

Visual Journaling as Art Therapy & Self-Help

by Cathy Malchiodi, PhD, LPCC, LPAT, ATR-BC



The following material is summarized from my *Psychology Today* column, Arts & Health <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/arts-and-health>, a four-part series on visual journaling, art therapy and self-help. Please visit these posts on the Arts & Health to find additional links to information and techniques. Special note: Any reproduction other than for personal use requires permission!~~ Cathy A. Malchiodi, PhD, LPCC, LPAT, ATR-BC

Part One: Visual Journaling, Self-Regulation and Stress Reduction

An art therapy perspective of visual journaling and its benefits. Published on October 23, 2013 by Cathy Malchiodi, PhD, LPCC, LPAT in Arts and Health @ Psychology Today



Visual journaling [aka art journaling] is a practice that has a long history among artists. The 2009 publication of *The Red Book* (Carl Gustav Jung's visual images and accompanying text) is considered by many to be the quintessential example of visual journaling. Because of its history in art and psychiatry, visual/art journaling has also become one of the basic methods used in art therapy. Among creative art therapy approaches to trauma intervention, visual journaling has been used in a variety of ways to help survivors not only cope with hyperarousal and distress, but also as a means of stress reduction and self-regulation.

In trauma intervention with individuals who have experienced interpersonal violence, visual journaling can be a simple, yet empowering experience of “telling without talking” about abuse or assault. For child survivors of abuse, loss or neglect, I regularly introduce a “drawing journal” with specific child-friendly prompts and activities. Visual journaling serves as a “transitional object” for these young clients to continue the process of reparation post-treatment and to remind them of ways they can self-soothe,

self-regulate and de-stress through drawing and other forms of image-making. In fact, I encourage everyone, adults included, to keep some sort of a visual journaling practice in between sessions and after art therapy has ended.

Like many art therapists I also keep several personal art journaling projects going simultaneously. Some are daily image-based musings and observations about the here-and-now; others are visual scrapbooks of ideas or images that intrigue or inspire me. But despite the fact that visual journaling is widely used by art therapists themselves and recommended to clients, it is not well-defined through a set of specific methods or best practice models. There is very little research to indicate just how visual or “art” journaling is helpful to help clients or

support wellness. Most of the available research is about short-term experiences of written journaling rather than art journal, and focuses on traumatic events, loss and medical illness via writing strategies. James Pennebaker's research team has contributed most of what is known about this type of journaling in terms of recovery from trauma. Pennebaker discovered that personal self-disclosure via writing is not only good for emotional health, but also boosts physical health as well. In brief, putting pen to paper to write about troubling experience may help to make those experiences more manageable. Says Pennebaker, "When people are given the opportunity to write about emotional upheavals, they often experienced improved health. They go to the doctor less. They have changes in immune function."

Art therapist Elizabeth Warson, PhD, is one of few researchers who has used visual journaling extensively and measured its impact via qualitative and quantitative outcomes. She proposes that self-exploration through visual journaling is an approach to treating stress, particularly with those individuals who have experienced intergenerational trauma. With American Indian and Alaska Natives populations, visual journaling is an emerging best practice in the treatment of historical trauma present in these cultural groups. Based on preliminary data, visual journaling has helped these individuals externalize traumatic stress and strengthen concepts of well-being.

Both Pennebaker's and Warson's findings bring up some questions about just how visual journaling actually works as a form of stress reduction and emotional self-regulation. For example, can art journaling be effective on its own or is it necessary to also include writing or oral storytelling as part of the process? Does visual journaling provide specific benefits that differ from writing about emotionally distressing events? Based on what is currently known about trauma recovery and existing anecdotal information, my sense is that visual journaling may work best in tandem with written journaling. When an individual experiences traumatic reactions, in essence the lower parts of the brain respond with fight, flight and/or freeze; at the same time, the higher brain is often overwhelmed by recurrent or intrusive thoughts or avoidance of thoughts related to the traumatizing events. Perhaps visual journaling and written narratives work in two complementary ways:

- 1) Creating an image, even a simple one with colors, line and shapes, expresses the sensory parts of the traumatizing event. It is a way to tangibly convey what words cannot adequately communicate or explain in a logical, linear way.
- 2) Writing about the image and the event, as Pennebaker recommends, not only translates experiences into language, but also performs another important healing function. Creating a written narrative may actually begin the process of detaching from intrusive thoughts and putting upsetting feelings (sensory memories) into a chronology. Rather than remaining a disturbing mixture of free-floating emotions, experiences are placed in an objective, historical context.

