Art Therapy for Rheumatoid Arthritis

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How Getting Creative Can Help

As you know, rheumatoid arthritis (RA) has a strongly negative, wide-spread impact on your life. The discomfort, tenderness and tightness in your joints will limit some abilities and make others completely impossible to perform. As if the physical discomfort isn't bad enough, it takes your mental health, social health and spiritual health and distorts them to be less desirable. People with RA often report lower quality of life following the diagnosis. RA makes everything worse.

Since RA assaults your body and mind on a number of levels, you need specialized treatment. Rather than seeking a treatment modality that focuses on one part of you, you should set your eyes on a treatment that improves your health on multiple levels. RA forces you to be creative with your treatment options. There is no better way to be creative than with art therapy.

What is Art Therapy?

Art therapy is not a single type of treatment for someone with RA. Just like art itself is hard to limit or define, art therapy is the same. Art therapy is an inclusive term that covers many types of beneficial actions. If something involves music, painting, writing, sculpting, dance or producing anything creative, chances are good that it can be part of art therapy for RA.

At times, art therapy is broken down into subcategories including expressive writing, movement-based creative expression, visual arts therapy, and music engagement. Art therapy has been proven to benefit a range of psychological and physical health issues including chronic pain, trauma, and the effects of cancer treatment. In coming years, you can expect to see art therapy used more regularly in association with other treatments and by itself.

For the best results, seek out a trained and licensed art therapist. These are people that have obtained a certain level of education and practical experience to be proficient at art therapy. They can assess your RA symptoms as well as other physical or emotional facets factoring into your pain. They will develop a treatment plan designed for your needs and begin sessions to move towards goal completion. Frequency and duration of treatment depend on your goals and symptoms.

Appling Art Therapy at Home

Unfortunately, not everyone will have art therapist availability close to home. Additionally, some insurances may not reimburse the use of art therapy in certain situations. But don't let this be an excuse to give up on the idea of using the arts to treat your RA. Again, it only means that you need to get creative. Consider all the different ways to use art in your life based on the categories of art therapy used above.

Music Engagement

When it comes to adding art therapy into your life, there is no simpler way than music engagement. Though its name might seem intricate, music engagement really only means listening to music. Studies have found that listening to music helps add relaxation and improve overall well-being ratings.

Additionally, music engagement assists in limiting anxiety, which is valuable since many people with RA report increased anxiety. It can also reduce physical tension. With less physical tension, there is a chance to improve your perception of RA pain.

To use music as art therapy, set aside time to make music the priority and avoid multitasking. Listen to the music and appreciate what it has to offer. Your selection of music can match your mood, or it can express feelings that you find more desirable. Thirty minutes later, you may feel better than before.

Appling Art Therapy at Home

Visual Arts

For as simple and straightforward as music engagement is, visual arts therapy is on the other end of the spectrum. Visual arts therapy is focused on creating art in any way, shape and form imaginable. Whether it is sketching, painting, sculpting, card making, scrapbooking, knitting, sewing or crocheting, it counts as visual arts.

The benefits of visual arts therapies are as numerous as the types of activities. Benefits include improved expressions of grief and loss associated with the RA diagnosis and improved levels of positive emotions like self-esteem and sense of purpose. Visual arts can also help by reducing depression, anxiety, and reoccurring thoughts of your illness.

You may be thinking that the pain in your joints, especially your hands, will make any of these artistic ventures impossible. Reconsider. Many people with RA find that using their hands more regularly leads to improved functionality and reduced pain. Even intricate movements needed for knitting can be beneficial due to the repetition. Rather than focusing on what you cannot do, experiment to find the best options.

Movement-Based

If a whole-body experience is what you seek with your art therapy, you can dive into movement-based expression. The range of options is broad, so think of any action that involves you moving your entire body in a purposeful way. Dance and tai chi are great examples to consider.

Movement-based art therapy has been shown to improve physical symptoms, decrease pain and improve range of motion. Additionally, it has aided in improving the mood and body image of research participants.

For you, starting slowly will be the best course of action. No one expects you to move from low activity to a full-fledged breakdancing routine. Explore simple sequences online. Instructional tai chi videos are widely available to benefit your RA and mental health symptoms. Since safety is of paramount importance, always consult with your treatment team to establish your limitations.

Written Expression

Depending on the level of pain in your hands, the thought of expressive writing may be a negative one. Don’t despair, though. There a number of methods to support in this process. If pen and paper are out of the question, try a keyboard. If the keyboard is no better, try voice recognition software or a voice recorder. This type of art therapy is too important to bypass since benefits include pain, anger and depression reduction.

Journaling is the most thought of version of therapeutic written expression, but it does not end there. Poetry, short stories, long stories, fiction, and nonfiction can all be helpful to you in your process of coping with the diagnosis and the pain that follows.

Conclusion

RA is not a positive diagnosis, but there are steps you can take to make it less negative in your life. Art therapy is one such step. Try one version, all four, or take it another step to find an artistic journey that was not described here. You have so much to gain.