



Healing Benefits of Art Therapy and Social Distancing Grief Therapy through Telehealth

By Valerie Moore-Altavilla

The Covid-19 Pandemic has turned our lives upside down and inside out. Normal is out the window. Individually and collectively we have been through an incredible amount of change this past year. This change has been overwhelming and the change often has been all consuming. Even the good parts of the change, such as more family time, has created stress and anxiety as we attempt to find a new rhythm of preparing meals, entertaining children, discovering new ways to connect with our elder relatives, as well as unfolding new methods of self care in the midst of confinement. All of this new is accompanied with the emotions of worry about staying safe and not catching the virus. In this time of uncertainty, we are experiencing the weight of grief and loss on a personal, community and global level. Life is expected to be unpredictable, but wow, this year has taken us down many new paths leaving us with feelings of isolation and anxiousness. We are feeling tired, overwhelmed, lost and trying to find a new way.

Discovering the silver linings in the midst of the crisis has become a practice to find new balance. One silver lining I've discovered in the Covid Pandemic is Telehealth. Telehealth has opened up an opportunity for me to utilize Art therapy with all ages dealing with life threatening illness and/or grief. The silver lining comes in the rich connections from these meaningful individual and group sessions. In the therapy profession, the "container" in a therapeutic relationship is the office or space in which the session is held. However, a few of my colleagues and I have realized through the Telehealth experience that the container really is the therapeutic relationship and not a physical space. If the individual or group feels safe and connected with the therapist, the space that the session is held is not as relevant as the container provided by the relationship.

Art therapy is an amazing healing process and I have discovered the same benefits can be accomplished via Telehealth as with in-person sessions. Art Therapy is about getting in tune with the body; getting out of one's head and spontaneously creating. Art therapy is fully about the process of creating; versus, that of a professional artist who is searching for a favorable end product. With art therapy there is not an expected outcome. There is not an agenda. Participants experiment with different materials and explore the art utilizing their five senses as a guide. It is about the journey. It's about getting out of the chattering mind (left brain), and in

to the body (non verbal feelings). It's about getting images out of the mind and onto paper. Our mind can play tricks on us, but our body doesn't lie, our body holds onto it all. This therapeutic art process has been found to move people, help them get unstuck, make new discoveries and insights and provide an overall deeper healing from within.

In Telehealth, just as in-person sessions, it is important to set the stage for art therapy interventions to take place in a meaningful way. A good place to start is by creating a "survival bag". The survival bag should be transportable so the contents can be used in any location. The bag should contain paper, scissors, glue and utensils of your choice such as (pen, pencil, markers, crayon, colored pencils). A clip board is a good item to keep in your bag to hold your paper if you are in a location without a table. The only other necessity for the art therapy process to work comes from within the person. The individual needs an open mind to let the experience unfold and to trust the process.

Children age 12 and under express feelings naturally and work through life issues mostly through play. In the office setting, therapists often engage in an array of interactive activities such as grief games, art projects, sand tray, reading books, taking nature walks and other expressive modalities to connect with the child as they journey through. With Telehealth, the options available are more limited; however, the opportunities to connect open up when using the expressive arts. Telehealth Therapy sessions taking place in the home of the child offers a wonderful opportunity for the therapist to interact with the child in their natural environment. They often open their world to the therapist in ways such as showing photos, special memorabilia of their loved one, shrines that are set up in their home, introducing pets and family members. Working with individuals in their own environment provides opportunity for positive change and deeper healing. With children, some of the work may involve creating a memory book composed of photos, stories of the loved one and of their life experiences in general. At home, they have quick access to photos and memorabilia for the creative process. Often times in an office setting, it is hard to remember to bring the photos and other memorabilia to incorporate into an art project due to the demands of life such as school, sports and other extracurricular activities away from home.

As with children, connecting with adults via Telehealth provides these same opportunities to work with them in their immediate environment. With grieving adults, I currently offer an ongoing Healing Arts group via Zoom. Just as in person, the Telehealth group members find it connecting to work "along side" (from their own homes or wherever they are when they connect to the link) one another as they create in memory of their loved one and/or work through whatever feelings/emotions need to be addressed in the session. For this group, participants have the flexibility and freedom to create whatever they choose, using their own supplies. Ideas and suggestions are provided, but ultimately the participants choose the project to work on and are led exactly where they need to be.

One art modality via Telehealth that has been quite successful with all ages, with both individuals and groups, is the use of magazine images and collage. One such technique involving magazine images is SoulCollage[®]. As a trained SoulCollage[®] facilitator, I have found this creative self-discovery process, founded by Seena Frost and taught worldwide, to provide deep healing for those who are introduced to it. SoulCollage[®] is a way to explore, learn about and heal ourselves. What our mind may not consciously be aware of, the body is often holding. The process of creating with images tap into the body and then words are explored giving conscious identity to an issue.

Art therapy can offer healing and support through times of distress, transition, sadness, pain, suffering, joy and happiness. It helps to create meaning of journeys/transitions in life: difficult, exciting, scary, etc. The process of creating gives voice to fears, anger, sadness, guilt, joy, love and happiness. It helps us articulate and put words to feelings and emotions held deep inside at a cellular level.

Telehealth is an evolving approach and there is much room for growth and new discoveries. Telehealth opens up a new way to reach and connect with people. As we approach this online/virtual experience, therapists and clients alike are learning. This new approach to therapy doesn't take the place of an in-person connection; however, I have found the process to be a viable therapy option to assist with transitions, grief and loss. Even when this current crisis is over, I see Telehealth as a viable alternative to in-person sessions. Telehealth would be a convenient option for caregivers, those with life threatening illness, those who just feel more comfortable being in their home while connecting with a therapist, those with transportation issues, and those whose schedules flow easier with this option. A wonderful silver lining for me through this crisis has been the opportunity to learn about Telehealth and to discover it is a viable method of communicating and utilizing art therapy. I feel honored to work with a progressive and caring organization doing what it can to make difficult transitions and life changes as manageable as possible for the people they serve by providing comfort, safety, support and a listening ear through Telehealth.