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Finding Your Voice

Anxiety through the lens of Expressive Arts Therapy

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*“ Why is this happening to me? Can I calm down just for a moment?
I am not in control of my thoughts. They are coming so fast.
Will my family be safe when they step out? Is it okay for me to worry so much?
There is something wrong with me.”*

The voice in your head that speaks louder than the reality around you. The voice in your body that makes you feel out of control. The collective voice that makes you lose your voice. This voice is Anxiety.

Anxiety is felt in the body through physiological sensations like shortness of breath, heart palpitations, churning in the stomach, loss of appetite and sleep, physical fatigue, sweaty palms and nausea. Anxiety is experienced in thoughts when the mind goes in circles, inability to focus, ruminating over the same thought, loss of control and mental fatigue. It is experienced as a combination of many of the above in different measures and this experience can be amplified in situations which bring about uncertainty. Even though anxiety is experienced by everyone, it can still feel very isolating. In this process of working on one's own responses to anxiety, we tend to lose our voice.



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Expressive Arts Therapy (EAT) offers us a chance to find this voice again in a safe and non-judgmental space. It allows us to focus on the process of managing our responses to anxiety by exploring and engaging with our minds and bodies via a creative process. This may seem questionable to some. You may think, “How can engaging in music, visual arts, movement, creative writing help? These are just hobbies!”

Creative art forms have been proven to be therapeutic through research in neuroscience. While genetic predisposition and neurobiological elements contribute to development of anxiety, familial dynamics and socio cultural constructs have a role to play too. Sometimes stressors can be identified clearly and sometimes it just seeps into your life steadily until living with heightened anxious state becomes chronic. Anxiety serves multiple purposes including that of survival and protection. It becomes dysfunctional when it persists and interferes with your day-to-day life. The key to restoring the stability is through the body. The voice which the body offers is often left out of the conversations on anxiety.

Expressive Arts Therapy is an intermodal use of art forms like movement, storytelling, creative writing, music, drama and visual arts framed within psychological theories and those of expressive arts therapy. You do not need to be good at any of these art forms to engage meaningfully in an EAT session. An Expressive Arts Therapy Practitioner/ Therapist is one who has had formal intensive training either via Diploma or Master’s level respectively in EAT. Just using art forms without training in a therapy space can potentially cause more harm to an already vulnerable client. When you create something that is an exploration of your anxiety, the therapist does not interpret it. The focus is greater on the process rather than the product. When your internal voice finds it hard to surface, engaging in arts provides a safe space for it to emerge



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within the context of the therapeutic relationship. It brings us into the current moment, gain resources at an embodied level to put into action when anxiety resurfaces and rewire the nervous system to respond and not react.

Grounding using expressive arts is one of the most fundamental practices to build resources for working with Anxiety. It allows us to be present in the here and now, feel connected, listen and self-regulate. Please note to practice grounding techniques using arts in safe space is something to build on in therapy sessions. Here is just an example of how grounding can look like as a practice. The key is to practice grounding as a ritual daily so that it can be accessed when symptoms get overwhelming.

Focus your attention on the body starting with your breath. Noticing the sensations you feel as you focus on each individual part of the body from head to toe and where it connects with the ground. Visualize colors for each part of the body. When you are ready to open your eyes and in slow and continuous strokes, use the colors that came up for you, on a paper. Once this process is over, pick three words that you now feel and hold them in your thought while still focussing on your connection with the ground. This can be supported by music that you find preferably something without lyrics.

Expressive Arts Therapy is the best combination of multiple arts forms and verbalization in therapeutic process, all in the service to make the resourceful voice louder than the voices we spoke about earlier in the article. Find your voice again through arts!

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