

HELPING TEENS UNMASK FEELINGS WITH THERAPEUTIC PAINTING



AUGUST 2022

An Art & Creativity for Healing Special Report

Helping Teens Unmask Feelings with Therapeutic Painting



SUMMARY

Adolescent mental health has been on the decline for the past decade, and the crisis was further exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. In this Special Report, we examine the startling statistics on adolescent mental health in 2022. We then discuss the unique emotional challenges teens face, and how our unique Art4Healing® method can be used to help with these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Art & Creativity for Healing has used a unique method to help participants express their feelings with abstract painting. In a sense, over the last 22 years, we've become "unmasking aides."

The concept of masking has become ubiquitous in daily life over the past years of COVID-19. Masking has become an ingrained concept in society.

Now, health regulations have relaxed, and we've "unmasked" again. We use the word in quotes because of our recent observations, particularly among teenage Art4Healing® participants.



TEENS NEED MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT



We've observed that the problem of masking feelings is *particularly* prevalent in the youth population that we serve. Adults are back to work, school is back in session, and the masks are coming off. But, have students dealt with the turmoil of the past 24 months in a healthy way?

Studies, reports, and anecdotal evidence say no. Before the pandemic, one in five U.S. teens developed a mental disorder (Merikangas, et al., 2010). Half of these manifested by age 14 and three-quarters before the mid-20's (Kessler, Berglund, & Demler, 2005).

The pressure to "return to normal" has left many with additional unresolved feelings that cannot be expressed in words. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, 140,000 children in the United States lost a primary and/or secondary caregiver alone (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021). These losses have led to a spike in mental health problems which will affect society for years to come. Whether it's grief from illness or loss, anxiety, or even PTSD, the pandemic left a deep impact throughout society.

The impact on adolescents, already in a difficult time of life, cannot be understated. For example, in a May 2022 report, researchers found a stark decline in psychological wellbeing between 2010 and 2021 amongst young people. They concluded: "Where once young adults reported the best psychological wellbeing, primarily along dimensions of happiness and optimism, today they have a much darker

mental wellbeing profile, substantially lower than every other age group across a multitude of dimensions." (Sapien Labs, 2022)

A NATIONAL EMERGENCY

In fact, the problem is so severe that the American Academy of Pediatrics declared a National Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health in 2021. In their declaration, the Academy stated:

"We are caring for young people with soaring rates of depression, anxiety, trauma, loneliness, and suicidality that will have lasting impacts on them, their families, and their communities. We must identify strategies to meet these challenges through innovation and action, using state, local and national approaches to improve the access to and quality of care across the continuum of mental health promotion, prevention, and treatment." (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021)

One of the Academy's recommendations was "Strengthen emerging efforts to reduce the risk of suicide in children and adolescents through prevention programs in schools, primary care, and community settings." (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021)



ART4HEALING® AND TEEN MENTAL HEALTH

Art & Creativity for Healing participates in **20+** High School programs throughout Orange County, CA. We help students reveal their feelings using abstract art on canvas through our Raging Colors: Expressive Painting for Teens Program.

This abstract methodology offers the language of colors as a way to identify private thoughts and feelings to safely be applied on canvas, weaving a tapestry of secret emotions.



WHAT OUR EXPERTS SAY

We have facilitators in the field with teenagers on a weekly basis. We're also in contact with professionals in the medical field as friends, board members, and advisors. To give you a sense of what's happening "on the ground", here are some quotes from the experts:

"Over the past several years, the increase in anxiety in teens appears quite significant. While many factors have likely contributed to this (pressure from parents, peers, or social media, the state of the world, cultural and societal changes, social isolation, etc.), anxiety and depression in teens has sadly become an increasingly large part of their lives."

Stephanie H. Burns

32 years retired as a School Psychologist

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“There are social issues and anxieties caused by being stuck at home for over a year. Some youths have reported significant anxieties about social interactions in general. This is probably most present in our youngest teens who lost a year or two of normal interactions with their peers at a time when they would be figuring all that out.

Dallas M. Stout, Psy.D.

Doctors Nonprofit Consulting (Since 2004)

“Since the pandemic began, I have found it harder to gain the teens’ trust and to get them to just relax and enjoy the process. I’ve noticed there is more apprehension to share, almost as if their masks are keeping them quiet.

The teens that do share often express how the pandemic made them feel confused and detached, and Art4Healing® helps them bring those emotions to the surface and gives them a new way of seeing them.”

