

# Expressive Arts Therapy: Creative Interventions

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# Today We Will Learn



1. What is Expressive Arts Therapy?
2. Why Art?
3. How, when, and why to apply Expressive Arts interventions in your work?
4. Practical Implementation of the arts in therapy, as regulatory strategies, and self-care tools

# YOUR HISTORY WITH ART

- What is your first memory involving art? Was it visual? Music? Something different?
- What was the narrative around making art? Was it for process or product?
- Did you enjoy making art as a child? As an adult?
  - If not, *why*? When did you stop finding joy in it?

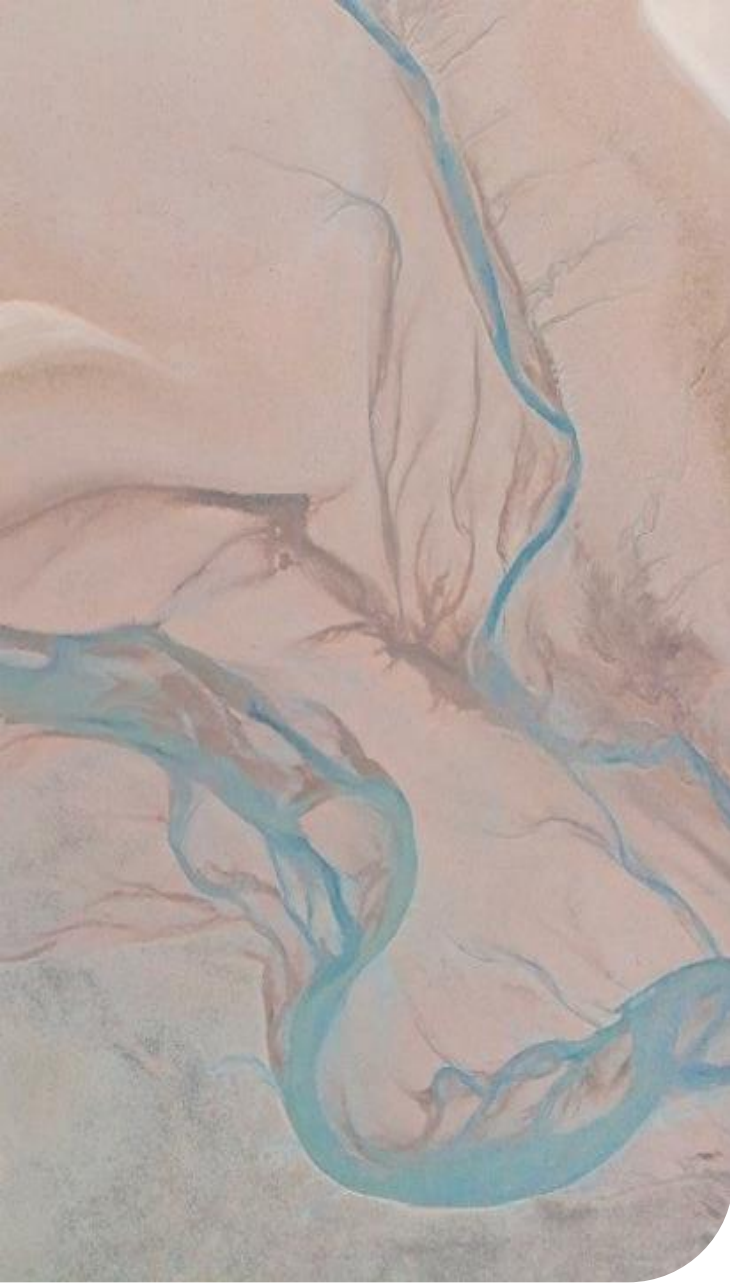


## Defining Expressive Arts Therapy

**“The expressive arts combine the visual arts, movement, drama, music, writing and other creative processes to foster deep personal growth and community development.”**

- IEATA (INTERNATIONAL EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY ASSOCIATION)

WHAT IS ART?



# Modalities

- Music – generating & experiencing
- Sound
- Poetry – written & spoken-word
- Dance/movement
- Visual Arts – drawing, painting, collage
- Clay
- Sculpture
- Multimedia (use of computer/tech)
- Song
- Beat-making
- Work with textiles/fabric (making garments, quilting, reupholstery)
- Drama
- Storytelling
- Any others you can think of?

ALWAYS REMEMBER IN OUR  
WORK...

