

What is Expressive Arts for Improving Mental Health?

An integrative approach that uses diverse art modalities to promote self-expression, emotional insight, and pathways to healing. Below is a starting point for curiosity and exploration, not an exhaustive list.

Expressive Arts Therapy

is an integrative, multisensory approach that uses creative processes—such as movement, music, visual arts, performance, writing, and play—to support emotional expression, self-awareness, and meaning-making.

- Integrative use of multiple art modalities
- Engages all the senses (e.g. sight, smell, touch, taste, and sound)
- Supports self-expression and emotional understanding
- Supports personal storytelling
- Can be implemented individually or in groups

Art Modalities

Art-based and expressive arts practices draw from a variety of creative forms. These modalities offer multiple entry points for expression and can be used individually or combined to enrich the therapeutic process.

- **Literary:** poetry, narrative, storytelling
- **Visual:** drawing, painting, photography
- **Performance:** theatre, dance, movement
- **Multimedia:** collage, digital storytelling, sound

Mechanisms of Art-Based Interventions

Art-based interventions work through mechanisms that support emotional regulation, connection, exploration, and healing. These processes help individuals translate inner experiences into external forms in a safe, expressive way. Core mechanisms are:

- **Self-Regulation:** grounding, mindfulness, self-care, expanding the window of tolerance
- **Co-Regulation:** fostering connection, safety, and supportive relationships
- **Exploration:** improvisation, curiosity, experimenting with self-expression
- **Restoration:** reclaiming wholeness, empowerment, and internal coherence

“Art is a normal and necessary behavior of human beings, like other common and universal occupations such as talking, working, exercising, playing, socializing, learning, loving, and caring” (Dissanayake, 1995, p. 18).

Dissanayake, E. (1995). *Homo aestheticus: Where art comes from and why*. University of Washington Press.

Expressive Arts Programs: Do's and Don'ts

These guidelines support the safe, inclusive, and empowering facilitation of expressive arts, highlighting best practices, common pitfalls, and a focus on process, meaning-making, and participant autonomy. Use this as a quick reference for sessions.

What Not To Do	Suggested Practice
<p>Impose your own interpretation. <i>"Wow, that's a beautiful red horse!"</i></p>	<p>Be mindful NOT to impose our own interpretation about a participants art creation. It can cause invalidation and embarrassment, instead use gratitude. <i>"Thank you for engaging in the art activity today"</i></p>
<p>Focus on the outcome. <i>"Let's hurry and finish the art piece."</i></p>	<p>Expressive art therapy programs is NOT about the outcome, but the process. Art-making is used as a tool and experience to foster self-expression and reflection. <i>"We have 30 minutes to engage in the art-making process, remember to observe how it is making you feel."</i></p>
<p>Treat it like an art class. <i>"I'm going to show you the proper way to paint."</i></p>	<p>Although expressive art therapy programs use many different art forms, facilitator are NOT art teachers. They can introduce the art-medium, but should not prescribe how it is to be used to create. <i>"Today we will use clay to respond to the question, what does home look and feel like to you?"</i></p>
<p>Expect prior art experience. <i>"Have you done this before?"</i></p>	<p>No one needs to have previous art experience to engage. Expressive art programs are not about art skills, it's about meaning making and self-expression. <i>"Thank you for being willing to engage in this art activity"</i></p>
<p>Stay separate as a facilitator. <i>"I'll just watch while you make art."</i></p>	<p>Facilitators are encouraged to also interact with the art-making process. This challenges hierarchy between facilitator and participant. It demonstrates safety and trust. Showing playfulness is helpful. <i>"Everyone can take a piece of clay and begin squishing it in their hands. How does it make your feel?"</i></p>
<p>Suggest that art will 'heal' someone. <i>"Do you feel healed today?"</i></p>	<p>As facilitators we need to accept that a program may not change someone's life, but it can be a catalyst towards their goal of an improved mental health. Especially for trauma survivors, it is a life long journey. Art is a tool for managing difficult emotions and processing. <i>"How did today's art making make you feel?" "What colour is your mood?"</i></p>