

Art and healing take center stage at Milwaukee counseling center

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When Jonisha Neita leaves the house, she's never without the basics: phone, wallet, canvas, paint and brushes. For Neita, a longtime client of **Creative Counseling of Milwaukee**, painting is more than a hobby – it is a tool for emotional regulation. Others may find solace through breathing exercises, a short walk or a splash of cold water.

Neita turns to paint.

Her ritual offers a personal example of why creative practice may matter at a moment of widespread mental-health strain. According to the latest data from [Gallup's National Health and Wellbeing Index](#), about 19% of U.S. adults reported currently having or being treated for depression. The rate was 28% among young adults and about 37% among those living in households earning less than \$24,000 each year.

By tapping into one of the oldest human traditions, art can offer a way to process difficult emotions or trauma and build skills for self-regulation – tools that may be especially relevant at a time of widespread mental-health strain.

For Neita, those tools became part of her life early on. At age 12, Neita was introduced to art therapy through Sarah Rosenblatt, then a therapist at SaintA mental health center, now known as Wellpoint Care Network. Neita continued working with Rosenblatt and later followed her to Creative Counseling of Milwaukee, which Rosenblatt co-founded with Craig Stone.

At Creative Counseling of Milwaukee, 2266 N. Prospect Ave., therapy is integrative, offering both traditional and non-traditional forms of therapy, including talk therapy, brain spotting, play therapy and art therapy. Rosenblatt finds creative therapies particularly useful for people experiencing emotional dysregulation, which can manifest as anger, crying spells, panic, irritability or sudden shifts in mood



Most clients are referred to the center by medical professionals, court mandates or word-of-mouth, and can be seen almost immediately with most forms of insurance accepted – important considerations for people seeking mental health care.

Art-making is not always therapeutic on its own, Theresa Van Lith, associate professor of art therapy at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, cautioned. Without guidance from someone trained in both art materials and therapy, she said, the process can feel overwhelming or even retraumatizing.

"Art is like exercise and it's good for everyone to do," Van Lith said. "Then you have those that are physiotherapists or physical therapists, or they're very much trained. That's what our therapists are like."

Art therapy is structured, evidence-based practice

Decades ago, people thought of art therapists as therapists handing out crayons and telling people to color, Stone said. While things have changed, many people still struggle to view art therapy as different from just making art.

The [American Association of Art Therapy](#) defines art therapy as a mental health profession that combine art-making, creative processes and psychotherapy to improve the lives of individuals, families and communities.

Trained art therapists have advanced degrees and professional licenses, and are trained to understand specific connections between the mind and body, how and when to introduce certain materials and to prompt people in certain ways. Thus, training covers a wide range of topics and skills including psychological assessments, human growth and development and art therapy theories and how to apply them in different settings.

Elisabeth Corona, an art therapist at Creative Counseling, mentioned that one common concept in art therapy is using the art as a way to get feelings outside of a person. Art can make difficult conversations less intimidating by giving people something tangible to discuss, Corona said. Rather than naming their own fear or sadness, a person can describe the emotions present in their artwork.



Practicing art in a therapeutic context allows people to focus on their strengths, release tension, communicate feelings and feel like they have ownership over something.

[Improvements in these domains](#) can lead to better self-esteem, increase in feelings of

empowerment and development of a stronger sense of self. It can also help build social skills and offer connections with others, which can reduce feelings of isolation.

Nervous system regulation may be the key

The mechanisms behind how art therapy improves well-being are not yet fully understood, but researchers and practitioners attribute some of its benefits to nervous system regulation.

Altered nervous system function has been linked to many different psychiatric conditions, including anxiety disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder. Researchers often use heart rate variability – the small differences in time between heartbeats – as one way to assess how that system is functioning.



Some studies suggest that art therapy changes nervous system function in ways that improve emotional regulation.

Other studies looking at cortisol – a hormone that regulates our body's stress responses – found that art therapy might decrease cortisol levels, and in turn reducing feelings of stress.

Some benefits may depend on the medium, whether its oil painting, drawing or sculpture. But there's still more for researchers to learn more about art therapy's impact on the body and brain.

Corona said emotional dysregulation is rooted in the nervous system. Triggers, such as loud sounds or an approaching person, can activate emotional responses, memories and physical sensations in the body. "So, you can use the body then to re-regulate and start feeling comfortable again," Corona said.

Once clients have gone through the art therapy process, making art often becomes a regulation tool they bring outside of the office and into daily life.

Art gives permission to work through emotions

For Neita, art therapy is a tool for mending rifts in a family. It's a simple way for families to strengthen their open and honest communication – or at least begin to.

She said it also allows families to address deep-seated issues and express emotions that might be hard to express in more traditional dialogues. Poetry is a way "you can express anger, and it wouldn't be looked at in a bad way," Neita said.

Though both Neita and her kids have their personal art practices, used both for pleasure and therapy, she insists that when the family comes together to do art it's to deal with any family issues that have arisen.



In her personal practice, Neita gives herself permission to paint or write without a prompt as she works through complex trauma and intense emotions – not always knowing where it will lead.

One painting hanging in her home began with a green landscape beneath a deep blue sky. In the foreground sits a pregnant woman, carrying the world.

Neita explained that as she worked she layered biblical imagery, scripture and symbols of hope into an open pasture engulfed by the sky. Together, the images portray a woman seeking refuge while carrying her children's lives – and the burdens of her intrusive thoughts. "I didn't know where I was going. I started off with the women figure because I'm a mama, [and] everything else started coming," Neita said. "It was just all how I was feeling."

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