IT'S ABOUT THE  
PROCESS, NOT  
THE PRODUCT

# What is Art?

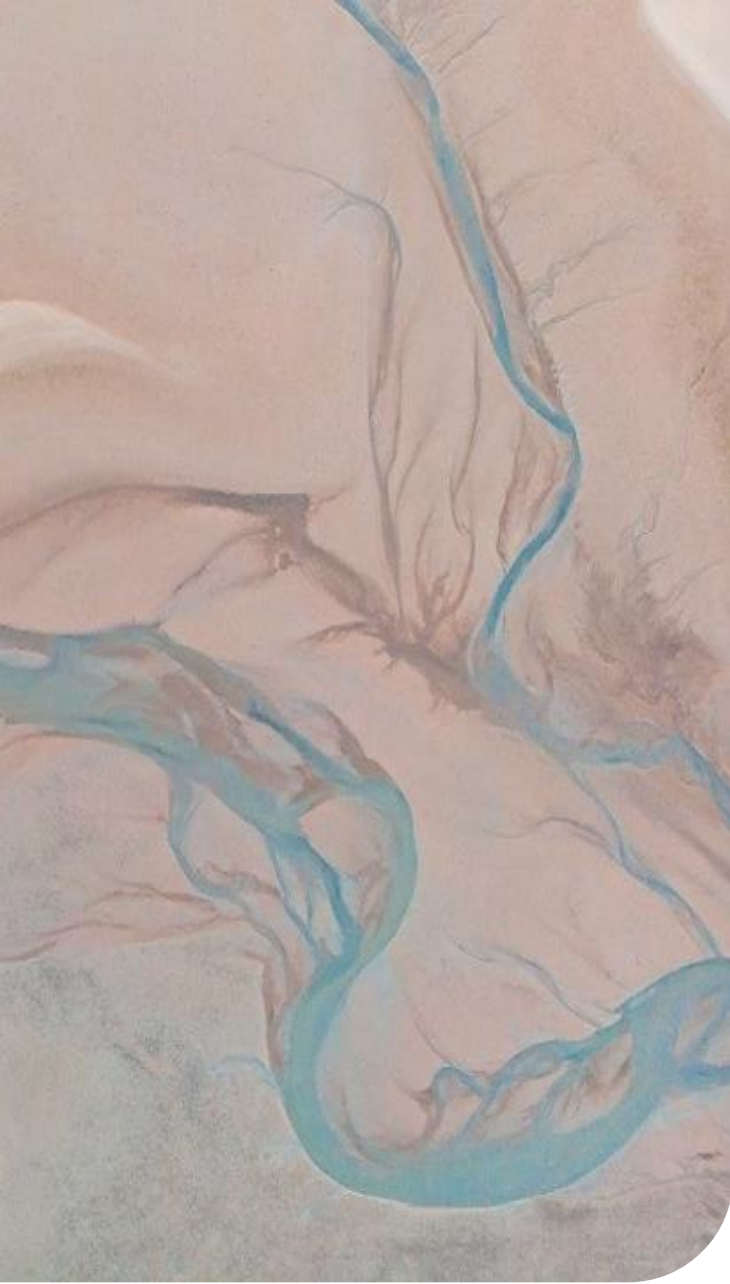
“I think everything in life is art. What you do. How you dress. The way you love someone, and how you talk. Your smile and your personality. What you believe in, and all your dreams. The way you drink your tea. How you decorate your home. Or party. Your grocery list. The food you make. How your writing looks. And the way you feel. Life is art.”

