

From out of the shadows: A creative arts therapist's reflections on bringing endometriosis into the arts therapy milieu

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KEY WORDS

Endometriosis, Arts Therapy, Women

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will reflect on my experiences of being an endometriosis sufferer to becoming a creative arts therapist who works with women with endometriosis. As endometriosis remains virtually unacknowledged in the arts therapy literature, I will provide an insight into this women's gynaecological health condition. Following on, I will describe my personal experiences of living with endometriosis, my inspiration for undertaking this work – drawing on my Master of Creative Arts Therapy research – and my initial experiences of working with this client group. Finally, I will conclude with a brief discussion about the benefits of creative arts therapy for women with endometriosis.

Note: All artwork and personal stories in this paper have been used with written permission of the women. Pseudonyms have been used for privacy reasons.

INTRODUCTION

As a creative arts therapist, I had always believed my professional life would be inspired by my personal experiences. However, I was not prepared for the inspiration to emerge from a medical diagnosis.

In 2002, I began my Master of Creative Arts Therapy Degree at RMIT University, Melbourne. At the end of the year, after a long journey with ill-health, I was diagnosed, via keyhole surgery, with endometriosis. For the next four years, I negotiated a plethora of surgical and medical treatments that often left me feeling worse than before my diagnosis.

In 2006, when I was going through a very difficult time in relation to my medical experiences, I was also collecting data

for my Master of Creative Arts Therapy research – an exploration of my experience of unaccompanied singing – and I began to capture some of my personal frustrations in my voice-work data. When I analysed my findings, I discovered that I had illuminated, in depth, some of my endometriosis experiences.

On completing my research, I began to further explore the professional arts therapy literature for material relating to endometriosis and the arts therapies. Drawn upon by Malchiodi (2007) and Seftel (2006), I discovered an isolated article. Prior to her diagnosis, Jane Bernstein, an artist and art therapist, had used a somatic journal to record her endometriosis symptoms. For her, art was an important way of helping her cope with them and understand her endometriosis experiences. She says: