for his mother. Adam and his mother maintained a close and affective relationship, which was both symbiotic and over-protective. Whereas Adam's mother treated him like a small child, his father was loving but did not know how to manifest his affection.

At the beginning of our sessions Adam spoke very little, mumbling when he did speak. He seemed to lack the skills to express his feelings or thoughts. His clothes were over-sized and he looked like he was drowning in the layers that surrounded his body. In the initial stages of our sessions, Adam sat aloof on a large pillow on a mattress and just looked at the room, reluctant to move or engage in any kind of play. Adam was polite, but unaware of the ways in which one could create a mutual relationship. I felt that he needed to be reassured and be given the time to explore his surroundings while learning how to engage with another.

I began to create our relationship through an invitation to engage in play and movement: I introduced several balls of different sizes, ropes, and sticks. Our connection started as he taught me different games that he wanted us to play together. Gradually Adam asked for my attention and my presence as he began to seek mutual interaction through his games. After a few sessions Adam said, "Now, you choose. What do you like to do?" I found myself being in a role of a big brother, a mentor who could provide him the guidance he lacked. Both our individual and our shared movements allowed him to start recognizing emotions and physical sensations: pleasure, excitement, his heartbeat, and the heat of his own body. He commented out loud that he had never thought of those sensations in relation to his body.

Following this dawning of awareness of himself and his own body, Adam's games increasingly became more physical and aggressive, as he unconsciously reenacted his relationships with his peers. He would vigorously throw pillows and balls at me, and I had to escape from them. As I was attacked by the pillows, I reflected on the ways in which creating relationships by taunting or minimizing the presence of another was part of Adam's learned patterns. The movements caused me to wonder what Adam was re-creating during our sessions—Where and what was he subjected to? Through our interaction and by sharing my reactions about our activities, Adam learned to share his own. As we processed content that surfaced, Adam started to get in touch with his feelings about his social environment. He realized he did not enjoy the company of the friends who were hurting and belittling him. He began to reflect about the way he would have liked to be treated, about his concept of friendships, and about the people he felt he could connect with in light of these realizations.

Through the course of his treatment, Adam started to lose weight, and his physical checkups demonstrated positive physical changes. As he gained awareness of bodily sensations, Adam had begun to connect with his body and to relate to the inner and outer layers of his transformation: "I look at the mirror and I don't recognize myself. My face is thinner and I see someone else, my clothes are too big, my pants are falling... I need new clothes that fit me. But there are two Adams. Inside I don't feel like that."

Every session, Adam would arrive with his mother, her hugging him while he was leaning on her. I started commenting on his leaning, and Adam, who had initially been reluctant to address

any content that related to his family, started to share stories about his childhood. His pain was present in the room, and I could feel the tension in his body. At that time, he started to look for activities that allowed him to express his rage and his strength. He would jump on a trampoline, or he would punch a punching bag and then sit on it. We started to discuss his relationship with his parents and home surroundings while we were moving and playing. Adam expressed his feelings of powerlessness and anger, being in the middle of his bickering parents. Eventually, Adam also recognized feelings of frustration towards his mother who was comforted by his presence and reluctant to let him grow. Adam stated, "I can't decide anything around here. How can I grow up like this?" After I had several discussions with Adam's parents, they became aware that their struggles negatively impacted Adam, and they realized the need to seek counseling. As Adam's parents started their own counseling process and his mother realized that her own difficulties impeded his emotional growth, it appeared that the relationship between her and Adam began to shift.

While changes were occurring in his family circle, Adam, who was initially extremely shy, started to create new friendships. He was surprised to discover that other children liked his company and that his ideas were appreciated when he chose to share them with his peers. As we were in the ending stages of his treatment, Adam entered the room one day.

He said, "I need to tell you two things, I looked at myself in the mirror today and I cried. It is not that I don't recognize myself; it is that I see myself and I am different and I feel different, I feel it. And the other thing is that they put me in this group with a few of my new friends at school."

I asked, "What kind of group?"

"Well, we are together and we do activities together, and talk about what we feel, you know like with you... but in a group. So, one of my friends didn't want to join, he didn't want to talk at all, and I told him 'you should come, you should talk'. I was once different and I didn't talk at all and I was not happy, and if you do this it helps, a lot of things can change."

Adam looked at me and said, "I just had to tell you this."

I was profoundly touched and impressed. Adam had seen the value of our shared work and he was now different than the Adam I had first met. He had grown to be an adolescent who could be in touch with his inner strength, and could communicate his feelings.

