

## Art therapy in the treatment of alcoholics

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**Summary** – Treatment through art therapy process lowers stress levels, relaxes, people communicate more freely, and this particular treatment affects the people addicted to alcohol. Having moved from the usual method of communication allows them personal creativity, freedom, and telling the truth through the images. Selection of their images is a result of internal thought processes that are difficult to express through words. Art therapy helps boost creative thinking and creating positive change, reduces emotional tension and activates multiple sensory systems. Various problems that are handled through art therapy cover emotions, communication problems and interpersonal relationship problems within the family. Along with art therapy it's common to listen to music at the same time (Mozart, Vivaldi).

**Keywords:** Addiction to alcohol, art therapy, emotions, communication, family relationships.

In the multidisciplinary approach and finding methods that will affect the patient's self-regulation and activate their potentials in perception and in solving their own problems, art therapy has a significant place.<sup>1</sup>

Treatment of people addicted to alcohol through art therapy process lowers stress levels, relaxes and patients communicate more freely. Having moved from the usual method of communication allows patients personal creativity, freedom, and telling

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story through the images. Selection of images is a result of internal thought process that is difficult to express through words.<sup>2</sup>

Art therapy is a process of inner monologue of the individual, where the thought process is creatively and openly expressed through drawings. Free symbolic communication gives the opportunity to every individual to talk through drawings about the problems that are difficult to express in words (emotionally and socially acceptable).

»Art therapy is a form of psychotherapy that uses art media as its primary mode of communication. Clients who can use art therapy may have a wide range of difficulties, disabilities or diagnoses. These include, for example, emotional, behavioral or mental health problems, learning or physical disabilities, life-limiting conditions, brain-injury or neurological conditions and physical illness.« – BAAT – British Association of Art Therapists

People addicted to alcohol have changed perceptual abilities, poorer self-image, difficulties to express emotions; they also have difficulties in social interactions, what eventually leads to difficulties in general functioning. Art and music activity helps stimulate the sensory system.<sup>3,4</sup>

Projective technique through drawings relieves stress, makes people addicted to alcohol easier to talk about the issues of which they find it hard to speak about. People addicted to alcohol have increased emotional tension due to conflict within their structure, the conflict in the family and show fear in achieving personal relations. People addicted to alcohol have skewed projection of reality, difficulties in coping with the consequences of the earlier kind of life. Behavior needs to be changed in the rehabilitation process. It is certainly not a simple task and it is a lengthy process, which involves all members of the family.<sup>5</sup>

Art therapy helps the expression by using stories with images, which help in speaking freely. Individuals determine boundaries and depths of content, and at the same time, they talk about the problems of emotional functioning, communication and family relationships.

Methods and treatment in art therapy process are adapted to the individual as a specific structure that results from a particular cultural context, differences in lifestyles and way of functioning. It is important to adapt to the individual needs and abilities.<sup>5,6</sup> The art therapy process has no limits in the general level of functioning and cognitive abilities and in doing so, everyone gets an equal chance of free artistic expression with the level of its reaction with uncharged social environment.

Artistic expression is symbolically an internal monologue, fostering the mechanism for considering the issues, helping to create new insights about themselves. It encourages individuals to make observations and decide how they will be affected by

the changes.<sup>7</sup> Expected changes are defined by the individual's own limits and the processes of art therapy rehabilitation method encourage their own mechanisms of self-perception and self-evaluation by an individual cause - effects of changes in thinking. An individual always has a perceptual problem pictured, as well as his or her own attitude to solve his or her own problem. Functioning of the individual is linked to learning and interaction in early childhood, experiences in adulthood, and the attainment of life functions and roles (partnership, parenthood), which are accompanied by rewards and disappointments.<sup>2</sup> The goals of rehabilitation through an art therapy process are: activation of multiple sensory systems, improving perceptions, releasing inner emotional tension by active work, discovering new knowledge through free pictorial expression, creating his or her own opinions on the drawing, boost in self-analysis resulting in personal conclusions and encouraging change (drawing, thinking, creating stories), updating the problem, enhancing creative thinking and making positive changes, graphomotorical exercise, group interaction.