- HELENA BONHAM CARTER

# THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS:

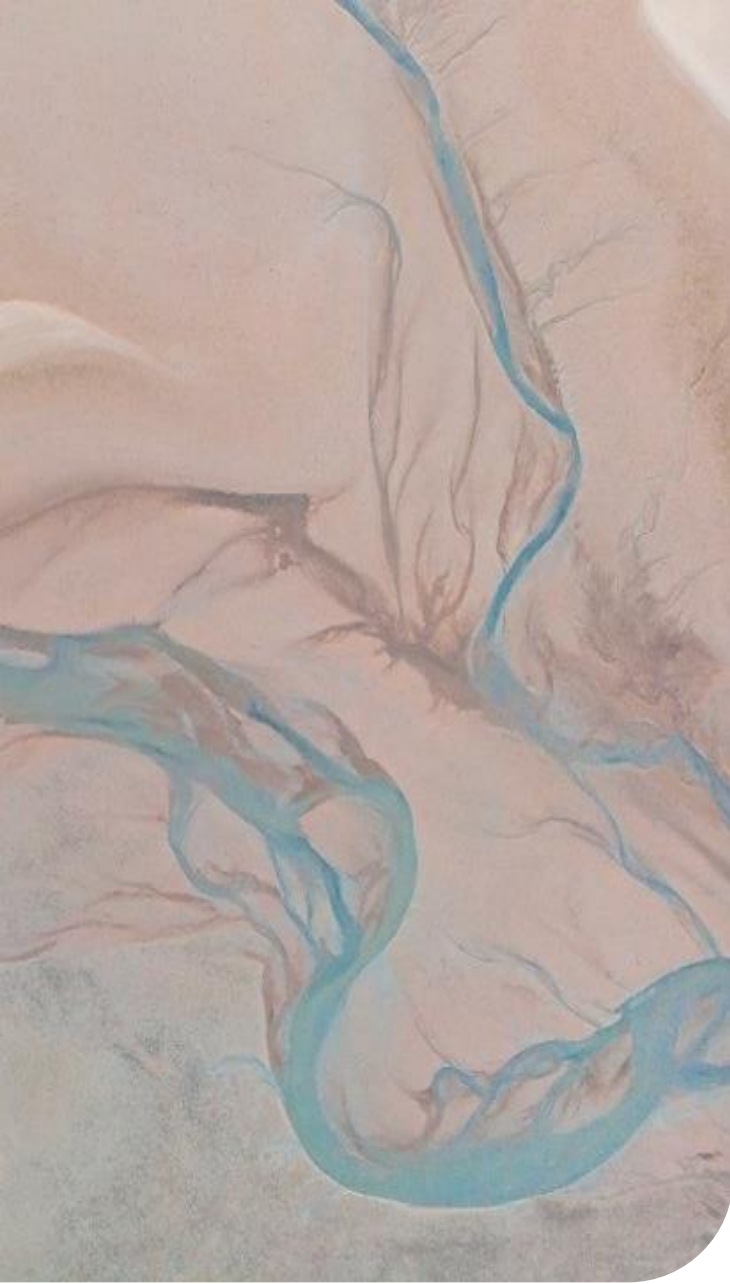
# WHY ART?





## Clinically speaking, Expressive Arts modalities can...

- Build rapport
  - Provide opportunity for shared experience & vulnerability
  - Build community and connection (group, classroom, or family therapy setting)
- Be focusing, promote stronger executive functioning, be regulating, relaxing, containing
- Be enlivening, energizing, amplifying
- Promote seeing situations in new ways, from different perspectives



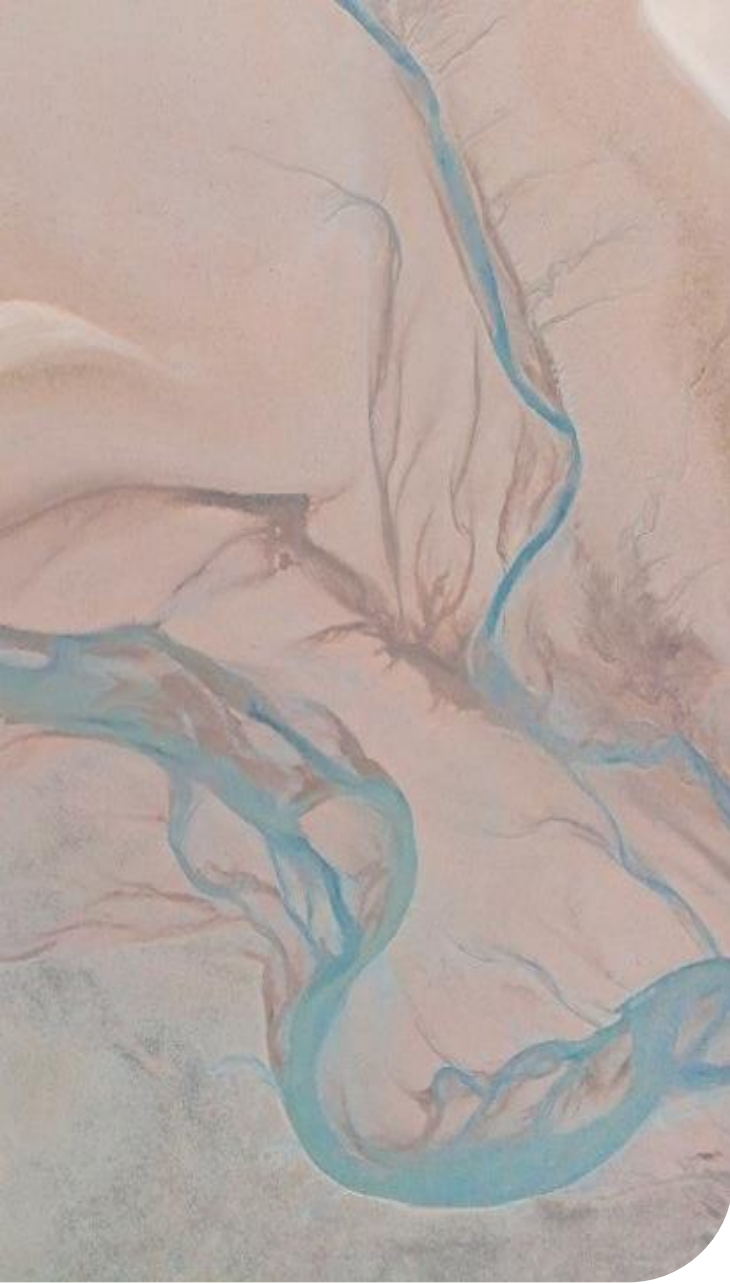
## Clinically speaking, Expressive Arts modalities can...