Laura Svette

Certified Art4Healing® Facilitator





“Artistic expression offers children a vehicle to relieve their stress. Children who are processing trauma and struggling to navigate Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) often see higher levels of physical and mental stress, so finding ways to release some of the related emotions can be beneficial. Plus, creating art can be relaxing while providing a healthy outlet for emotions that can come out negatively if not channeled appropriately.”

Lorry Leigh Belhumeur, Ph.D.

Chief Executive Officer, Western Youth Services

HOW ART4HEALING® HELPS TEENS

Adolescence can be a difficult time to understand and process intense emotions verbally. That's where nonverbal activities like Art4Healing® can help.

The Art4Healing® method can help teens express their feelings. It uses unique prompts to allow self-healing through nonverbal expression. There is a powerful connection between the participant and their creation. Because the method uses abstract colors instead of words, only the participant knows the true meaning of the creation.

What the studies reveal

We retain the Doctors Nonprofit consulting group to continuously monitor our Programs via statistical surveys. The results from our Raging Colors: Expressive Painting for Teens Program support the effectiveness of the Art4Healing®

method when it comes to helping teens express their feelings.

In our latest report, our consultants surveyed over 1900 participants between June 2018 and June 2020.

Here are some of the challenges teens face with their emotions, and how the Art4Healing® method has helped participants.

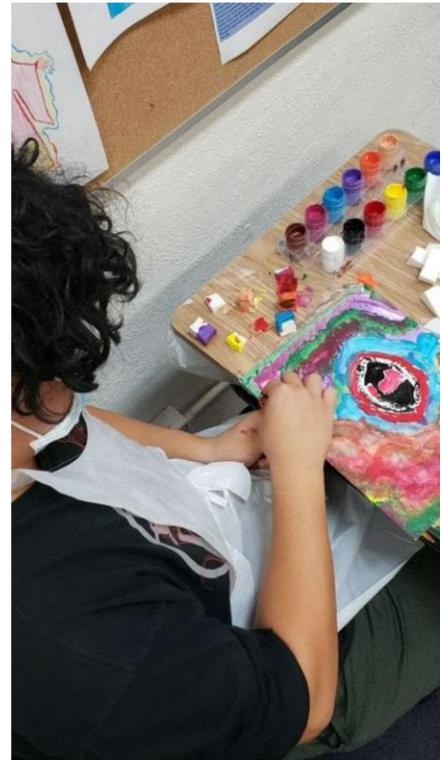
Managing frequent and higher intensity emotions

Compared to an adult sample (ages 19–65), adolescents in grades 9-12 experience more frequent high-intensity positive and high-intensity negative emotions, and fewer low-intensity emotions (Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Graef, 1980). These findings were replicated in two other studies comparing adolescents and adults on high-intensity positive and negative emotions (Larson & Richards, 1994) (Verma & Larson, 1999).

In our study, **88.35%** of participants said the workshop *helped them share their feelings* (Doctors Nonprofit Consulting, 2020). Sharing feelings can help express these frequent high-intensity emotions associated with adolescence. In a post-pandemic world, we've found students are less reluctant than ever to share their feelings.

Handling negative emotions

One study found a decrease in the frequency of positive emotions and an increase in the frequency of negative emotions in adolescents ages 10–14 over the next 4 years





(Larson, Moneta, Richards, & Wilson, 2002). Other studies have found adolescents to be at higher risk for mental disorders (Lewinsohn, Klein, & Seeley, 2000) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Whatever the study, it is apparent that developing brains process emotions differently and adolescence may be a time of risk.

In our study, **87.38%** of participants indicated that they *felt better after taking a workshop* (Doctors Nonprofit Consulting, 2020). These results suggest that participants feel better after expressing any feeling, be it positive or negative. Considering the intensity and increased frequency of negative emotions adolescents face, expressing feelings with abstract color can be an effective self-help tool.

Processing emotions

“

OUR IMPACT ON TEENAGE PARTICIPANTS

Statistics from surveys are powerful measurements of our success with teenage participants. Sometimes, quotes are equally as powerful:

“We began having Art4Healing classes prior to the COVID 19 pandemic. Our students love these classes so much that these therapeutic art classes were sometimes the only way we could entice our kids back to school. I believe this unique abstract art method gives them an opportunity to unmask uncomfortable feelings when they have no words”

Vern Burton

Assistant Superintendent of Alternative Education
Orange County Dept of Education



“I never thought about expressing my feelings before taking Art4Healing classes. Because of these classes, I’ve been able to get so many different feelings out in color. And today I realized I have anger issues and used a lot of red and black layers to express my anger and fear.”