»Some of the benefits of art therapy during addiction treatment include: self-discovery, personal fulfillment, empowerment, relaxation and stress relief, symptom relief and physical rehabilitation.« – COVE – Center for Recovery

#### *Methods, treatment and results of art therapy process (500 drawings)*

»Clients are encouraged to draw and paint whatever they are feeling or thinking at the moment. Our art therapist is trained to recognize the non-verbal symbols and metaphors that are communicated within the creative process, symbols and metaphors which might be difficult to express in words or in other modalities.« – Malibu Horizon

Before the drawing begins, apart from the preparation equipment, there should be given clear instructions for the task. Make a brief introduction to the positive stimulation followed by listening to music (Vivaldi, Mozart). Drawing lasts 40 minutes and the talk about drawing lasts 50 minutes. Patients themselves talk about their image (»Method conversation with their own picture«). The group gets actively involved in the conversation with their questions after the patient has finished his presentation. The therapist encourages discussion in the desired direction. It is desirable that the discussions are going in a positive direction and trigger the good side learning through positive reinforcement with the induction of the image. The group participates in the discussion by asking questions, so each individual uses questions to update its problems. The picture and story of one person encourage all individuals to think about themselves. It is important to emphasize that the groups are all very interested and active in the art therapy process.

### *Drawing »Draw yourself in a positive environment«*

When the drawing is complete, the patient tells a short story about their picture. The story of his or her figure in the picture explains the selection of environment, gives an opinion on whether he likes the figures and the whole picture.

Furthermore, it includes a discussion within the group where individuals raise some questions or say something aloud, praise, etc.

The therapist always leads the discussion in the desired direction. The question is: what can we learn from this drawing?

Figures in the drawing speak of the patient himself. Colorism, the size and the figures in space give a clearer indication where and how a person sees himself. Positive aspects seen in the picture along with an explanation of the individual give them the encouragement to think positively about themselves. If they draw themselves without a stable foundation, it shows their own insecurity and powerlessness. Drawing the head with a large mouth, with eyes that are closed or very open indicates fear or a desire not to see reality. It has been proven that children of alcoholics are prone to draw figures with big mouths in visual expression. Drawing arms and hands can show interpersonal relationships and it can be noticed that the persons are very often drawn without arms or without hands, in a passive position, indicating the significant problems in relationships with other people. Attitude of figures is often passive and without initiative. Colorism is usually warm and gentle. A small number of patients show certain degree of aggression through colorism. Drawing rooms tell about managing the environment. Areas that are far from home, indicate that it is difficult for them to find a place and so they are drawn to walk on the road, climb the high mountains or in the forests. Relations between objects in the picture that are not properly aligned, indicates the discontinuity, which is related to their daily functioning.

In summary, it can be concluded on the basis of drawings that people addicted to alcohol are emotionally warm people, have a rich and diverse internal contents, indicate regressive ways of expression and poor orientation in the environment. There was a focus on the primary elements of the search itself. Significant emphasis is placed on the difficulties in achieving interpersonal relationships. The reality through relationships with other elements in the picture is very confusing, unspecified and uncertain, more focused on search for ways of functioning in complex situations.

### *Drawing »My Family« positive environment*

In the treatment of people addicted to alcohol, family relationship problems are multiple, complex and emotionally weighted. Art therapy is a significant contribution to the rehabilitation and education.

Drawings »My Family« can gain insight into the structure and functioning of the family, as well as into the interpersonal relationships and emotional connections between the individual family members. When explaining the image, they are encouraged to speak why certain figures are drawn in a certain place. They also comment their position in the image in relation to the others. Place and the importance of individual family members are recognized by the size of figures and colorful marking. Working on family and family problems through drawings has a significant value. Through images, patients construct their conclusions, to connect and create knowledge. In observing the interactions of people in the drawing, location, and orientation towards other people, some complex and bad interactions within the family structure are evident. It is depicted by an alliance of other family members who stick together. Mostly they choose to draw an area that is far away from home, and if they draw a house, each member is in their own, separated area. The drawings are full of detail, which shows that drawing families as their motive is very important. There are also frequent divisions into male and female figures, which are kept separately and have their men's and women's activities.