- Help increase emotional intelligence, empathy, & attunement
- Support therapist/counselor mirroring, reflecting, responding
- Promote clients to explore different aspects of themselves, their relationships, values, goals & struggles
- Increase therapist insight
- Support processing trauma more quickly, effectively, and safely

# The Power of the Arts in Therapy

“Art can serve as a tool to help clients cross cultural barriers including language to forge connections and express themselves. Art making taps into expressive tools that are inherent in all humans, and that are still a regular part of indigenous and old-world cultures. Creative expression serves in many Latinx and indigenous cultures as a tool for communication, storytelling, record keeping, and the documentation of history (Agosin, 1996; Carocci, 2010; Charland, 2011; Garlock, 2016; Mujica, 1997). In preserving traumatic memories through art, individuals can reclaim their past.”

- BRANDOFF & SANCHEZ, *ART THERAPY WITH LATIN-AMERICAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN*



## Clinically speaking, Expressive Arts modalities can...

- Improve self-care practices, enhance health & wellness
- Improve emotional release. Art-making can be cathartic
- Increase levels of serotonin (support management of depression)
- Decrease cortisol (lower stress)
- Trauma-informed expressive arts therapy “...centralizes brain and body-based regulation, stress reduction, somatic awareness, self-efficacy, and empowerment.” – Cathi Malchiodi, *Handbook of Expressive Arts Therapy*

Greasley, A. E., O'Grady, A., & Stapleton, S. E. (2026). Age is just a number: Persistent participation in Electronic Dance Music by women over 40. *Psychology of Music*, 54(3), 432-447.

Magsamen, S., & Ross, I. (2023). *Your brain on art: How the arts transform us*. Random House.

# The Power of the Arts as Self-Care

“Participants reported attending EDM events to combat stress, to escape the realities of everyday life, and to access spiritual experiences. Five participants chose to expand on the spiritual aspect of EDM in the open-ended responses, explaining how the music, people and atmosphere in combination provide access to ‘a feeling of happiness and a high that’s hard to find elsewhere’ (42 years). For overall wellbeing, several responses emphasised the importance of balance.”

- GREASLY, O’GRADY, & STAPLETON, *AGE IS JUST A NUMBER: PERSISTENT PARTICIPATION IN ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC BY WOMEN OVER 40*

