

EMOTIONS IN MOTION

Using movement-based expressive art therapy with people recovering from addiction ~

by Chloe Noble

"Movement is a way to connect deeply and authentically; to express the full range of human emotion."
Daria Halprin

One of the greatest gifts I have received from my training in movement-based expressive art therapy was learning how to be creative with issues belonging to my own existence. By exploring artfully my personal stories I could give a voice to the emotional patterns that were underlying the way I experienced life. Through the container of art I discovered that I had a much larger range of play and freedom than I thought and many resources to address life's situations and live more fully.

Working as an intern in a hospital setting with people recovering from addiction to alcohol I have been amazed by the possibilities that a creative introspective approach can bring to this specific population. Encountering the patients, I remain touched by their sensitivity, by their incredible and inspiring courage and by the deep human issues that led to and entertained their addictive behavior. For most of them their stories with alcohol are closely related to their emotional life. Being under the influence of alcohol often appears like a refuge that can protect them from unmanageable emotions. A refuge that over time became uncontrollable, needing more and more drinks to attain the protection expected, a refuge that keeps them separate from others and from experiencing their true self.

I work with them using the Tamalpa Life/Art Process®, a unique and pioneering method, originated by the American dancer Anna Halprin and her daughter Daria Halprin, a master in the field of expressive arts therapy. This intermodal approach combines movement and dance along with drawing, writing and dialogue and is based on the principle that our real life experiences feed our art, and our art informs the real issues in our lives. At the hospital I call upon various arts mediums to support my patients to connect to themselves and to invite their emotions to be felt and expressed in a healthy and contained way. I found out that my practice can be a rich complement of psychotherapy and medical treatment.

Emotions and alcohol ~

According to the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, an emotion is different than a feeling. A feeling is a private sensation developed by the thinking activity and related to an outside event.



In addition to this an emotion has a resonance in the body, it's a mental phenomenon translated through the soma by the nervous system. It can involve movements in the muscles, in the facial expression, in the posture, that may bring reactions such as tears and laughter or be manifested in the internal system, through the hormones, the heart beat, the lungs activity or the blood pressure. Doctor Françoise Lotstra, specialist in neuroanatomy, differentiates the simple forms of emotions: the universal expressions and gestures common to every culture to the complex form of emotions: those that are subjective and belong to each individual.

Many areas in the brain have a role in the emotional process. We know that the hypothalamus which has to do with the expression of emotions, the amygdala that initiates the feeling of fear and the nucleus accumbens that is responsible for the sensation of pleasure malfunction with alcohol abuse. The intake of alcohol inhibits the fear and the sensation of danger and stimulates the sensation of pleasure creating dependence to the product. The nervous system gets as well affected, slowed down under the effect of alcohol and agitated when the effect disappears, causing deep mood of anxiety and either intensification of the emotions felt or struggles to feel properly within one self.

As they recover from alcohol abuse and become sober, patients have to deal with a whole new way of experiencing themselves and their emotional capacity that can be very frightening and require healthy and sustainable care. Without the alcohol interaction on the brain, some emotions can be experienced as very vivid and overwhelming. Through the Tamalpa Life/Art Process® method I aim to offer people a ground for expression and providing them with resources to address the emergence of their emotions.



Creating safety ~

As I work in groups, an important aspect of my work is to invite people to feel safe. This includes the delicate but undeniable fact that each individual has his own way of feeling safe. My intention is to support each person finding something that can support them calming down and feel relaxed. This is very important for many people who have issues with alcohol because when they leave drinking, anxiety and stress surface. Through mindful movement, visualization, breathe awareness and other exercises to help reduce tension in the nervous system, my intention is to have patients connect kindly to their body.

Andre, a man in his early 60's, sober for six months, participated in my groups and reported that through slow and easy movements he experienced deep relaxation that was allowing him to feel comfortable and rested within himself. He felt over time much more grounded in his body, aware of his postural habits and tuned in to make adjustments and feel better within himself. This openness to his own internal sensations offered Andre as well a wider openness to the world around him and connected him deeper to the natural world, a place where he felt safe and resourced.

Working with movement and metaphors ~

The way I use to approach emotions is to work with what is called in the Life/Art Process® method the “movement as metaphor”. Emotions use in first place the body and its primary language which is movement to be expressed. On working on the movement we can then work as well on our emotions. Moving can bring us to our deep memories and reveals whatever resides in ourselves, in need for expression. Our emotions can give us messages that we can learn to welcome and encounter in order to inform us about meanings for our life. Whatever it is fear, joy, anger or sadness, we can learn to welcome and be creative with what arise in us and find responses consciously supported by the container of the art.

