

Couple Art Therapy: 'seeing' difference makes a difference

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The medium of art can be incorporated into therapeutic work with a couple in valuable and productive ways. Verbally, the couple are in familiar territory—their interaction is entrenched, predictable and known. The therapeutic application of art offers couples the opportunity to communicate in a way that is less familiar. Once over the initial shock of being asked to make art, the couple has an opportunity to look at their difficulties from a new perspective and literally 'see' their different points of view. It is likely that expressing themselves visually is a new, or foreign, experience. However, the production of images to convey thoughts and feelings about the relationship, each other and themselves, introduces difference and thereby encourages the couple to communicate in a new and less familiar way. This is a new realm of experience with what is known and familiar—their partner. Coming together to make art often inspires a new sensitivity to each other. For some couples, this can be challenging, while for others it can introduce a sense of fun and play. It can also be the difference that makes a difference, often because it is an experience that is different to anything they have done together in the past.

Why is this? Couple art therapy offers an opportunity to literally 'see' the way each other is describing their relationship experiences. This helps promote sensitivity and respect in regard to unresolved conflict, and offers an opportunity to co-construct ways to resolve relationship difficulties together. The process of sharing artwork with each other engages the couple to look at and listen to the perspective of the other. Using art-making processes to convey thoughts and feelings provides a new language, a language that is less familiar, yet universal. There is opportunity to have fun, transforming words into images, exploring the symbolic meaning and listening to metaphorical explanation.

Although art therapy is used in family sub-system work, and dyadic or conjoint marital work, its use has limited description in the art therapy literature. Specific literature on couple art therapy is written predominantly by American art therapists: Kwiatkowska (1967, 1971, 1978); Wadeson (1973, 1980); Landgarten (1981, 1987); Frings Keyes (1983, 1984); and Riley (1991, 1993, 1997, 2003). Kwiatkowska has been particularly influential, and Wadeson's (1973) pioneering work is the first published couple art therapy research.

British art therapy is couched in more psychodynamic terms (Donnelly, 1992), whereas in North America, it is best described as 'eclectic' or 'integrative' (Rubin, 2001; Wadeson, 2001; Ault, 2001), and demonstrates the incorporation of a wide variety of theoretical models, including an emphasis on systems theory. Australian art therapists have the advantage of exposure to both