15-year-old at-risk teen from an alternative school

“Anger/Fear” workshop participant

“I have a lot of anxiety and always wished there was a panic button. Art4Healing is now my panic button when I’m feeling anxious.”

16-year-old at-risk teen from an alternative school

“My Identity in Color” workshop participant



“These exercises always help me reflect and gain perspective on my feelings. Today I feel much calmer after painting than when I first came to school.”

17-year-old at-risk teen from an alternative school

“Having it All” workshop participant

IN CONCLUSION

Adolescents need more mental health support than ever, as shown in studies and observed in our teenage Art4Healing® participants. Post-COVID trauma has exacerbated an already precipitous decline in adolescent mental health. Physical masking has habituated teens to "hide behind the mask" when it comes to expressing feelings.

Adolescence is a unique time in life, where the brain and ability to process emotions is still developing. Activities like Art4Healing® that help teens express their emotions can be powerful self-help tools.

We’ve designed a program specifically for teens. Our Raging Colors: Expressive Painting for Teens Program helps with adolescent emotional challenges outlined in research. In our studies, teenage participants indicated that our Art4Healing® program helped them say things with paint that words couldn’t describe.

OUR FOUNDER'S STORY

We've discussed the need for mental health tools to combat the decline in adolescent mental health. We've also shown how Art4Healing® can help teens express their feelings. Now, read the story of the Founder behind the method, Laurie Zagon, and the impact that creating therapeutic, abstract art has had on her life. Here's Laurie's path to mental health by using art as a coping mechanism from the age of 8.

In Laurie's words:

Growing up in Queens, New York had its challenges. We lived in Flushing, Queens. Both parents worked; My Dad was a Liquor Salesman and returned home at 10pm every day. He was intoxicated when he arrived home each night. He would have his last 2 shots of whiskey and pass out in the living room club chair.

My Mother was an admin assistant for an airline and loved her job, but she was always screaming and yelling at my Dad, sister, and me when she was home. She had a temper and if we said something she believed was wrong, it resulted in her slapping and hitting us. She clearly was not happy with her life. She often spoke about having married the wrong man.

My parents created such a toxic environment that I remember suicidal thoughts as early as eight years old. I thought about cutting my wrists but was too scared to cut myself. I also remember banging my head against the wall in my bedroom out of frustration. There was a lack of love and





care in my family. The verbal barrages were constant, as was the out-of-control anger. I dreamt of leaving the house to get away from it all.

To escape, every day I would go down to the basement and spend most of my time after school and through the evening with art supplies given to me by my uncle. When I first received oil paints and canvases from my uncle, without any training, I painted my first painting. The theme was me collecting tickets at a movie theater. My uncle told me I was a good artist, and his words encouraged me. I was an artist if someone said I was an artist!

When I descended to the basement, my world expanded. I was now saying things with art to express myself. I made drawings and created little books that reflected happily ever after endings. Art became my coping mechanism and started me on my road to mental health.

As I got older, I enjoyed the art classes in junior high with a great teacher. Mrs. P introduced me to many different mediums: drawing, printmaking, painting, sculpture. Art was my friend and confidant. When I was ready for high school, I was accepted into the High School of Art & Design in Manhattan.

I had to take a bus and a train from Queens to Manhattan every day to get to school. I didn't mind at all since it took me away from the unhappiness and despair I felt at home. The people, theatre, galleries, museums, and the sights and smells of the city were a catalyst for my art.

When I graduated High School, I was accepted to the Maryland Institute of Art, in Baltimore, on scholarship. I was out of my house and a new chapter in my life had begun. From there I was given a full fine arts fellowship to Syracuse University and began as a graduate student/ art instructor for freshmen at the university as well.

When I graduated, I moved back to New York to begin my career as a fine artist and to teach painting, design, and color theory classes at the City University of New York. I married my boyfriend; two artists together were not a great match. I went to therapy as a result. It was a great help speaking with a professional who could help someone like me sort out my anger. Ultimately, it became clear that my husband and I were not good together, and we eventually divorced.

I met with my therapist for an hour and a half a week. It cost half my salary, but I didn't care. I knew I needed help! Between the counseling and creating giant colorful abstract paintings on canvas, my thoughts became more and more positive. The therapy helped me to reconcile my past and my art. It also helped me work through my unhealthy coping mechanisms, which were drug use and food addiction. Finally, the art and therapy opened me to a spiritual path that has always kept me focused and grateful to God for the gift of art.

I created Art4Healing® workshops for children, teens, and adults that struggle with all types of mental health issues. Now, I teach others the language of color and painting on canvas as a way to give pain a voice. My previous, negative



life experiences have transformed into a way for me to bless others.