This narrative case study provides a vivid example of how the experience of movement initiated a ripple of change. Adam's movement in our sessions revealed his unconscious reality while he was reenacting the way he was being treated by others. As the therapist, I responded to Adam and his movements, and created a connection via movement and play. In this regard, movement was a catalyst for a ripple that started with him reflecting on inner feelings, sensations, and thoughts, and then extended to his relationship with me. The effects of his growth gradually spread to the outer circle of Adam and his family; ultimately this growth affected his relationships with his community of peers and friends.

### **Narrative Three: Cultural Connection Through Lyrics and Flowing Poetry**

“Lyrics and Floetry” (Floetry, 2006) was a weekly music therapy group held on a male psychiatric unit in the Bronx, New York. The group consisted primarily of African American males who had high-functioning schizophrenia and who were in their mid-twenties to early thirties. While the men were required to attend regular music therapy sessions for bonus points toward their conduct report, “Lyrics and Floetry” was an additional group created for patients who enjoyed hip-hop and R&B. The members attending this group had the freedom to express themselves using rap, poetry, and improvised lyrics over contemporary beats. The music therapists were present to support the group musically, encourage lyrical interaction, and facilitate discussion around the lyrics.

Members often portrayed raw, unapologetic emotions through their lyrics. In order to provide grounding and consistency in the flow of music, I often created a melody that reflected the emotional content of the lyrics and a chorus that reflected key words. This also served to support and validate the member who provided the lyrics. I tried to keep the words and melody of the chorus simple enough so that all of the members of the group could sing together. This created support and unity among the group in a powerful, non-verbal medium.

With every session, members became increasingly eager to have their lyrics heard; some of them would come prepared in advance, with lyrics and poems scribbled on ripped notebook paper. The topic of the group members' lyrics varied from past life experiences, hopes of being discharged, future goals, and even the type of women they liked. As they exchanged lyrics, the group members began to strengthen bonds through the shared music that they were creating together. There was a deepening sense of inclusion and belonging for those involved in the weekly lyrical exchange. Yet there was still a bit of bravado and tendency not to reveal too much about sensitive topics.

At one of the sessions during this stage of the group, a patient who I will call Alex came in with a prepared set of lyrics. Alex was an African American patient who was in his early thirties and had a calm disposition. He was staying on a short-term unit, but he had been there for several months. He seldom participated in the regular music therapy groups, as the genres of music used there were often not his preferred style. He did, however, seem interested when the music transitioned to hip-hop or R&B in those groups. He was pleased to be in the “Lyrics and Floetry” group because he was an aspiring rapper who planned to eventually pursue his dreams on a professional level.

The lyrics Alex brought that particular day were a direct reflection of how he felt within the unit. He rapped about 'being an angel with clipped wings' and not being able to 'feast with the big kings.' Other parts of the song reflected his desire to be free. The lyrics implied that he didn't feel as though he belonged in this current situation, that he should be 'feasting' or enjoying his life out of the ward with 'big kings,' or rather, people who were not in the same situation as him. The group processed the meaning of the lyrics after the rap was finished. Every member was engaged in the conversation and they showed support by validating Alex's feelings. In addition to the lyrical analysis, the group continued to process and respond to the lyrics by adding their own

freestyle rap, as I added my own musical reflections. This ordinary rhyme cypher became a platform for these men to reveal their truths, to hear them amplified in the music, and to have them be accepted by others. It seemed to me that members opened up more on that day. I first thought that it was an isolated event, but I soon realized that the group had moved to a deeper level of authenticity.

Alex's introspection played an integral role in this shift in group dynamics. Through self-disclosure and willingness to share authentic lyrics, he began a ripple that prompted other members to take part in the same process. As Alex shared information through lyrics and poetry, other members felt safe to include their own lyrics without feeling judged or scrutinized. The art that we all created in support of and in response to Alex's art could be heard and felt.

Alex started the ripple in the group by first revealing his own truths. I believe that all ripples start similarly—from within. When one is able to express their truths in an authentic way, others may also find it safe to reveal parts about themselves. The members of this group wanted to be heard; like so many of us, they had a deep desire to be accepted. Music provided a unique platform for empowering the members and giving them a shared purpose. This small ripple, which first cultivated cohesion among the group, also helped them to form stronger interpersonal skills outside of the group setting, thus promoting healing in other venues. The members' willingness to provide feedback and support to one another became a group norm, not only during the music therapy session, but also outside of their lyrics and flowing poetry.

#### **Narrative Four: Ripples of Forgiveness in an Art Reflection Group**

In expressive arts group sessions, the insights that are gained during art-making can be witnessed amongst the members. This creates a ripple effect from individual art experience to the whole group, enriching and amplifying the experience for each group member. For this reason I find it profoundly rewarding to facilitate art-making in reflection groups. The art reveals the uniqueness of each person's inner process while providing something visible that can be shared with others.