# MEANING MAKING: MUSIC AS COMMUNITY



THE NEW YORKER



Song is a vehicle

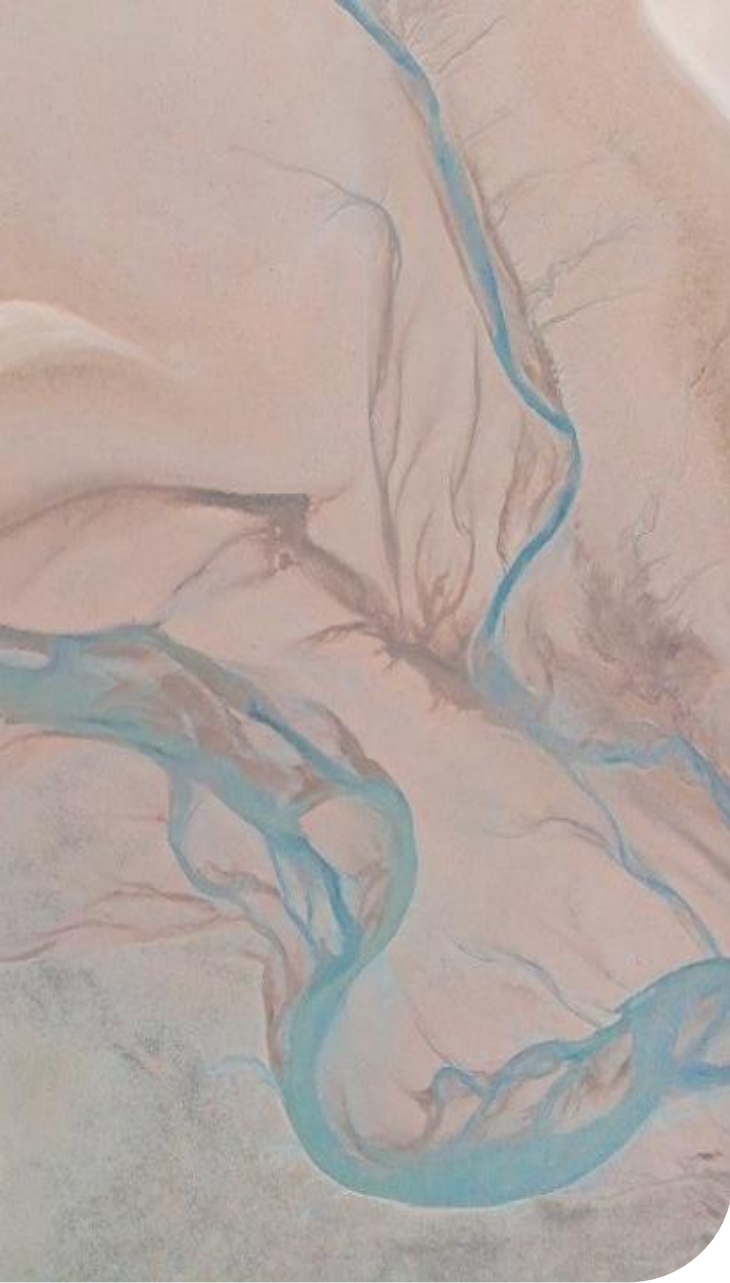
# The Power of the Arts as Activism and Community-building

“In the world of creative expression and activism, art therapy holds a special place in expressive arts interventions for generating agency and resiliency. Art therapists utilize social justice frameworks and recognize artistic creation to challenge oppression (Hocoy, 2005; Kapitan, 2009). Art can uplift spirits, incite revolution, provide a sense of agency and power, and be an important piece of the healing process.”

- Harris & Marcelo, *Understanding Black Experiences and Access Barriers in the Expressive Arts Activities and Therapies*

“One of the best strategies for working with this population is the use of art therapy, a discipline that inherently cuts across language barriers and transcends embodied trauma, engaging the strength of creativity in helping to re-humanize the client”.