Just as my uncle gave me my first art supplies when I was 8 years old, I am able to give out thousands of art supplies to disadvantaged children and teens. To-date, Art and Creativity for Healing workshops have allowed over 90,000 participants to experience what I have. I hope I've given many the tools for a new creative direction in their life.



MORE ABOUT ART4HEALING®

In this report, we've considered the state of mental health and the need for mental health tools and services in the post-COVID era. We've also examined how expressing feelings through abstract painting can have a positive impact on mental health. Laurie Zagon developed the Art4Healing® method to help participants express feelings when words do not suffice. Understanding and expressing these feelings can bring participants a sense of wellbeing, promote positive brain changes, and support mental health.

The Art4Healing® method is a creative process that **gives pain a voice and meaning by providing expressive abstract painting workshops to support emotional healing.**

Our mix of artistic development and expression coupled with a creative healing model allow participants to learn a new way of communicating through color that encourages emotional breakthroughs and further enhances the therapeutic process.

Our Art4Healing® curriculum contains strictly guided exercises, rather than loosely formatted art sessions. These exercises are specially designed to elicit emotional responses in a safe and nurturing environment. Our workshops and community programs offer expression, encouragement, clarity, and insight.

Art & Creativity for Healing (ACFH) supports emotional healing for children, families, individuals, and military personnel using our Art4Healing® method. ACFH also partners with schools, shelters, hospitals, and other nonprofit agencies to integrate Art4Healing® programs.

Art4Healing® vs. Art Therapy

We are NOT an Art Therapy provider. We share art as a tool for self-expression and self-exploration. The structure of the Art4Healing® sessions makes clear that the leaders are facilitators of the creative process, not therapists guiding it. ACFH facilitators don't offer any interpretation or diagnosis.

The focus remains on the participants in charge of their own exploration. The fact that this process is therapeutic DOES NOT make it art therapy.

(Art therapy is a legally separate institution and field of practice.)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

We offer a variety of resources to help you learn more about the Art & Creativity for Healing method.

Pre-Recorded Workshops

We have 35 courses available online! Relax and experience the Art & Creativity for Healing method in the comfort of your own space. All courses are only \$29! Check out our course list and introduction video from Laurie here:

Online Courses: <https://courses.art4healing.org/>

Workshops

We offer a variety of live, online workshops via Zoom, as well as studio workshops! Visit our website for frequently asked workshop questions and our upcoming workshop calendar:

Workshop FAQ's: <https://www.art4healing.org/faq/>

Workshop Calendar: <https://www.art4healing.org/calendar/>

Program Outcomes and Past Special Reports

We engage an outside party to help us compile Outcome Data for all of our Programs. We encourage you to visit our Results page, where you can view Outcome Data. We also have prior Special Reports available for you to review!

Results: <https://www.art4healingorg/results/>

Art4Healing® International Certification Program Online

Can't make it to our studio? We are proud to offer the only globally recognized Art4Healing® Certification, exclusively available online.

To become certified online, students experience and complete Art4Healing® workshops and assignments through an online platform within a timeline of 9 months (or less). We match students with an Art4Healing® Coach who will answer questions and review his/her assignments and facilitated workshops.

Find out more about this exclusive program here:

International Certification Online:

<https://www.art4healing.org/international-certification/>

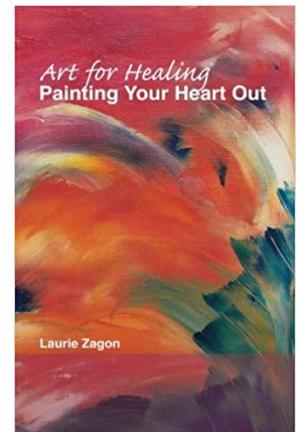


Painting Your Heart Out, by Laurie Zagon

Read the inspiring account of how Laurie Zagon started Art & Creativity for Healing, a Southern California non-profit organization that provides fine art workshops for children, teens, and adults suffering from abuse, illness, grief, or stress.

Learn from former students about the extraordinary impact that Art & Creativity for Healing has had on their lives. Art4Healing® Painting Your Heart Out is a non-threatening method that enables people who cannot draw a straight line to become successful in expressing their feelings through art. The creative process used in this book encourages participants to paint using abstract strokes of color on canvas to translate life's everyday stresses.

Available on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Art-Healing-Painting-Your-Heart/dp/1517072247/>



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Stay engaged with us on social media: <https://www.art4healing.org/stayengaged/>

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