Meditation Painting and Pain Management: A Self Study

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ABSTRACT

This article chronicles an art therapist’s experience of having osteoarthritis in both right and left trapeziometacarpal joints and subsequent surgery which provided the opportunity to use art making to manage pain during the recovery period. Meditative painting was used whenever pain was experienced post-surgery, and two series of twelve seven-inch paintings were created. Simple criteria were set and followed for at least three weeks post-surgery, and the questions asked were: Will meditative painting relieve post-surgery pain? Can meditative painting be used to reduce or eliminate the need for pain medication? Are there patterns in the artwork that can be seen in the healing process? It was found that meditative painting minimized pain to the extent that pain medication was unnecessary. Patterns were seen in both series that may illustrate aspects of the healing process.

Keywords: Art Therapy, Mandala, Meditative Painting, Osteoarthritis, Pain Management

INTRODUCTION

It is easy to take our hands for granted. Most of the time they do whatever we need them to do: activities of daily living—brushing teeth, holding a cup of coffee, sewing on a button; artistic vocations or avocations: playing an instrument, sculpting with clay, drawing and painting; communicating with others: touching, holding hands, typing. An injury, pain or restricted ability to use our hands suddenly makes us more aware of how important they are and how much we depend on them.

For more than six years I battled unrelenting pain in both left and right trapeziometacarpal joints, at the base of my thumbs. It started as mild pain during certain activities and gradually got worse so that no matter what I did, it hurt. Most of the time it was a dull ache, but if I did anything remotely strenuous—pick up something heavy or try to open a jar, the pain was stabbing and breathtaking. As a tai chi practitioner, I realized that I could alleviate some of the pain by simply relaxing; because I was experiencing constant pain, I unwittingly clenched my hands, which simply caused more pain. Relaxing my hands, rather than clenching, made the pain more bearable.

It took a while to get a correct diagnosis, as I was too young for osteoarthritis to be the first thing a doctor thought of. Before I had the proper diagnosis, I was referred for PT, which

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felt good while I was there but didn’t have any long-term effects. The diagnosis was a relief in terms of knowing what was happening, and then being able to make an informed decision regarding what to do about it. I had osteoporosis of both thumbs, caused by over use. I thought back to all my art pieces requiring the cutting of metals, wrapping of wire, hand sculpting hardwood and extensive embroidering on canvas. The pain had progressed to a point where even the idea of sewing on a button, or making a beaded necklace, or pulling weeds in the garden was untenable. Holding hands with my husband had to be done gingerly and my grip was becoming less viable, making usual activities of daily living harder and harder.

I had started studying Afro-Cuban drumming for a year or two before the advent of pain in my thumbs, and that seemed to exacerbate the progression of the osteoarthritis. However, while drumming, my hands felt fine. I tried many things to alleviate the pain: topical ointment, OTC pain killers, injections of hydrocortisone. The hydrocortisone was a wonderful relief from pain, but lasted only a month or two, with a limited number of times that it could be injected per year. Finally I felt I had no choice but to have surgery. The decision to go with surgery made sense after I was told that the condition would continue to get worse, ultimately debilitating and permanently deforming my hands.

The surgery, called trapeziectomy with ligament reconstruction and tendon interposition arthroplasty, would recreate my joints using my own tendons.

In preparation for surgery, I set up my studio to create small, water-based paintings of circles, or mandalas, so I could use art to manage the pain after surgery. I wanted to know if meditative painting would relieve post-surgery pain, can meditative painting be used to reduce or eliminate the need for pain medication, and are there patterns in the artwork that can be seen in the healing process? I considered an experimental model, using art with only one hand, but didn’t want to risk not doing as much as possible to help heal both hands. I began this with a bias that art would be instrumental in my healing process. As an artist, my hands were also too important to take a chance on an experiment in such a way, so the plan was to treat both hands the same, using meditation painting whenever I felt pain.

LITERATURE

Art and Medical Settings

Art Therapy began in psychiatric hospitals, and has been used for assessment, ego development, skill and self-esteem building, self expression, self-awareness, and psychological healing (Cane, 1983; Wilson, 1985; Kramer, 1993; Snyder, 1997; Ahmed & Siddiqi, 2006). Expression through art taps into the unconscious, and brings to light those conflicts or traumas that need to be addressed and integrated consciously to heal or move forward in life (Kramer, 1958; Cane, 1983; Henderson, Rosen & Mascaro, 2007; Favara-Scacco, Di Cataldo, Smirne & Schiliro, 2001). Art therapy is now also being used as adjunctive treatment for patients with cancer, chronic illnesses, and other types of physical illnesses. When the act of creating art is pleasurable, it is inherently health-building; the body releases endorphins, which reduces the perception of pain (Pearsall, 1996; Stoppler, 2007). McNiff (1992) encourages a new model of healing where art is medicine. Art and creativity have been linked to a spiritual element that is also healing (Allen, 2005). Listening to soothing music, viewing beautiful artwork or watching a classic dance performance can be transporting, making it easy to forget whatever issues or problems you may have for a while.

Hospitals have become aware of the importance of creating more patient-friendly environments and now include the display of murals, paintings, sculptures and the piping in of healing music. Studies have shown that being in an environment with art positively affects how people feel (Litch, 2006; Caruso, 2009; Stuckey & Nobel, 2012). In The Pleasure Prescription, Pearsall (1996) outlines steps we can take to aid our own healing, how emotional connec-