

# Creative Healing

A teenager serving time in a youth correctional facility received an upsetting phone call before his therapy session. “He stormed in completely enraged about what was going on at home,” said James Schultz, a licensed professional counselor and trained art therapist with a private practice in Fort Collins. Schultz broke out a graphite pencil and suggested the young man scribble it across a blank piece of paper until it was completely black. Then he handed him an eraser and asked him to transform it.



by rhea maze

Art therapy is a technique that uses the creative process to treat a wide range of mental health issues in people of all ages. According to the American Journal of Public Health, there is growing evidence that art-based interventions, including the artwork shown on this page, are effective in reducing adverse psychological and physiological outcomes, and that they can have significantly positive effects on health.

“Art therapy uses art media, the creative process, and the resulting artwork as a therapeutic and healing process,” says Jennifer Amaral-Kunze, a licensed professional counselor at Beyond the Mirror Counseling and Wellness in Fort Collins, a center that has been using art therapy with clients of all ages for over a decade. “Through art therapy, clients can explore their feelings, reconcile emotional conflicts, foster self-awareness, manage behavior, develop social skills, reduce anxiety, and increase their self-esteem.”

For example, Amaral-Kunze may ask a teen experiencing family conflict to create a family sculpture. Afterwards, she and the client work together to make meaning from the art, such as by noticing the differences in the size and position of each family member. “Talking through the art creates insights that wouldn’t normally be noticed otherwise,” Amaral-Kunze says. “It also allows clients to identify feelings and work through scary emotions in a gentler way. Talking about the art feels so much

safer than talking about their mother drinking, their father leaving, the loss of a loved one, or a rape. Talking about art is safe.”

Schultz, who provides counseling, art therapy, and experiential fly fishing therapy for people of all ages as well as at-risk youth, agrees and says that many of his clients find it difficult to simply sit down and talk about their issues. Having another activity to focus on can melt away that stress while also enhancing the relationship between the client and counselor.

Things often come up naturally during the art process

that wouldn’t necessarily come out through sitting down and asking pointed questions. Similar to art therapy, in the fly fishing therapy that Schultz practices, metaphors often show up during the process, giving clients new ways to look at their issues, and creating a space where they are more comfortable talking about them. Clients are often more relaxed during art and fly fishing therapy sessions because they’re also having fun. “When they’re involved in a task, rather than being knee deep in their issues, it provides an observation point, and an opportunity to lighten or intensify things as needed,” Schultz says. “Sometimes, a client just needs to slow down and take their time with something or be provided with a new challenge, which creates a dynamic where they can then reflect.”

“People who say, ‘I don’t know,’ a lot find that they know way more than they thought when using art therapy. It’s like coming through a backdoor to reach the subconscious.”

— Jennifer Amaral-Kunze, licensed professional counselor at Beyond the Mirror Counseling and Wellness

For the young man in the correctional facility, scribbling the blank page black allowed him to release his rage. Schultz then handed him the eraser as a way of asking, “what are you going to do now to turn it around?” With the eraser, he created a beautiful landscape depicting a rainy day mountain scene. “He left the session a completely different kid,” Schultz said. “He came in enraged and left covered in graphite, but also very relaxed, in a state of mind where he knew he would be alright and could move forward, rather than feeling like everything was out of control.”



## Information and Resources

- The American Art Therapy Association: [arttherapy.org](http://arttherapy.org)
- The Art Therapy Association of Colorado: [arttherapycolorado.org](http://arttherapycolorado.org)
- Connections staff can help locate a certified art therapist in the community to fit specific needs: [mentalhealthconnections.org](http://mentalhealthconnections.org) or 970-221-5551.
- [Healthinfosource.com](http://Healthinfosource.com) is a website where you can search for Fort Collins-area therapists.