- Brandoff & Sanchez, *Art Therapy with Latin-American Immigrant Women*



# Theory

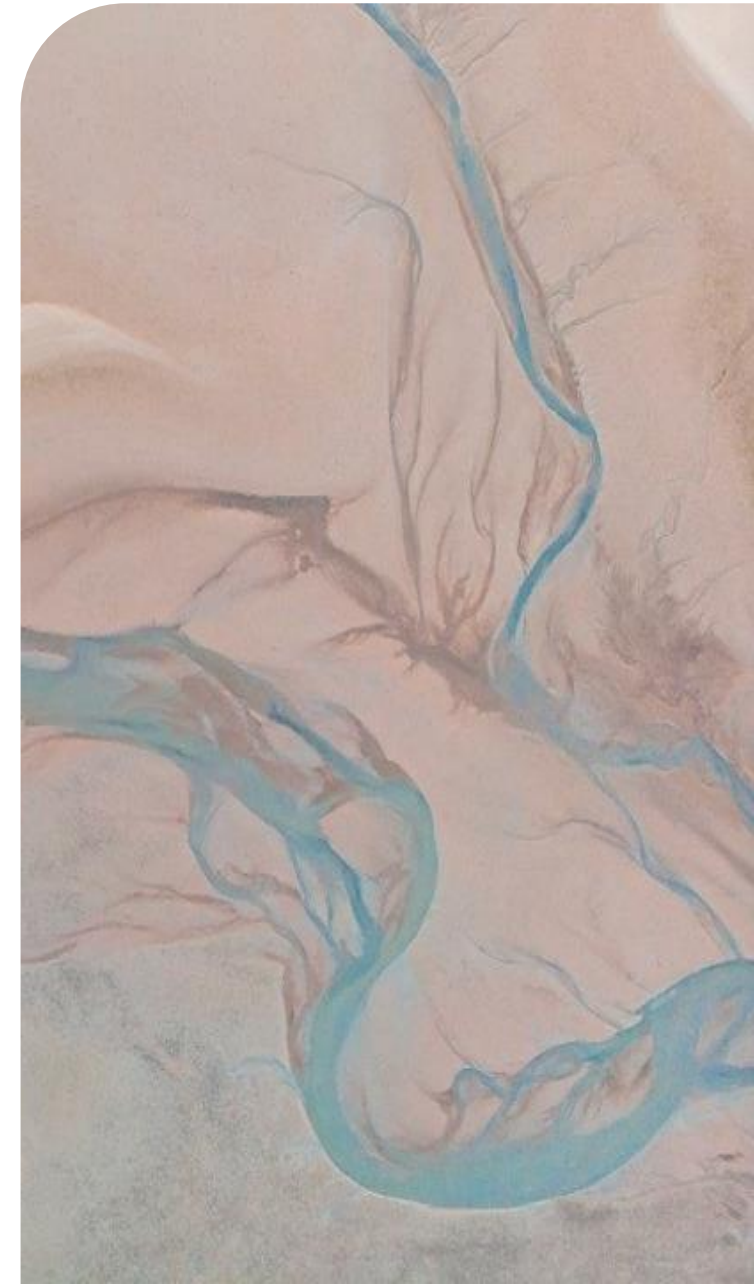
- ***We don't always have the words*** or language to describe an emotion, situation, event, or problem.
- There are ***times we need distance*** to explore and find solutions, new outcomes or lessons – “You cannot taste the soup you're in”
- ***Everyone's process is unique*** – talking alone doesn't always work for everyone, especially kids. Sometimes we need to use ***other modalities*** to go deeper and create a safe space to explore, express, and be vulnerable.
- Art ***as*** therapy
- “Metaphor is a vital component of creativity because it allows familiar circumstances to be seen in new ways” - *Managing Traumatic Stress Through Art*, Cohen, Barnes, Rankin c1995

# MEANING MAKING: SQUIGGLE DRAWINGS

1. Put your pen down on the paper, close your eyes, and without lifting the pen, make a squiggle for 30 seconds.
2. Create a creature using the squiggle you've just drawn. Find a name for your creature.
3. On the back of your paper, write a story about this creature with a beginning, middle, and end. This can be as short as 3 sentences.
4. Take 5 minutes for a free write on the experience of this when done. Turn & share with a partner if you like!

