

# A Practical Art Therapy

*Susan I. Buchalter*



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# Contents

PREFACE 6

Introduction 7

1. Warm-Ups 8

2. Murals 16

3. Drawing 26

4. Advertising 71

5. Painting 75

6. Collages 80

7. Puppets And Masks 91

8. Sculpture 97

9. Clay 104

10. Combining Modalities 110

11. Mandalas 115

12. Portraits 119

13. Group Work 123

14. Holiday Projects 129

15. Stress Reduction 134

16. Miscellaneous 141

REFERENCES 158

LIST OF PROJECTS 159

## Preface

"Two or three projects are all I can think of: help me." This is a quote I've heard quite often from students, beginning art therapists, counselors and social workers who express the desire to be acquainted with a variety of art therapy techniques. The interns I've supervised, as well as my fellow therapists, appear to be amazed at the diversity and creativity of the projects which I present to clients at the short-term psychiatric facility in which I work. I've written this book to fill a gap, to present a variety of standard and original techniques in an easy-to-read format. One should not view this collection simply as a "cookbook" of therapy techniques. Therapy sessions cannot be scripted ahead of time, but a collection of specific approaches can provide the framework for countless therapeutic interventions. Readers should take it as a challenge to add their own personal touches in order to create sessions that are most meaningful for their particular clientele and themselves.

The techniques illustrated are from many sources: my two decades of experience designing original creative activities for clients, art workbooks, articles, lectures, and workshops. Some of the projects presented have been modified and/or changed to suit a variety of clientele.

# Introduction

Many of the projects presented in this manual have proved valuable in my work with depressed, borderline, bipolar, schizophrenic, and addicted clients. The therapist needs to determine the nature of the group, and client needs and abilities when choosing a particular activity. Many of the activities can be modified for a variety of populations including children and the elderly. Children enjoy working with a wide variety of media and color. Seniors benefit greatly from creative experiences focusing on family, memories, and work-related experiences. Many of the seniors prefer media that is not messy or complicated to work with, such as markers and colored pencils.

Socialization, expression of feelings, issues, hopes, problems, and conflicts, as well as the enhancement of reasoning and thinking skills are therapeutic goals for all of these groups; therefore, I will not always specify these goals under the heading "Discussion."

Topics are organized according to technique or media. Many techniques allow for the utilization of a variety of materials. The therapist must determine which materials are most suitable for the population he or she is working with.

I use a wide range of projects/techniques in working with clients. This keeps the clients as well as myself motivated, energetic, and involved. Experimentation allows for growth and new insights.

## Warm-Ups

Warm-up exercises give clients a chance to become familiar with art therapy and the group experience. They allow group participants to "loosen up" and relate better to one another. The warm-up helps desensitize apprehensive individuals to the art experience because it is often fun and easy; there are few risks involved. This practice helps convey the message that in art therapy "it does not matter how one draws." It is the expression of thoughts and feelings that are important. Quick creative exercises (usually five to ten minutes in length) often prove helpful in facilitating group interaction and growth. It's beneficial to the group process if the warm-up acts as a transition, relating in some way to the group project.

### **Squiggle Design**

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#### *Materials:*

Drawing paper, markers, crayons, etc.

#### *Procedure:*

Ask clients to draw a scribble with their eyes open or closed. Encourage them to have fun with it. Tell them to let their hands move however they want to. Ask them to look at the scribble from all angles. Suggest they look to see if there is any object in it that looks familiar or if they can find any part of it that attracts them. Have them color that part in and give the picture a title.

*Discussion / Goals:*

Encourage clients to explore how it felt to draw in such a free manner. Ask participants to examine the item or figure found within the scribble. Have them relate the completed picture to their thoughts and feelings.

**Draw with Your Less Dominant Hand**

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*Materials:*

Drawing paper, markers, crayons, etc.

*Procedure:*

Clients are asked to draw a picture with their less dominant hand. The picture can be realistic or abstract.

*Discussion / Goals:*

Many individuals feel less threatened by this drawing experience because they are clearly not expected to create a *perfect* picture. It's obvious to all that they are at a disadvantage. Clients may discuss the ease or difficulty of doing this task, and their feelings about substituting one hand for another. They may relate this activity to adjustments and substitutions they need to make in their lives when they are ill, lose friends, jobs, family members, etc.

**Draw with Your Eyes Closed**

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*Materials:*

Drawing paper, markers, craypas, crayons

*Procedure:*

Ask clients to draw a picture in any way they please with their eyes closed.

*Discussion / Goals:*

Discussion may focus on risk taking and control issues. The theme of perfection (who needs to be perfect and who can allow themselves to be imperfect) often emerges from this warm-up. This experience allows clients to "loosen up" and freely express themselves.

## **Cloud Drawing**

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### *Materials:*

Drawing paper, markers, craypas, crayons

### *Procedure:*

Clients are asked to draw a cloud and something underneath it.

### *Discussion/Goals:*

Discussion centers on both the cloud (its shape, size, color, and meaning for the artist), and the person or item under the cloud. Goals include exploration of mood and emotions. The size of the cloud may represent the degree of depression or fear the client is currently feeling, and how overwhelmed he or she is by external forces.

## **Draw Your Energy**

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### *Materials:*

Drawing paper, markers, craypas, crayons

### *Procedure:*

Clients are asked to draw their energy in any way they please.

### *Discussion/Goals:*

Discussion focuses on the way in which the energy is represented (e.g. is it tornado-like or very weak, perhaps symbolized by small, gently curving lines?). Clients then discuss how they relate to their sketch, and their energy level is explored. Goals include examining how best to utilize strengths and maintain balance in one's life.

## **Form and Environment**

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### *Materials:*

Small magazine photos, glue, scissors, drawing paper, markers, craypas, and crayons



*Procedure:*

Have a pre-pasted magazine photo glued onto a sheet of white drawing paper. Ask clients to draw an environment around the photo.<sup>1</sup>

*Discussion / Goals:*

Discussion focuses on the magazine picture and the environment drawn. Goals include focusing and problem solving.

**Draw How You are Feeling Right Now**

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*Materials:*

Drawing paper, craypas, crayons, markers

*Procedure:*

Ask clients to draw their feelings at the present moment.

*Discussion / Goals:*

Discussion centers on self-awareness and exploration of issues and feelings.

**Shape Design**

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*Materials:*

Drawing paper, markers, crayons, craypas

*Procedure:*

Ask group members to draw a design using only circles, squares and triangles.

*Discussion / Goals:*

Discussion focuses on the manner in which participants create their design and the significance of the artwork. Goals include focusing, problem solving and abstract thinking.

## **Tiny Design**

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### *Materials:*

Drawing paper, markers, crayons

### *Procedure:*

Instruct clients to draw a *tiny* figure or design.

### *Discussion/Goals:*

Discussion involves exploring the meaning of the design and thoughts about drawing in such an *odd* manner. Goals include self-expression and increasing flexibility in one's thinking and art.

## **Drawing in Black**

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### *Materials:*

White drawing paper, black crayons, markers or pastels

### *Procedure:*

Instruct group members to create a picture (realistic or abstract) using only black marker or crayon.

### *Discussion/Goals:*

Discussion may focus on the design created, and feelings associated with the color black. Goals include self-expression and the exploration of feelings.

## **Color and Shape**

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### *Materials:*

Construction paper, scissors, glue

### *Procedure:*

Ask clients to choose a piece of construction paper of the color that most closely represents their feelings at the moment. Then have them choose another sheet of paper the color of which also symbolizes how they feel (this will be the background of the design). Have them cut a shape/s from