

From Self-Harm to Creation: A Young Woman's Journey through Art Therapy

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ABSTRACT

Art therapy can be a powerful therapeutic medium for clients dealing with issues of childhood sexual abuse, self-harm and a borderline personality presentation. Case study material is presented from individual work with a young woman carried out over an 18 month period. Images depict the changes and healing processes that occur within the framework of the therapeutic relationship. The interpersonal space between therapist and client is also explored to elucidate the transference and counter-transference issues that emerge through the multiple layers of meaning found in the imagery.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents case study material of a 19 year old woman's journey dealing with childhood sexual abuse and self-harm experiences through art therapy over an 18 month period within both a hospital and community setting. Art therapy is placed within the context of being a relatively new field of therapeutic endeavour, particularly within southern New Zealand/Aotearoa. Theoretical material is presented to underpin the therapeutic framework derived from clinical training in art therapy in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Clinical material focuses on key aspects of the therapeutic work and explores in greater depth some of the transference and counter-transference issues that emerge within the relationship and are particularly highlighted through the images created. Many identifying details have been altered to guarantee confidentiality whilst consent was given to use both imagery and verbal description of the therapeutic relationship.

ART THERAPY IN CONTEXT

Art Therapy is a new field of professional practice barely in its infancy within the health

system in New Zealand. Until recently there has been no formal training offered here, thus the small number of practicing art therapists have sought post-graduate training overseas and have returned to establish their practices in the New Zealand health system. A research-based Master of Arts in Arts Therapy (MAAT) has been running at Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design in Auckland since 2001. The Creative Therapies Association of Aotearoa (CTAA) has been established in New Zealand over the last 15 years and has initiated steps towards establishing training programmes here at post-graduate level as well as providing a network for the growing numbers of individuals interested in art, music, drama and movement therapy.

My work as an art therapist in the relative isolation of the deep south of New Zealand came about after completing a Post Graduate Diploma in Art Therapy in the United Kingdom in 1989-1990. The training emphasised psychodynamic understanding of the therapeutic relationship as well as the art objects created within that relationship. I returned to New Zealand to work in mental health and community settings for 12 years