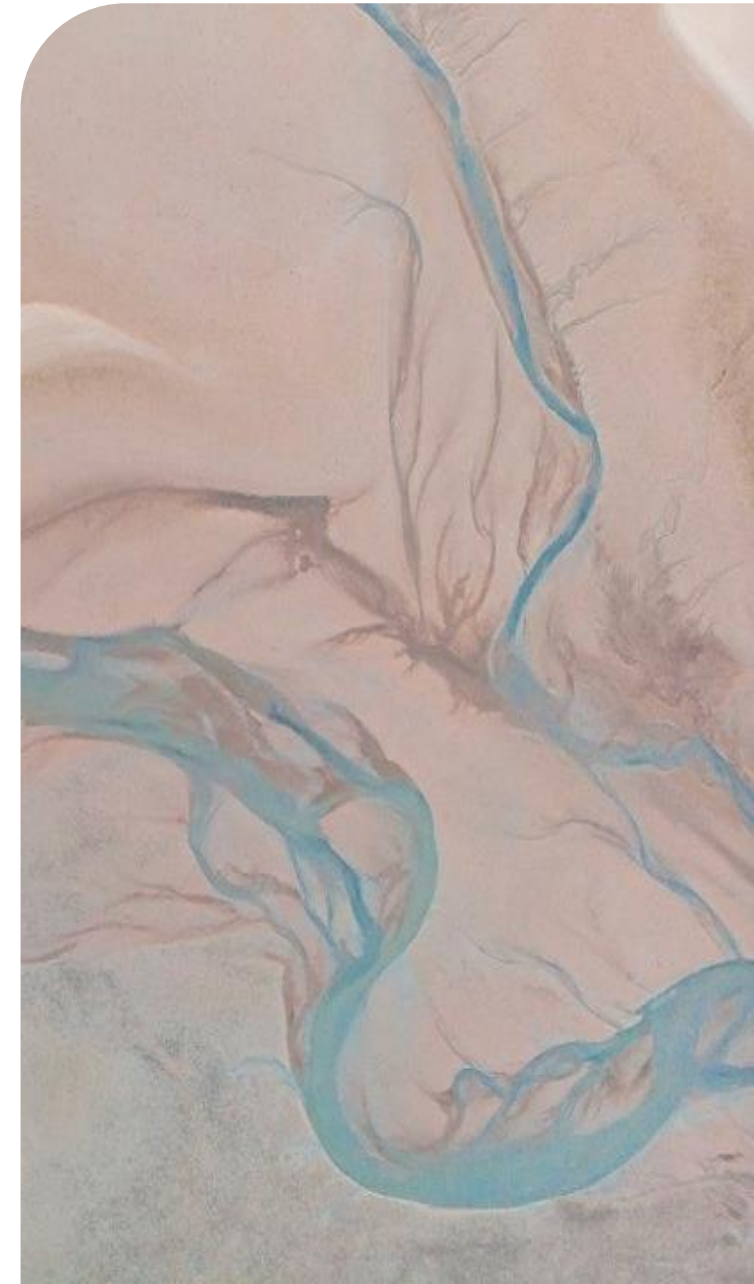
# Key Terms and Concepts

- ***Low Skill, High Sensitivity***
  - Example: With visual art, let the image/expression be abstract, free, non-representational
  - Avoid temptations to judge the art
  - Participants are not required to have any artistic ability
- ***Process & Product***
  - Our focus is on the experience of the art making, rather than the finished product
  - It is through the use of the individual's senses that the imagination can process, flourish, build insight, and support healing



# Responding to the Art

- ***“I see...”***
  - Focus on line, shape, color
  - objective
- ***“I imagine...”***
  - What images, associations, memories, ideas, stories are evoked?
  - Subjective
- ***“I feel...”***
  - Is there a feeling connected to this image?
  - Personal

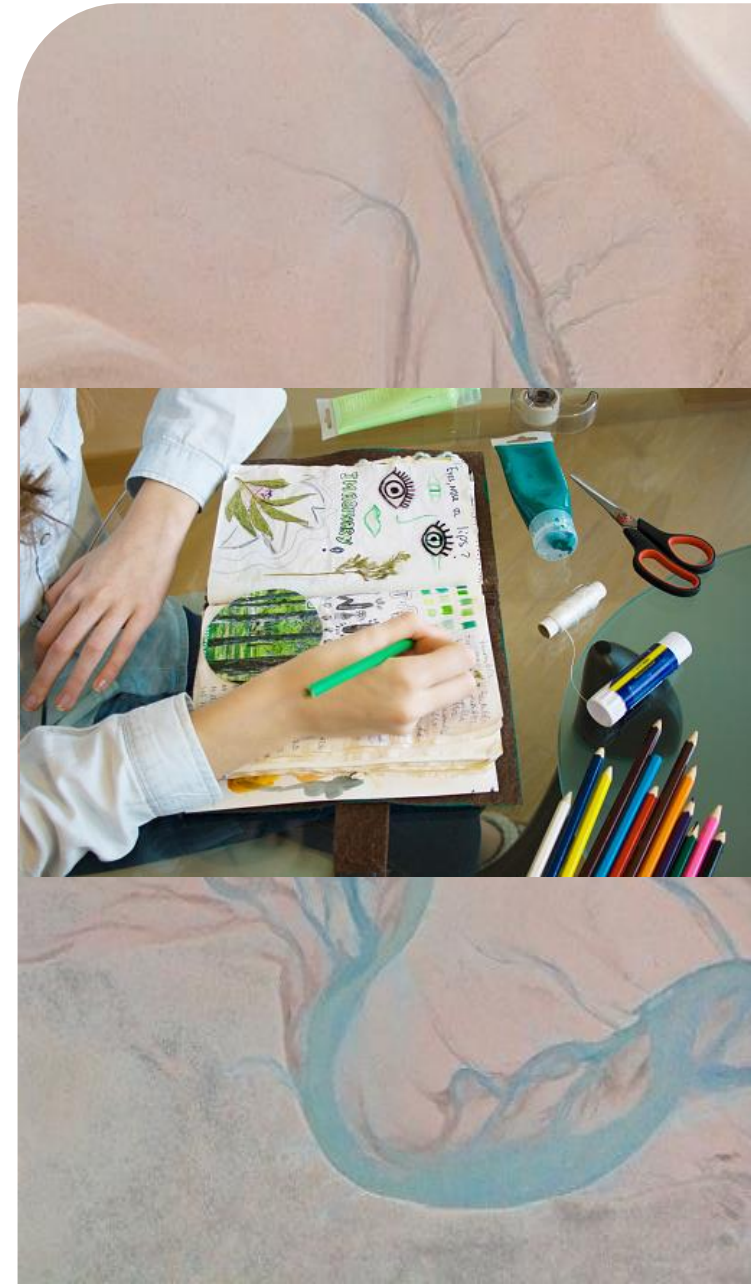


# ARTS AS INTERVENTION: CONSIDERATIONS

# Begin with a check-in:

Why? When we utilize the arts in therapy, it can be vulnerable!

