

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

When Words Aren't Enough: The Power of Expressive Arts in Healing

"Have you ever felt at a loss for words? When something bad happened to you, did you feel numb? Wish you could communicate what happened?"

When we experience trauma, violence, loss, and grief, our emotions can be so overwhelming that our body either shuts down or disconnects. We might discover that we don't know what we feel, or we can't feel anything. Even though these natural responses can be confusing and painful, they are normal ways of reacting to life-altering events.

Oftentimes, healing from trauma, violence, loss, and grief, comes in the form of words. We are encouraged to connect with people, or seek professional help in therapy. For instance, you can see our resource on knowing when and how to seek help, here. However, words with our loved ones and/or professionals are not always an option to us. And there are times when someone asks us, "How do you feel?", and we just don't know what to say.

Not having the words to express what we are thinking, feeling, and experiencing makes sense. Our memories from traumatic events doesn't always include words; sometimes, the memories are stored in our bodies. For instance, during a miscarriage or when witnessing someone being murdered, we may dissociate, or disconnect emotionally, from ourselves and the experience. So, after it is all over, the harm can live hidden within us in ways that words can't express. Instead, our emotions and memories can come out in our dreams and nightmares.

How can we express our hidden and wordless feelings? And how can we experience the healing that comes with sharing those feelings in a warm and supportive environment? One way is through **Expressive and Creative Arts Therapies**. Beginning with shell-shocked war veterans of World War II who could not speak following the war, music therapists found that music reached a part of the psyche that was still active. In this way, music therapy helps people who have been traumatized, with music as a way of communicating with and through our hidden and unknown feelings.

Art therapists can also help children and others heal when they've experienced something, like sexual abuse or community violence, that they do not yet have words for. In art therapy, therapists work with people to help them draw their fears, share them with others, and discover their own creativity and strengths.

As detailed in our resource on resistance strategies, found here, we know that we can flee, fight, freeze, or appease when we experience a traumatic event. When that happens, fear, terror, anger, grief, depression, anxiety, and other emotions can get locked in our bodies. How do we unlock our bodies so they can flow again, and we can move forward into a new day? **Dance Therapists** are trained to work with the body, to understand nonverbal communication, and to incorporate culturally sensitive ways to bring the body back to life.

Other forms of **Expressive Arts Therapies** also use creative and symbolic ways to communicate. These include Poetry, Storytelling, Drama, Psychodrama, and Mixed Media. Each of these types of **Expressive Arts Therapies** have support groups and therapists specially trained to work with culturally relevant arts psychotherapy. Therefore, no matter what has happened to us and how we are dealing with it, the arts offer us avenues of healing (see our resource on seeking help, found here). And in addition to or in lieu of words, **Expressive Arts Therapies** can provide us the space, time, and community to express our deep emotions, wounds, and hope, thus freeing us from being trapped underneath what we have experienced. For more information on interpersonal trauma, violence, and abuse, *see* here. To learn about collective trauma, *see* this. To learn more about how to heal and thrive, *go to* here.