By using different arts mediums patients can deepen the exploration. With movement and dance they engage their body in space, time and force. There are invited to feel in each body part, to become awake to what’s going on inside them, to how they are in space and how they relate to others. Drawing after a movement exploration provides a trace of what has been discovered or what is present with the patient in concrete forms, colors and symbols. Writing allows one to describe with words, to connect with the imagination, to create poetry from an experience, or to give life to the patient’s inner dialogues and comments. All those mediums can serve each other and create constellations of creations that will inform and nourish the personal journey.

Working with emotions through this intermodal process with my patients is to me a fascinating experience. I work from Doctor Lotstra’s categorization that describes simple and complex forms of emotions. The simple form, the universal one, allows us to communicate our emotions to others, they are built out of all gestures and body expressions that are recognizable by every individuals. To work with them I propose for example, movement works with postures and with the face, exploration about being masked representing defenses or familiar social roles they might have, or working in partners with mirroring and developing others expressions. This stimulates expressivity and communication on their human emotions. The complex form that has to do with how each individual intimately live and relate to his own emotions can be worked out with improv on various themes that belongs to the life of the patient, explorations about being unmasked manifesting more about how they experience and feel themselves in depth, or working on body parts that are more private like the chest or the abdomen. This type of exercises facilitates authentic meetings with personal issues.

Rose, a woman in her forties, sober for almost a year, participated to my groups. After several sessions, I proposed a work on the chest body part. The exploration was about opening and closing the chest area and to bring the awareness in this activity to what was experienced in the physical body, in the mental realm and which sensations were alive. After few movements Rose started to cry, holding strongly herself. A deep intimate life issue got awakened for her. The huge unshared love she was holding back since her husband left her several years before. This theme was highly important for her to work on in her recovery process and from this opening



that happened for her through expressive arts, she was able to share more about her grief and heal her intimate wounds in my groups and with her psychotherapist. The drawing and writing process have also supported her to witness and feel the love she was carrying for him, the sadness and despair his absence left in her heart, and to put courageously her words on it.

By opening through the soma the doors of emotions patients get an opportunity to work on their life stories that underlie the emotional sensations felt. My role is to accompany them, respecting their rhythm, their needs and their expectations. The frame of the sessions is built to



allow coming out everything that may wants to arise for each person. Keeping all along a sense of ground and safety is a central concern for me in my work and a transparency that I share with my patients. When more support is needed the patient can keep exploring his story with his psychotherapist at the hospital.

Decentering and resourcing ~

To support patients experience an alternative solution for their emotional responses to drinking or other destructive behaviors, the process of decentering is very important in expressive arts. Once we get at the root of an issue for the patient, we need to find together ways not to reproduce the old reactive pattern but growing from it and transforming the responses to address the issue. Through creativity, the patient can engage his own imagination stimulated by the arts in the aim to provide himself with resources. Like a dream where anything can happen, art can be used as a space for recreating ourselves and to find elements of guidance. The distancing process can help patients respond to their life situations rather than react to it, and possibly react by going back to drinking. Professor Paolo Knill, pioneer in the field of expressive arts, scientist, artist and educator describes the decentering as “an alternative experience of worlding” that bridging back into our lived experience can reveals deep inner resources that in daily life situations may do not have come naturally to our consciousness.

After having met with her personal issue through arts, Rose has been able to take some distance with it and to invite her imagination to provide her with some resources about her emotional wound. I’ve proposed her to move inspired by the drawing and writing material she produced and to imagine what these creations would reveal her if they were able to speak. By playing around artfully with this question and letting her imagination grow Rose started to develop new movements, different from theses she had used to embody her pain. From this new impulses emerged, she could shift into another state of mind, recognizing that what she needed now was to learn how to give herself care and consideration. She became aware of the possibilities that her own creativity made available for her.

By detaching themselves from their life situations and the related emotions by making art with it, patients can engage in a deep healing process. They are invited to open space between them and their issues and allow creativity to come in that place to support them to reinvent ways of meeting their problems and of living their life. They can find they have many

other resources than their addictive behavior to support themselves and that resides inside them a creative source that can open new perspectives to cope with life. Embodying emotions and exploring them through body expression, drawing and writing, many of my patients reported that they were moving toward healing their wounds but were as well connected deeper to what was beautiful and nurturing in their life. They can discover and learn from the wisdom that their own artistic creations can offer them and experience art as a new refuge that illuminates their life.

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Pictures credits:

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