The analysis of figures in the picture shows that male patients often have good support from their daughters, while sons show a significant distance in relation to alcohol abuse. Male patients often draw their wives as dominant figures (significantly larger and have more important positions on the pictures).

Women who are addicted to alcohol draw family by trying to place themselves between the figures in a safe place. They show initiative towards the other members by giving gifts, holding hands, etc. A very important place in the picture is always given to pets (they have an important place on paper, they are always on the move). If we analyze the figures, they draw significantly less body parts in relationship to the head. Family members have particularly dark eyes (colors), and some have their eyes closed (they do not want to see). The complexity and details of placement focuses on the state of clarity and orientation in the environment. When people talk about their family picture, they are quite sensible, invest a lot of energy and want to talk about it for a long time. Family interactions and relationships are a very complex problem with alcohol abuse and getting help in solving these problems has an important place in the therapeutic process.

#### *Drawing, »Emotions and communication during drinking and abstinence«*

A5 paper is folded into 4 parts

- First p. Draw your favorite flower (the flower as a symbol of individuality)

- Second p. My emotions and communication during drinking (3–5 adjectives with picture)
- Third p. My emotions and communication while sober (3–5 adjectives with picture)
- Fourth p. My biggest problem and my greatest desire (2 sentences with picture)

After that, they tell a short story:

My favorite flower is..., my emotions and communication during the drinking... and explanation of the image, my emotions and communication are when sober... and explanation of the image, my biggest problem is..., my greatest desire is...

Work on emotion and communication through art allows the patients to generate insights into emotions and communication during periods of drinking over a period of abstinence, and they realize the difference as an incentive to change. Through drawing »Emotions and communication during drinking and abstinence,« it is evident that persons addicted to alcohol communicate more easily and have more positive emotions during drinking, because they feel stronger, while when they are sober, they communicate and express emotions worse. Through the task, they think about themselves and their differences in communication and emotions during drinking and while being sober, they try to understand the problem and find a solution for creating change.

## CONCLUSION

In the art therapy process, individual capacities are boosted, by drawing and stories, individuals are encouraged to think and analyze their problems. All individuals have equal opportunities because they are not limited in cognitive abilities. In symbolic communication through drawings, all sensory systems are activated, which increase the perceptual abilities. It significantly reduces stress in individuals who speak about their problems in a creative and active way. They create their own opinions and they are encouraged to change.<sup>2,8</sup> Assessing the work in art therapy process, the therapist gains a lot of elements which represent a good direction for their future work. The content and colors used speak about the emotional state of the individual. People addicted to alcohol, in most cases, are emotionally warm. There is also an evident disorientation in the environment, primarily because of the search for a place of their own. Drawings are regressive and there are visible difficulties in achieving personal relationships within the family, as well as the problems of socialization in their environment. Very often they take a passive stance and move away from family members.

They have more difficulties achieving the emotional expression and communication in the sober state.

When we see individual problems more clearly, together we can create strategies to solve problems.

## ART TERAPIJA U LIJEČENJU OVISNIKA O ALKOHOLU

**Sažetak** – Ovisnici o alkoholu tijekom liječenja putem art terapijskog procesa kroz aktivnost snižavaju razinu stresa, relaksiraju se, slobodno komuniciraju, što utječe na sadržaj mišljenja. Odmicanje od uobičajenih metoda komunikacije omogućava im osobnu kreativnost, slobodu i pričanje svoje istine putem slika, a odabir slika rezultat je upravo unutarnjih misaonih procesa o kojima je teško razgovarati. Art terapija pomaže jačanju kreativnog mišljenja i stvaranju pozitivnih promjena, te umanjuje emocionalnu napetost i aktivira više osjetnih sustava. Tematski se obrađuju emocije, komunikacija i odnosi u obitelji, uz glazbenu terapiju (Mozart, Vivaldi). Unutarnja psihička energija se projicira u sliku. Ideja za uvid može biti potaknuta slikom.

**Ključne riječi:** Ovisnost o alkoholu, art terapija, emocije, komunikacija, obiteljski odnosi.

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