

CREATIVE CONNECTIONS: ABSTRACT ART TO FOSTER MENTAL HEALTH FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES



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An Art & Creativity for Healing Special Report

Creative Connections: Abstract Art to foster mental health for people with disabilities



Through non-evaluative, abstract painting experiences, Art4Healing® offers families with disabilities and caregivers a safe, creative space for self-exploration, emotional connection, and shared expression.

INTRODUCTION

Art4Healing® provides a safe, welcoming space for individuals and caregivers with disabilities to explore art and creativity with a focus on the process, not results.^{[1][2]} Unlike traditional talk-therapy, Art & Creativity for Healing's programs are non-evaluative, focusing on expressive abstraction as a means of self-exploration and emotional connection.^{[1][2]} This report examines the impact of our approach and highlights recent findings on how creative expression benefits cognitive and emotional development, sensory integration, family dynamics, and nonverbal communication.^{[1][2][3]}



COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL BENEFITS OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION FOR NEURODIVERSE INDIVIDUALS



Fine Art-based activities have proven to support cognitive and emotional growth, making them a valuable resource for neurodiverse individuals.^{[1][2]} Studies from 2021 to the present highlight that art can aid in focusing attention, enhancing problem-solving skills, and improving spatial awareness. These skills are often beneficial for neurodiverse individuals.^{[1][2][3][4][13]} Art & Creativity for Healing’s open-ended sessions allow participants to engage without judgment, using abstract painting to express their thoughts and emotions.^{[1][2]}

These benefits extend as an emotional release as well. Creative Art expression has been linked to reduced stress and increased self-awareness, both of which are essential for emotional well-being.^{[1][2][4]} By using colors, shapes, and paint strokes to express emotions, participants can communicate feelings they may find difficult to articulate verbally.^{[1][2][4]} This type of self-directed, stress-relieving activity empowers individuals to develop greater emotional resilience in a supportive, non-clinical environment.^{[1][4][13]}

SENSORY ENGAGEMENT TECHNIQUES FOR PROCESSING CHALLENGES

For individuals with sensory sensitivities, Art & Creativity for Healing’s approach to creative art expression offers a safe way to engage with sensory input in a safe space.^{[4][5]}

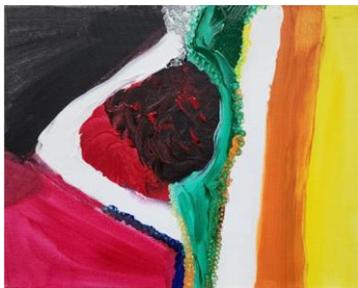
Research underscores the value of multi-sensory art activities—such as using various textures, colors, and sounds—to help individuals with sensory processing challenges explore and adapt to different sensory experiences.^[5] Art4Healing® integrates tactile, visual, and auditory elements in its sessions, enabling participants to paint abstractly using textures, shapes, and colors in a structured step-by-step format.^{[1][5]}



STRENGTHENING FAMILY BONDS THROUGH SHARED CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Art4Healing® also encourages family-centered creative painting activities that allow families with special needs to engage, communicate, and bond.^{[6][7]} Families dealing with disabilities or neurodiversity often face unique relational challenges, and shared creative activities can help strengthen family bonds.^{[6][7]} Studies indicate that collaborative creative activities improve communication, foster empathy, and reduce stress within family dynamics.^{[6][8]}

Art4Healing® Connection



Our programs provide a shared safe space where family members can explore these benefits together.^{[6][7]} By participating in abstract expressive painting, they can gain new insights into each other's experiences and challenges, creating opportunities for stronger connections.^[6] For caregivers, these sessions offer stress relief and an emotional outlet, allowing them to connect with loved ones while also finding their own form of self-care.^[8]

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AND EXPRESSIVE OUTLETS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH SPEECH LIMITATIONS

Art & Creativity for Healing's programs recognize that for some individuals, communication is best achieved through nonverbal means.^{[1][2][4]} For those with speech limitations, creative expression through abstract expressive painting serves as a powerful tool to convey emotions, thoughts, and personal experiences.^{[1][2][4]} Through the use of colors, , and abstract forms, participants can visually represent emotions, reducing the frustration that can come with traditional communication challenges.^{[1][2][4]}

