

- Psychotherapy

Art as therapy a benefit in Covid world

In these uncertain times, creative frameworks can be healing, cathartic and help reshape the world.

The Dominion Post · 12 Mar 2021 · 6 · Andre Chumko reports.

In times of crisis, people often turn to the arts for comfort, stimulation, creativity and escape. A growing body of research has shown the negative effects of consistent lockdowns and prolonged periods of isolation on the mental health of people.



One paper published last year in *Psychiatry Research* found a need to cater to and ameliorate children's access to mental health support services, with a particular focus on developing healthy coping mechanisms. That is where people like Anne Ortlepp, a Wellington-based drama therapist with the charity Skylight, come in. Drama therapy is a more intimate, client-centred form of therapy which uses things like improvisations, puppetry, game-playing and work with masks, stories, fairytales and figures in therapy. "With the protection of the role, puppet or story, clients can express their inner and outer conflicts, their feelings and longings in a safe way and find their own creative strategies and solutions," Ortlepp said.

For those who may find it hard to express themselves verbally – for example, shy or anxious children – drama therapy takes away the pressure to talk, allowing exploration and expression of difficult emotions in a more indirect, creative and non-confrontational way.

"It can provide a voice to a child who has been unable to express themselves. The drama therapist has to be observant, listen, understand the metaphoric language and intervene creatively," she said.

Benefits of drama therapy – as well as outcomes of healing and growth – include greater self-awareness, and improved physical and emotional wellbeing.

It has historically been used to treat anxiety, depression, interpersonal relationship issues, behavioural issues, learning difficulties, eating disorders, and grief and loss.

But in a world where societies are looking to a post-Covid life, researchers say all forms of psychological therapy – especially those grounded in the arts – will be needed more than ever before.

“Children can become burdened by worries, many they are not even conscious of,” Ortlepp said. “Through drama therapy they can understand their feelings around these issues, make sense of their worlds and learn to express themselves. It can be healing and cathartic.”

Jo Randerson, founder of Wellington-based theatre company Barbarian Productions, has an upcoming show exploring how creative frameworks can reshape the world during this “urgent, uncertain moment in history”.

Secret Art Powers: Lies and Fluidity is the second instalment of an evolving theatrical lecture series, and will contribute to a book she will publish next year.

Randerson said art and therapy often were in relationship with one another.

Her company is informed by therapeutic practice, with Randerson reading and watching “with great interest” any developments in the field.

Recently, Barbarian Productions explored ways people could talk about how they were feeling via its EggFruit mobile recording booth at Te Papa, which encouraged exchange of thoughts and reflection in a way that was not “just thrusting a microphone directly under someone’s face”.

Art more generally allows people to safely express thoughts which might otherwise be too difficult or challenging to say out loud, Randerson said.

“Art is essentially healing and calming because it brings an alternative energy to the buzzing consumerist culture around us.

“It can return us back to our true impulses and feelings.

“It allows us to see each other’s humanity, reminds us what is important and to feel connected.”

Jo Randerson will perform Secret Art Powers: Lies and Fluidity, at St Peter’s on Willis tomorrow at 7pm. More details at iticket.co.nz.