

play & mental health

by Helen Townsend



What is play therapy?

Play Therapy uses the power of play to bring about healing and transformation. Many children cannot talk or will not talk about their problems. The same can also be said for adults. We can sometimes find ourselves in the grown-up world, debilitated by fears, anxieties and worries that freeze us and stop us being able to articulate how we are experiencing something. We also don't always grow up with the skills to be able to understand ourselves or breakdown large emotions such as anger and fear.

The importance of adult play

In our hectic, modern lives, many of us focus so heavily on work and family commitments that we never seem to have time for pure fun. Somewhere between childhood and adulthood, we stopped playing. When we carve out some leisure time, we're more likely to zone out in front of the TV or computer than engage in fun, rejuvenating play like we did as children. But play is not just essential for children; it can be an important source of relaxation and stimulation for adults as well.

Play can add joy to life, relieve stress, supercharge learning, and connect you to others and the world around you. Play can also make work more productive and pleasurable.

The benefits of play

Play helps to relieve stress, improve brain function, stimulate the mind, boost creativity, improve relationships and connection to others.

Play is fun and can trigger the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals. Endorphins promote an overall sense of well-being and can even temporarily relieve pain. Fun activities that challenge the brain can help prevent memory problems and improve brain function and aid a better social interaction which can help ward off stress and depression.

Young children often learn best when they are playing—a principle that applies to adults, as well. Learning a new task when it's fun and you're more relaxed aids the ability to retain the learning. Play can also stimulate your imagination, helping you adapt and solve problems.

In the words of George Bernard Shaw (Irish comic and dramatist), "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing." Play can boost energy, vitality and even improve your resistance to disease, helping you function at your best. Play also releases important chemicals in the brain that promote a sense of calm and well-being in the child/adult.

I tend to reframe the word 'Play' as 'Creative Work'. Say the words "PLAY" and it can conjure fears and anxieties in some adults. Our society tends to dismiss play for adults as its perceived as unproductive, petty or even a guilty pleasure. The notion is that once we reach adulthood, it's time to get serious and between personal and professional responsibilities, there's no time to play. But having fun is in fact crucial to mental creativity, health and happiness.

We seem to only believe that the kind of play we can honour is competitive play! But play is just as pivotal for adults as it is for children. We don't lose the need for novelty and pleasure as we grow up. Play can bring joy and happiness that stimulates the pleasure centres in the brain and reinforces the action, which aids the repeating of that activity.



The benefits of creative play in adults

Creative Therapy is a method of helping adults to help themselves through providing a therapeutic environment to play. Play is a child's natural medium of self-expression – it's essential for development but sometimes as adults we have not been able to 'self express' for fear of consequence.

Creative Therapy has many benefits to the cognitive, social and emotional wiring of the brain. Neuroscience has shown that play is essential in the successful development of the brain, in particular, the problem solving and pro social part of the brain.

Creative Therapy also increases self-esteem, decreases stress and gives the opportunity to express feelings and emotions.

I'm sure we've all heard the expression "Self-Medication". I like to see creativity as a form of self-medication. It aids brain function and brings so many positive factors that this form of self-medication should be a prescription given to everyone. It can be a cheap way of making us feel valued and worthy and does not involve too much physical energy in most cases. When clients suffer from mental health disturbance 'energy' is quite often something we don't have much of. The examples below don't involve a large amount of physical energy, more a brain function, which ultimately will boost the physical energy.

What does Creative Therapy look like?

It could see an adult engage in creative activities such as clay, sand, paint, stories, music, movement and puppets to name but a few. I have given some examples below of the sort of creativity some of my clients have undertaken.

Creative Art

Art journaling is a form of creative art we are all familiar with, and there are many examples throughout this course of how journaling play can be greatly beneficial. Creating by using our imagination and bits from around the home can aid the release of endorphins. In creating any type of art we can feel a massive sense of achievement which help boost the positive receptors.

Mask Painting

Masks are an excellent technique for encouraging self-reflection and expression. I encourage the client to be creative and use the mask as they wish. This activity is about looking at the mask from both sides and reflecting on how clients see themselves and how they think others see them.

Cookie Jars

Cookie jars are a fun, artistic, and hands-on way for clients to practice gratitude/self praise. In this activity, a client creates a special jar for saving positive statements at the end of each day. Using blank slips of paper and using prompts such as “I am thankful for....., today I achieved....., I am pleased with, today I feel happy because....” they will write down good things about their day.

We encourage other people within the client’s household to add positive statements about the client to the jar, if the client feels this is safe.

We then use the positive statements at time when a client might be struggling to find a positive for the day or about themselves. They can dip into the cookie jar and take out a statement and read it out to themselves. Again, this is about self-reflection and self-awareness and is really good for clients who suffer with confidence issues and low self-esteem.

Sandplay

Sand Tray Therapy is a creative therapy in which clients represent their personal world in symbolic form by working with objects in a sand-filled tray. Working in this way can powerfully enhance a client’s awareness and promote expression, exploration and resolution of a variety of issues.

Sand Tray Therapy possesses a natural ability to heal the human psyche itself when given the proper conditions. It is used to activate these healing energies at the deepest level of the psyche by using miniatures and the sand tray to reflect the client’s inner world through the process of play.

Clients can create and reflect on the sand trays, often retrieving lost memories, early childhood experiences and material difficult to verbalise. It is especially useful when working with childhood trauma, relationship difficulties and needing to see things from a different perspective.

