4 Benefits of Art Therapy for People With MS

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Art Therapy for MS

With all the battles people with MS have with depression, brain fog, self-esteem, fear, pain and isolation, how great would it be to discover we have, at our disposal, something to help us counter and cope with all of these things? We do. Better yet, it is not another drug, and it does not have to cost a thing.

What we have at our disposal is art. Through art, we can express any emotion or simply ease our strained spirits at any time. No skills are needed. Art is personal and primal. Creating art is freeing because there are no rules, no deadlines and no one else's opinion that matters (unless you want them to).

Art and art therapy is a proven way to elevate our coping skills, challenge our minds and lighten our spirits. Through art, we can create tangible works of self-expression. We can vent our frustrations, celebrate victories, share emotions and express what we cannot say in a universal medium that requires no language.

Art can be a powerful way to reach out and express how we feel to the rest of the world. It can also remain a private endeavor offering a meditative and soulful means of coping with all life throws at us.

The Benefits of Art Therapy for People With MS

According to the Multiple Sclerosis Association of America (MSAA), "numerous studies have been conducted with healthy individuals as well as those with various conditions to examine the positive effects of creating artwork. One small study found that the women with MS who participated in a creative art program experienced significant increases in self-esteem, social support, and self-efficacy to function with MS (self-efficacy is the ability we believe we have to meet challenges and achieve goals). The study also saw a strong effect on hope. The authors concluded that creative art has the potential to enhance the lives of those living with MS."

Some of the other significant benefits of art therapy include:

1. Stress Relief

Diverting your thoughts and focusing on a proactive activity for a period of time is useful for relieving stress. Art is a fantastic way to transfer focus, and the slow, repetitive movements of painting, drawing or sculpting can physically calm the body.

2. Lessen Depression and Isolation Levels

As MS symptoms begin to interfere with your mobility or energy levels, your social life can suffer, and eventually, many MS patients become isolated, anxious and depressed. Joining together with a group of people who understand your feelings and symptoms can provide a welcome bonding opportunity.

3. Visual Help for Verbal problems

It’s not uncommon to get tongue-tied or simply give up on explaining your symptoms and state of mind to people. Unfortunately, a lack of communication can mean less effective treatment and more suffering. Many people find that they can express difficult thoughts more easily with a visual representation, especially after getting into the rhythm of the creative method.

4. A Sense of Empowerment

Some art therapists notice a significant improvement in self-confidence and self-esteem in their patients when they have put their art on display. Ultimately, showing your work in a formal, public setting presents you as an artist, not a patient, and that is empowering.

Art allows us to take our minds and imaginations to new places. It helps our brains make new connections. It helps us find new ideas and ways to cope. Art helps us understand who we are and how we are connected to ourselves, to our lives and to one another.

What If You Aren't Artistic?

No one needs to be artistic or skilled in any way to benefit from dabbling in artistic endeavors. All that is needed is curiosity and an openness to explore something creative.

Choose something that appeals to you and dive in. Draw, knit, photograph, write or create a collage of magazine cutouts with paper and glue. You can even get lost in a coloring book for a while. Whatever appeals to you, go for it. Let go of expectation or concern for the outcome. You may be surprised as to what you end up creating.

When in creative mode, you may come to realize the constant noise and dialogue in your head goes quiet as you start to really get into what you were doing. This experience is called creative flow. It is an elevated form of focus as the mind works out the challenges and connectivity to emotions brought about in open artistic creation.

Break Out of the Norm

Art therapists use the creative process and the unique kind of focus and flow that art can lead to to help people explore their inner emotions and work out inner conflicts.

There is another benefit for people with MS. We can push the boundaries with our mind/body connections. Through working with the challenges of expressing what we wish to convey through our art, we help create new neuro-pathways. We can, in fact, train our brains and exercise our senses beyond the confines of daily living.

For people with MS, art and the challenges it provides can help us learn to work with and around deficits of sensation, mobility and cognitive thought processes. Through art, we can take back some control and have a better, deeper understanding of our bodies.

Alternate Worlds

Art pursuits have helped me break away from the monotony and sameness of day after day responsibilities and tasks.

I enjoy painting and pottery, largely because they have nothing to do with the rest of my life. It feels as if I am taking a mini vacation any time I paint or work with clay. I can now easily become fully immersed in my art sessions.

I am sometimes eager to being and get lost for a while in this safe alternate word. I consider this to be a moving meditation of sorts. I play and experiment. I am challenged and I and learn while focusing on the task at hand. The most wonderful thing about it is that I feel entirely free.

Camaraderie in Class

For anyone who wishes to be creative in a social environment or simply wants to learn, art classes can be a wonderful way to engage.

The communal feel found in art class can be wonderfully supportive and encouraging. Being amongst all walks of life, with like-minded intent is an excellent means of socializing and sharing experiences and ideas when experimenting and learning.

If you do decide to take an art class, notify the instructor or any concerns or questions you may have in regards to MS and any accommodations or adaptive techniques you may require.

Using Art As Therapy

Living with multiple sclerosis is difficult to put into words. Even when we do, words are simply inadequate in explaining the frustrations, pain, emotional torment, twisted humor, small victories and immense challenges we experience with this dreadful disease.

Art is a tangible and accessible outlet for all we hold within. We can engage in art to give our minds and spirits a chance to explore and discover. We can help ourselves, each other and anyone who comes across our art to better understand who we are. Art makes us more human and gives us hope for more.