

Facing Vicarious Traumatization

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Introduction - Art and Art Therapy

The art therapist's physical and mental health is a main issue for professionals both on the personal and on the clinical level. Human beings are all subject to frustration, deception, suffering, grieving, distress, trauma, crackdown, burn out, depression, death and fear of death...so are the arts therapists [1].

Before choosing and training to be an art therapist, we need a personal art-psychotherapy. And as we know that patients' issues can destabilize the most experienced therapist, we need to learn how to use art and art therapy for regulating our inner balance and avoid vicarious traumatization.

Vicarious Traumatization, Self-Care and Resilience

Transference issues become even more complex when the client's suffering infers echos connected to the therapist's own life experience. This situation is both able to deepen empathy and help the therapist's efficiency as to mislead to vicarious traumatization [2].

As an art therapist, I need to develop tools helping to face difficult events in life and constant professional challenges in my practice. They have to be concordant with my own identity and personal style. Continuing training, creative intervention and supervision as well as personal art practice are mandatory all along our professional life. I will show how I recently had to do an important self-care work.

Current Challenges and Crisis

Since several years we all have been impacted by the pandemic which was traumatizing for many art therapists (and for everybody else too). Scarcely starting to get off the post-traumatic period of the covid pandemic – with the virus still here – when a new catastrophe occurred: the war in Ukraine, threatening us with terrifying actual and potential consequences. Moreover, a global and long-lasting challenge is the climate crisis with its economic, social and mental health consequences...

Facing multiple crisis, my professional community quickly put in place effective art & art therapy responses as well as research strategies [3, 4].

But, on my personal level, the shock of this war was particular-

ly hard. Romania is my native country and it is joining Ukraine and Moldavia, it is so close to Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia...I have friends and colleagues who are or might be more directly than myself threatened and hurt. This war was also a brutal reminder of my young years with the Ceausescu's regime in the post-Stalinist Romania, of the way I had to run away to exile and become a migrant trying to escape brutality and dictatorship. I am living for more than 40 years in France but at the end of February 2022 when this war started, I was traumatized again. I hardly could believe my eyes and ears...

As since 2020, with my colleagues from the European Federation of Art Therapy (EFAT), we started regular online meetings and implemented many working groups on different themes : creative support, experiencing art therapy directives and methods, intervention, social actions, research, special interest groups...I started to attend several of them and currently still do, as they proved to be very effective. I recovered the feeling of my capacity to contribute to the collective resilience, as well as to regulate my own emotions and restore my inner balance of sensibility, empathy, compassion, care and my therapeutic attitude. I also managed to preserve my creativity as a visual artist.

Self-Care and Resilience

One of the art therapy methods that I experienced in 2022 through a several month process is the TT-AT protocol implemented by the Italian art therapist Paola Luzzato [5]. The Trauma Treatment Through Art Therapy is a process in 6 steps/sessions, organized in 3 phases with specific objectives, goals and methods. It has been successfully applied with various populations: groups of African women with traumatic experiences of sexual abuse, rape, war violence; Ukrainian children and adolescent refugees; as well as other profiles of art therapy clients. Each step of the protocol is composed by a short time for psycho-education, a semi-directive art proposal on a specific theme, a moment of common silent looking, a time for sharing and finally a brief free art work closing the session.

I used this training both to learn the protocol and to manage vicarious traumatization. It also helped me to develop creative intervention and supervision as well as to boost my own art work. The illustrations below show my art & art-therapy self-care work between February and May 2022 [6].



Figure 1: Men in war, sideration (collage, drawing, mixed media).



Figure 2: Women in war, sideration (collage, drawing, mixed media).



Figure 3 : Searching a seed, new hope (charcoal, pastels).



Figure 4: Planting a seed, acting for resilience (ink, charcoal, vegetal elements).



Figure 5 : The butterfly, memories from Agistri, a new life (Photo, ink, seeds, textiles, mixed media).

These images show a progressive stepping from chaotic, violent and frightening feelings to a positive attitude recovering hope and trust in myself, life and world.

Conclusion

This experience proves the effectiveness of the art therapy, and specifically of the TT-AT protocol, for treating PTSD and complex trauma. Using appropriate tools - such as non-verbal communication and detour strategy - through art work, the art therapy helps making visible, expressing and sharing, stop hiding and thus healing deeply rooted trauma. People get able to face the reality, find solutions and make projects in their life [7].

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