



Art as Therapy for Traumatic Brain Injury – A Case Study

Atara Grenadir MFA, ATR-BC, Touro College, Brooklyn, NY

What is Traumatic Brain Injury?

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is defined as any alteration in brain function or pathology due to an external force (BIAA,2014). Such an injury can be mild (a concussion) or may cause physical, cognitive and emotional disturbances, calling for a comprehensive, holistic, intensive and individualized treatment.

I present a case study of art as therapy as an intervention for TBI.

Presenting Problems and Goals

Shmuel is a 39 year old man with developmental disabilities. He had surgery at age 2½ for a brain tumor. Over the years, multiple cerebral shunt failures and replacements were experienced as traumas that affected his cognitive functioning. Shmuel frequently feels unsafe and is often unable to sleep at night. He wants to make peace, and when issues are not resolved, he tends to panic, and this leaves him unsettled.

Shmuel is living in a group residence, and he feels that the staff often treat him like the lower-functioning residents, and he resorts to remaining in bed to avoid conflicts and situations when his concerns are not being heard.

One of his goals is to stop ruminating about one doctor who had committed him to a psychiatric hospital for a week, due to an incident in his residence that was misinterpreted as hostility.

Shmuel had demonstrated talent as an artist as a child, and art was suggested as an intervention.



A Protocol for Art as Therapy

Art Materials: Resistive materials (markers, oil pastels) are the preferred drawing materials because they give the art maker more feeling of control. In an open studio, Shmuel builds 3D constructions from wood and objects purchased at variety stores.

Procedures: Shmuel often opens an art session by drawing what is on his mind and explaining what he drew. Directed questions about the imagery lead to insights. The subsequent drawings are often based upon recent experiences that he wants to work through and resolve.

Dialoguing with the image (role-playing multiple characters in the image) is effective for clarifying how the situation occurred and exploring more appropriate responses for the future.

Trauma Drawing #1 Hard to Fall Asleep

#1 Shmuel made a drawing of the challenge of trying to go to sleep because of his negative self-talk and "mental chatter" concerning difficult people



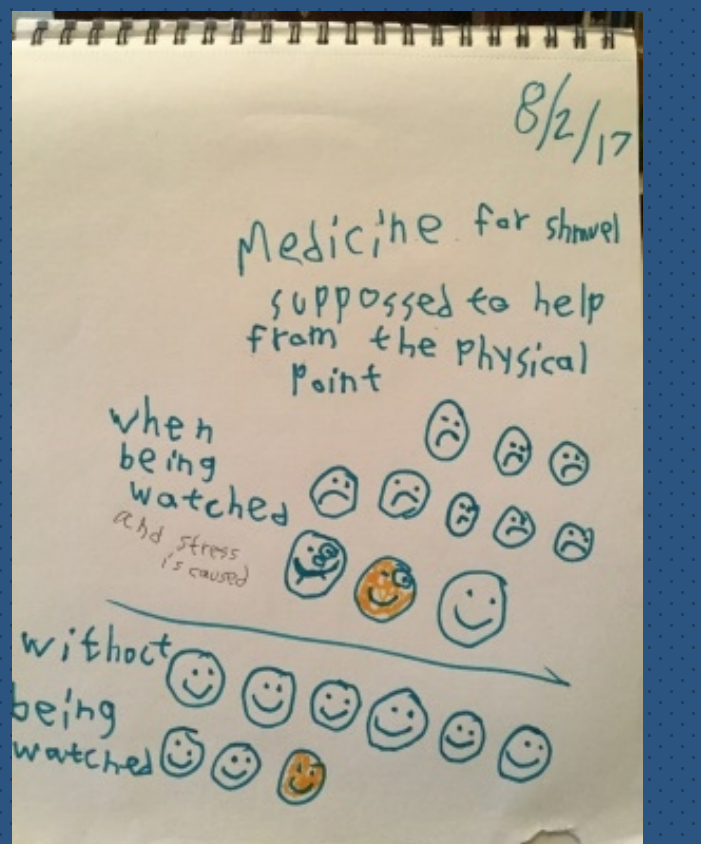
2 By dialoguing with the image, he told each figure to go to sleep now, so he could also go to sleep. Now that he could be in control, he found a solution: listening in bed with earphones to relaxing music



Trauma Drawing #2

Supervision of Taking Medicine

#1 Shmuel resented having to be watched by the staff while he takes his medicine



#2 By drawing a self-strength image and discussing his options, Shmuel developed an approach for convincing the staff that he is capable of taking his medicine unsupervised



Benefits Exhibited from Using Art as Therapy

Art making can help an individual with TBI explore self-identity and focus on abilities instead of disabilities. The last two years of this art-based treatment has helped Shmuel self-regulate and achieve his goals. He had developed positive social skills. He had developed resilience and he is more outer-directed, motivated and productive. He has created many new artworks, several of which have been sold.

Shmuel works as an art teacher for people with disabilities. He is creating an interactive coloring book and a "happiness cookbook".



Window of Happiness



Creating Peace



Life is Wonderful