This narrative case study describes my facilitation of a group that was held in a church in Canada for people who were interested in using art-viewing and art-making as a way to reflect upon the process of forgiveness. The purpose of the group was to facilitate and deepen understanding of what forgiveness is and is not, and to explore the concept of forgiveness spiritually, psychologically, and personally through artistic reflection. Participants in this group were mostly members of the host church; a few were guests. The church was already actively involved in interfaith relations, social justice, and was interested in expression through all of the arts.

Each of the three sessions of the group included: a psychoeducational component about forgiveness that I, as a therapist, provided; a short Bible study that examined scriptural insight on forgiveness that a pastoral co-facilitator provided; and a group discussion about forgiveness. The three sessions were titled as follows: “Be Angry and Sin Not,” “Forgiveness is a Choice,” and “Empathy as a Bridge to Peace.” In the first session participants viewed videos as a tool for examining the impact of injustice; we presented psychoeducational and biblical perspectives on

the role of anger in forgiveness when confronting injustice, and the group discussed what forgiveness is not (i.e. excusing or minimizing an offence). In the second session, one week later, participants were invited to use art-making to process their thoughts and feelings about forgiveness. The art form offered was collage, using papers, paint, light fabrics, and images from a variety of magazines, as this art form is very accessible to anyone regardless of artistic experience. In the final session on the last week, we returned to viewing music videos and then discussed compassion and empathy for the victim, as well as how to work toward re-humanizing the offender through understanding their context. Empathy in forgiveness was the focus of the final session. This included exploring victim and offender identity and examining how offenders have also been victims at times. This was powerfully witnessed in the music video 'Hurt' as performed by Johnny Cash (Leopoldino, 2010). Many participants stated that the video's powerful artistry had a profound effect on their experience of empathy towards offenders. In this session, we reflected on all three sessions by using pastels, markers, and crayons to create drawings that integrated the many components of the experience and information from the sessions.

Art-making was used to process and develop personal understanding of the material presented and was later shared and discussed in the group. To ensure safety and privacy, while everyone was invited to share their artwork and their process in art-making, participants were told that sharing was not mandatory and that they should only share what they wanted to share; participants could still benefit from witnessing the sharing from others. Creating art was not the only way that art impacted the process. Participants said that viewing music videos affected art-making and brought out rich emotional discussion of the topics. The music, lyrical poetry, and visual effects, as well as the opportunity to explore in the visual arts, provided the group with much more than a cognitive exploration of forgiveness.

I was touched by what participants shared with the group, what they had learned by processing content through their own art-making, and how both viewing and creating art affected their awareness and understanding of forgiveness. The art components helped participants internalize and explore the emotional components of forgiving as they created images that expressed inner realizations and showed new insight as to what forgiveness may look like. The group members were able to witness those new insights and realizations as they listened to each other explain the symbolism, metaphors, and meanings in their own art. I noticed how this created a ripple of deeper perspective on what it is to forgive, as members discovered the sensory, emotional, and cognitive layers in each others' art. Some participants appeared to be very moved by the process.

For example, one participant had been intensely engaged in art-making and in witnessing the art of others. I felt the emotional depth of her artistic experience reflected in her facial expression as she showed her art to the group. She chose not to share verbally as it appeared that she was too emotional in the moment to share the meaning with the group. She later explained to me that the art-making had a profound impact on her. She had then taken the art she made in our group to a personal therapy session to work through what the art had illuminated.

Within the group, some members stated that creating with others and hearing about the group members' process had helped them to understand how forgiveness may look in inter-personal



situations that they were working through. Participants found that the act of sharing their art process served to illuminate relational dynamics in their lives and thus provided more clarity in their forgiveness process.

The group's effects extended to a community and social justice level. The reverend of the church where the group was held had attended the first two sessions of the group. In the final week of the group, the church was defaced with swastikas and racial slurs directed at the Black reverend and congregants. A nearby synagogue and a mosque were similarly graffitied with hateful slurs that week. In response, the Reverend joined several other leaders of faith to arrange a peace movement against such hate crimes. Although the Reverend was already an established figure and leading authority on the topic of forgiveness, he gained an insight from our group that he then shared with his congregation: It is not the offence that is being forgiven, as the offence is wrong and unforgivable; rather, it is the offender, a person, who can be forgiven. In this spirit the Reverend planned to visit the offender after court proceedings were completed to offer forgiveness in hopes of extending and fostering mutual empathy through restorative justice.