In brief, visual journaling adds an extra component to written narratives in terms of self-expression. Exactly what that synergistic combination entails and how it helps to reduce stress, serves as a form of self-care, and restores emotional equilibrium post-trauma is still unknown. In the next post, I'll describe some of the more popular practices and techniques used in visual journaling that support stress reduction and self-regulation for trauma and loss and can enhance your visual vocabulary and self-awareness.

Part Two: Visual Journaling: An Art Therapy Historical Perspective

Art journaling is about having a visual conversation with yourself. Published on October 30, 2013 by Cathy Malchiodi, PhD, LPCC, LPAT in Arts and Health

Because of its history in art and psychiatry, visual journaling (aka art journaling) is one of the basic methods used in art therapy (see “Top Ten Art Therapy Interventions” on Arts & Health).



As I said in my previous post, visual journaling is used in a variety of ways including as a means of reducing stress and emotional self-regulation. In terms of psychological trauma, visual journaling is also embraced as a practice that capitalizes on right brain dominance and supports meaning-making.

While there are many individuals in art therapy and related fields that can be referenced on the topic of visual journaling, one in particular stands out from a historic perspective. Several decades ago, art therapist Lucia Capacchione envisioned a form of visual journaling called “creative journaling.” My well-worn copy of her initial book on creative journaling is one of the oldest books in my art therapy library and is one I keep returning to. Like many art therapists, Capacchione shares

that she was influenced by Carl Jung’s *Man and His Symbols*; she also reports that Anais Nin’s *Diary* had a profound affect on her and her subsequent investigation of art-based journaling methods. And like many who find comfort in journaling at times of trauma and loss, Capacchione clearly underscores that her journaling, both in word and image, was born during a period of personal crises.

The techniques Capacchione presents are deceptively simple and these same techniques are often applied in art therapy today. Her drawing prompts include creating simple images of “how do I feel right now,” “what do I feel on the inside and what do I show to others on the outside,” and “what would my self-portrait look like today.” There are many other directives in Capacchione’s original set of prompts, including drawing mandalas, dreams, timelines and various life experiences. In brief, these visual journaling prompts help to make visual one’s pictorial vocabularies and with the facilitation of a therapist, increase awareness of the personal narratives our images and symbols manifest. But out of all these prompts, two in particular stand out and are still part of art therapy theory, methods and historical lore today.

The first is drawing and writing with your non-dominant hand, a prompt that eventually became the author’s signature technique. Capacchione’s claim is that this way of drawing and writing brought forth a sort of wisdom from the right brain and even one’s “inner child,” terminology from

then popular transactional analysis and subsequent “child within” therapy for adult survivors of childhood abuse. At the time art expression and creativity was widely promoted as basically a right brain activity, a loose interpretation of the findings of Nobel Laureate Roger Sperry who pioneered research on hemispheric functions of the human brain. In brief, Capacchione proposes that writing and drawing with the non-dominant hand provides more access to right brain functions like feeling, intuition, spirituality and creativity.

Today we are more savvy about the complexity of the brain and that creative expression is a whole brain activity, not a solely right hemisphere accomplishment. And primitive handwriting and drawing with one’s non-dominant hand is not necessarily an automatic doorway to one’s inner child, no matter how child-like the images or scribbled letters that appear on paper. However, these techniques when explored via visual journaling do provide a spontaneous form of expression that helps individuals let go of control and judgment about creative output. I often use this approach with individuals as a warm-up or as an uncensored way to experience drawing as a form of self-exploration. There is evidence that cultivating the use of one’s non-dominant hand may have an integrative effect; for example, musicians who use both hands have an increase in the corpus callosum, the part of the brain that connects the two hemispheres. So theoretically, using both hands may create more transfer between the two sides of the brain. There is also evidence that using both hands to scribble or draw is an integrative experience and at the very least, gives the brain a different type of sensory and cognitive workout (see McNamee's research in the Reference section below).

The second concept that was novel for its time period involves Capacchione’s use of visual journaling in conjunction with making an intention. The act of “making an intention” can easily take on a fluffy connotation involving candle-lighting, wishful thinking and mysticism. Art journaling is by no means the royal road to intentions coming true. But when using art expression to make visible and tangible a positive intention for oneself, I believe that Capacchione was on to something. Today, proponents of the value of intention in therapy describe it as a form of cognitive reframing and resilience-enhancing behavior. Creating an expression to represent an intention and reinforcing that in regular visual journaling not only serves as a reminder, it is also an imaginal commitment to change. Because art expression is a whole brain activity that capitalizes on non-verbal, sensory experiences, it is possible that when we draw and write about positive intentions, we increase the chances of behavior change or at least establish what we intend in a deeper, more complete manner.