GLOBAL AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN CREATIVE EXPRESSION FOR FAMILIES WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR CAREGIVERS

Around the world, various programs focus on making art accessible to people with disabilities, and our inclusive practice of abstract expressive painting draw from these innovative approaches.^{[9][10]} In the United States, community-based art programs promote inclusive creative experiences, while in the United Kingdom, the National Health Service supports art-based initiatives for neurodiverse individuals.^{[11][12]} Australia's use of telehealth for remote art sessions demonstrates how these programs can reach underserved areas, providing inspiration for our commitment to inclusivity and its ability to offer web-based classes internationally.^{[9][10]}





CONCLUSION

Art & Creativity for Healing’s creative expression programs have demonstrated the profound impact that open-ended, non-evaluative art-making can have on families and individuals with disabilities or neurodiversity.^{[1][6]} By focusing on creativity as a means of connection, communication, and self-discovery, Art4Healing® provides a valuable service that supports cognitive and emotional growth, strengthens family relationships, and offers a welcoming space for nonverbal expression.^{[1][3][6]}

From sensory-friendly techniques to global inclusivity, Our work highlights how creative expression through abstract painting can empower individuals to communicate, connect, and thrive.^{[1][5]} As research continues to affirm the benefits of art for diverse populations, Art4Healing® remains dedicated to its mission of fostering expression through art, providing an accessible and inclusive space where everyone's unique voice can be celebrated.^{[1][3][4]}

VOICES OF TRANSFORMATION: TESTIMONIALS AND CASE STUDIES

Testimonials and case studies further highlight the profound impact of ArtHealing® in empowering individuals to navigate their mental health journey and find a renewed sense of wellbeing. With its innovative and self-investigative approach, ArtHealing® is at the forefront of using art as a powerful tool for mental health transformation.



"I liked getting crazy with the paint and Q-tips." – teen with Down Syndrome

"I learned that I can express myself through art no matter what." – teen with Autism

"This class was great. I learned that art is good relaxation for the brain." – teen with Autism

"When I looked inside my heart, I saw orange because of the warmth and good in my heart." – teen with Autism



“I like Art4Healing® because it helps me feel comfortable with change and expressing my emotions. Change is difficult but a part of life. So, it’s up to us to accept it for the better of our future.” – teen with Autism

“This class helped me realize my purpose.” – teen with Autism



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 ArtHealing® 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.



"MOVIE TICKET LINE", OIL ON CANVAS, 1960
LAURIE ZAGON



"PAINTING HOPE", ACRYLIC ON WOOD, 2024
LAURIE ZAGON

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 ArtHealing® 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 100,000 participants to experience what I have. I hope I've given many the tools for a new creative direction in their life.



MORE ABOUT ARTHEALING®

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 ArtHealing® 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 ArtHealing® 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 ArtHealing® 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 ArtHealing® method. ACFH also partners with schools, shelters, hospitals, and other nonprofit agencies to integrate ArtHealing® programs.

ArtHealing® 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 ArtHealing® 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 25 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/>

ArtHealing® International Certification Program Online

Can't make it to our studio? We are proud to offer the only globally recognized Art & Creativity for Healing Certification, exclusively available online.

To become certified online, students must apply and complete ArtHealing® workshops and assignments through an online platform within a timeline of 9 months (or less). We match students with an ArtHealing® 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/>

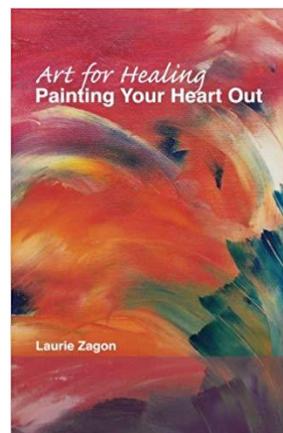


Painting Your Heart Out, by Laurie Zagon

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. ArtHealing® 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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