The group of eleven participants consisted of four men and seven women. A post-group questionnaire/worksheet was given to participants. Results from the questionnaire indicated that when compared with psychoeducation and Bible study alone, art-making was rated slightly higher in providing insight into personal experience of forgiveness on an intra-personal level. Comments from participants during the group discussions indicated that this rippled into inter-personal, relational, and community attitudes, perspectives, and interactions. While the demographics of those involved in this group may indicate that they were already highly motivated, the survey results suggested that there is value in art-making and witnessing for facilitating a deeper understanding of what it is to forgive. The participants indicated that they were highly interested in continued discussion on the topic of forgiveness and in participating in more art exploration encounters.

I had attended workshops on forgiveness prior to this without the inclusion of art-making and found that the addition of art-viewing and at making offered a framework of exploration for the participants that generated more diversified, symbolic, metaphorical, and personal/sensory reflection than did verbal discussion alone. Whereas verbal discussion engaged the cognitive process that brought out emotional content, art-making was a place to explore the emotional content for deeper understanding. The experience of witnessing what happened in this group increased my own interest in pursuing further academic insight into the phenomenon of how art can affect the process of forgiveness. Shortly after the conclusion of this group, I started a separate research project to examine how art affected my own personal process. This group's art-making started a ripple that moved from intra-personal self-understanding, to inter-personal relations, to community impact, and for me, to future academic work.

### **Conclusion**

The five of us find it exciting and enriching that we use a medium that draws upon visual, symbolic, and metaphorical expression, as well as sensory, somatic, and kinesthetic processes. By using the arts, we are providing a uniquely engaging alternate or addition to traditional

therapy that can help our clients and ourselves move beyond cognitive understanding and verbal processing. We have each witnessed the ripple effect of the arts in a variety of contexts, via a variety of the arts modalities. As the above narrative cases describe, visual arts and movement were catalysts of change for Joey and Adam; their growth rippled out to affect their families and friends. The musical arts offered Alex and his peers the opportunity to be heard and accepted, changing the dynamic within their mental health facility, and perhaps providing a platform for being respected and understood beyond that setting. For the forgiveness group, the ripple into issues of social justice was clear: the impact of the art touched the Reverend, his community, other faith-based communities, and perhaps even the perpetrator of a hate crime.

As more information and research about expressive therapies is released, there is an increased interdisciplinary interest in the profound impact that the arts have in therapy, psychoeducation, and social justice. Some of this has reached the popular media. The cover of *National Geographic Magazine* had a lead story that described Walker's healing work, in which she used mask making to help veterans express what they were feeling about their experience of war (Alexander, 2015). ABC evening news gave a report about the critical value of music therapy in Congresswoman Gifford's recovery of her ability to speak after brain injury (Moisse, Woodruff, Hill, & Zak, 2011). Dance and movement therapists are being lauded in the treatment of psychiatric patients (Chace, Sandel, Chaiklin, & Lohn, 1993). Reports of these recent high-profile arts-based treatments have opened conversations about the value of art in other disciplines, such as nursing, pastoral care, and school support. This has also resulted in increased integration of the expressive therapies in various theoretical approaches and counseling applications (Degges-White & Davis, 2011).

The arts offer a different epistemological approach to self-awareness and healing; they give us a different way of knowing ourselves and our clients. Most uniquely in the therapeutic realm, the arts are impactful in creating social change as they provide a way of translating individual and community experiences of the human condition into modalities that can be shared and experienced by others, creating bridges of realization and empathy. As stated by Solzhenitsyn (1970), “... the only substitute for an experience we ourselves have never lived through is art.” In all of the arts there is the capacity to hold the expression of lived experience, transformed for others to see, hear, feel, and experience with the art maker. Being witness to the unfolding of insight through art is not only helpful to the art makers, it is also an honor and privilege for all of us who witness the art and view the revelatory creative process of others.

### **Implications**

The metaphor of a ripple is used in this article to describe the relational process of expressive arts therapies. As described, expressive therapies provide a catalyst for unleashing the clients' creative capacities to explore and ultimately influence their world. Nonetheless, further research is needed to gain insight into the rippling effect caused by the use of expressive arts therapies as the ripple extends from individual circles to the larger community. Additionally, acknowledging the power of the arts as catalysts for improved emotional and mental health in a community context could promote the use of expressive therapies in related disciplines. As other professionals such as psychologists, social workers, and counselors gain greater understanding

of the therapeutic rationale for using the expressive arts therapies and the way they can spark a ripple, the therapeutic disciplines will gain valuable methods and insights regarding the impact of art in facilitating healing processes of health and human relationships.

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