I encourage you to get yourself an art journal or even a composition book at the dollar store, grab some felt markers or Sharpie® pens and try some of the techniques described in this post. The next installment of this series will describe some more visual journaling techniques, 21st century art therapy influences and what we know via research about best practices.

References and Resources

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McNamee, C. (2005). Bilateral art: Integrating art therapy, family therapy and neuroscience. Retrieved at <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10591-005-8241-y>.

Nobel Laureate Roger Sperry and the split brain experiments, see <http://www.nobelprize.org/educational/medicine/split-brain/background.html>.

Part Three: Top Ten Art Therapy Visual Journaling Prompts

There is a palette of possibilities when it comes to journaling for health. Published on November 19, 2013 by Cathy Malchiodi, PhD, LPCC, LPAT in Arts and Health

Visual journaling (aka art journaling) has a long history in the field of art therapy, particularly as an approach to assist recovery from trauma or loss and as a form of stress reduction. Carl Jung is often considered to be the art therapy “poster person” for visual journaling because he maintained a regular practice of visual journaling. He generally created small circular drawings that he believed corresponded to his inner feelings and the archetypal realm of the collective unconscious.



The previous two posts on this topic address how visual journaling assists emotional reparation and supports self-regulation and stress reduction. Since then many readers have asked about specific art therapy approaches to visual journaling in response. There are numerous books on visual or art journaling on the market with many good recommendations on how to get started or expand your visual journaling practice. In the tradition of the Top Ten Coolest Art Therapy Interventions, here is a list of the more popular visual journaling prompts [in no particular order] used in art therapy, followed by some general guidelines for applying these strategies to your own self-expression and exploration:

1) How Do You Feel Today? This is possibly the most common prompt also called a “feelings journal.” I often recommend to clients that they keep a feelings journal between sessions and to spend a little time each day drawing “how I feel today” using colors, shapes, lines or images.

2) Spontaneous Imagery. Spontaneous imagery can mean many things; most often it refers to creating a scribble or free-form lines and looking for images within those lines.

3) Non-Dominant Hand Drawing. Lucia Capacchione [see previous post], art therapy/ journaling maven, encourages people to “draw with your non-dominant hand” over time and see what emerges; she also recommends writing with your non-dominant hand as part of a journaling practice.

4) Working Within a Circle. This is sometimes called a “mandala journal.” You can simply trace or draw a circle on each page of your journal and make a regular practice of creating images within and/or outside the circle template.



5) Dream Journal. If you have time first thing in the morning after you wake up, try keeping a journal of visual images recalled from your dreams. Try writing down some key words or phrases first, followed by drawing of the main elements of your dream.

6) Photocollage Journal. If you are not keen on drawing, try collecting your favorite images, words or quotes from magazines or books, and/ or print memorabilia and make a regular practice of creating an image journal. It can be any theme [travel, soothing images, etc] or purchase a Smashbook® [available at craft and book stores] and a gluestick and start gluing.

7) Doodle Diary. Doodling with felt markers or the ubiquitous Sharpie® pens is not only fun, but also has been shown to actually improve memory in some cases. You can also replicate Zentangle® designs or make up your own “tangle doodles” by creating patterns with repetitive lines and shapes. By all means, be sure you are having a good time and getting into the “doodle zone” [a state of creative flow where time is non-existent].

8) Intention Journal. If you have a particular intention in mind [for example, a gratitude practice or a goal to become healthier in the next year], try keeping a visual/writing journal dedicated to a particular intention or vision.

9) Altered Book. Any book [old novel, cookbook or children’s storybook] can be used as a visual journal; you can use the words and images in the book as part of your journaling or draw/paint/ collage over text. The next post in this series will explain this form of visual journaling in more detail.

10) Create Your Own Approach. Draw/paint/collage as you like and die happy. It’s your visual journal, do what seems right for you and in any media that appeals to you.

Here are a few basic guidelines for visual journaling:

Just Relax. Many professionals who use visual journaling recommend some sort of relaxation practice before beginning each entry. That can be helpful, but don't make it into a laborious ritual if it does not feel right to you. Visual journaling itself ought to serve that purpose of stress reduction and emotional regulation. Some times it is best to just pick up your art materials and get started.

Record the Date. Write down the date [on the front or back of the page] you completed the image in your journal. If a title or other words come to mind, be sure to write those down, too.

Don't Go it Alone. A visual journal can be a private experience, but if you really want to get the most out of it, an empathetic and reflective witness is important. Of course, I recommend an art therapist skilled at helping you deepen narrative work about your images; a visual journaling group that meets regularly to share creative work and spend time together working in journals is another good option. There are online art communities [like the Art Therapy + Happiness Project] that offer opportunities to connect with other visual journalers, too.

Safety First. There is an automatic mantra that "a visual journal is safe place to express your feelings and experiences." This is not necessarily true in all cases. We often are inclined to place our deepest, most tender experiences in journals of any kind. I always advise my clients who take up the practice to consider keeping their journals in a safe place if writing about traumatic events, losses or interpersonal problems. And with my youngest clients, I encourage children I see in therapy to leave their journals with me for safekeeping between sessions especially if they are in danger of domestic violence or abuse.

This is a shortlist of guidelines, with one more post to come-- the altered book as a visual journaling practice. According to art therapist and former National Institutes of Health researcher Harriet Wadeson, an altered book is form of journaling practice for exploring an altered life. Like all visual journaling, it is a powerful way to tell your story as well as re-story the dominant narratives of your life.

Part Four: Altered Books and Visual Journaling

Changing the story through "altered" art therapy and visual journaling. Published on December 23, 2013 by Cathy Malchiodi, PhD, LPCC, LPAT in Arts and Health

Visual journaling (aka art journaling) has a long history in the field of art therapy, particularly as an approach to assist recovery from trauma or loss and as a form of stress reduction. The previous three posts on this topic address how visual journaling assists emotional reparation and supports self-regulation and stress reduction. I also shared some popular visual journaling prompts used in art therapy and general guidelines for applying these strategies to your own self-expression and exploration. One of these prompts is the "altered book" and is the final installment of this four-part series on visual journaling for self-expression, health and well-being.

Technically, an altered book is a form of mixed media artwork that changes a book from its original form into something different, altering its appearance or intended meaning. The book itself can be cut, collaged, painted or otherwise changed or transformed in some way. These

alterations often incorporate the book's text and/or illustrations; in fact, you can simply use a felt marker or pen to highlight certain words or phrases, creating altered prose and poetry. The Altered DSM III by Ron Huxley is one of my favorite examples of an altered book found at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/rehuxley/sets/316407/show/>. Huxley's innovative concept of the altered

book may inspire some of us to take a creative crack at the DSM IV and V someday!



From an art therapy perspective, creatively altering a book can be a form of rewriting one's life story through visual journaling. It is similar to the process of narrative therapy, but taking the approach a step further through redefining the story through not only words, but also images. Harriet Wadeson, a well-known art therapist, author and researcher, applied altered book journaling to her own struggles with cancer and describes the experience in her book, *Journaling Cancer in Words and Images*. Wadeson refers to the process as an "altered book for an altered life;" in her case, it is

a life profoundly changed by a cancer diagnosis and subsequent treatments and challenges. Her altered book contains not only images of pain, suffering and the realities of illness and treatment, but also beauty, inspiration and transformation in words and symbols.

I recently took a cue from Wadeson's altered book -- when confronted by a mild traumatic brain injury [TBI] earlier this year, I started to re-author the narrative of my concussion via a book called "The Stranger" [not the Camus version, but a novella by another author]. The book's title reflected my initial post-TBI status of "not feeling like myself," a shared experience that almost everyone who has had a closed head injury reports. I used the experience of creating an altered book first as a relaxing and stress-reducing pastime when my cortex was literally too tired to think; I just allowed myself to enjoy working with colored paper, pens and paints to alter pages without judgment. As I began to recuperate, the pages evolved into images and prose depicting my process of recovery and the eventual realization that I was very fortunate indeed to have not experienced the more serious symptoms that many individuals with TBIs encounter. Ironically, the last page of the book was completed on the three-month anniversary of the injury, a day that coincided with the predicted "complete" recovery date according to my doctors. My last image summarized this milestone and it is a message that I now share with individuals I see in my art therapy who have sustained a TBI or are challenged by other conditions. The page says, "You can let Rays of Hope pull you in every direction," a personal awakening to the benefits of a positive outlook when confronted with physical or emotional challenges.

Of course, there is much more to the story of my altered book and newly discovered narrative than I can describe here. But as a therapist who professes the importance of resilience in

reparation and recovery, engaging in this form of visual journaling turned out to be more powerful than I originally anticipated. All art making is in some way about transformation and renewal; altered art empowers the creator to restore what has been lost and make changes to what already exists through symbol and metaphor. In brief, my simple altered book not only helped to re-author the experience of mild TBI, it also empowered me to honor and transform my healing journey through art and image.

Keep Calm and Art Therapy On in 2014,

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