- Think about structured, simple creative practices to begin to help the client be open to working creatively. ***Metaphor is your friend!***
- Structured interventions & clear directions
- Feelings charades (young kids, families)
- Sound/movement
- Musical instrument, beat, song
- Sand tray figure
- Choose a color
- Drawing
- Weather report
- Art Cards



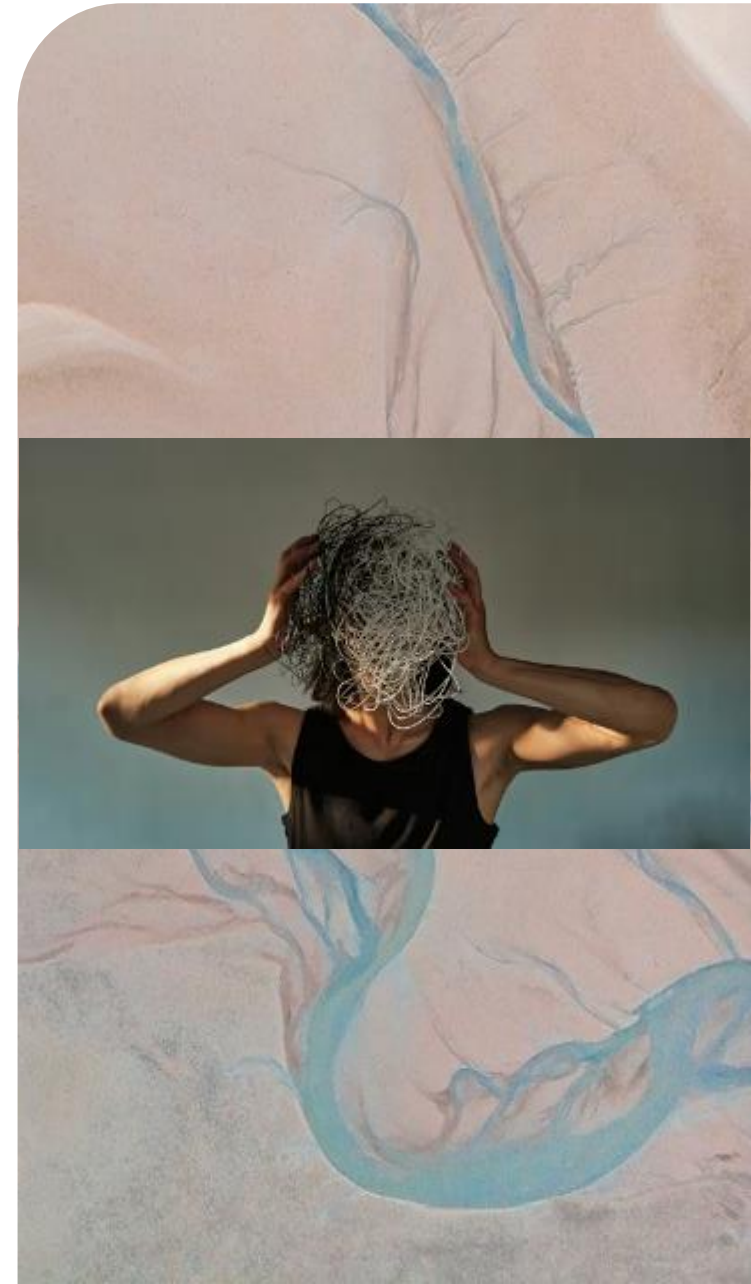
# MEANING MAKING: REFLECTING ON OUR EMOTIONAL NEEDS

1. On a sheet of blank paper, draw a large circle filling most of the page
2. Take a moment to reflect on where you are today, in this moment. What emotional needs are present? Are these needs being met? If not, what might you need?
3. Holding these questions in mind, explore your emotional experience inside the circle by illustrating, drawing, and/or creating using any visual arts materials of your choosing. Tip: if you're collaging, consider leaning towards images and away from words! .
4. Be as literal or abstract as you like, there is no right way to do this! When finished, give your image a name. Bonus: assign a song to it!

# Arts modalities based on need:

## **Anxiety, escalation, anger:**

- Containment
- Structured interventions & clear directions
- Movement (move only one body part, play with levels, speed, tempo, movement quality)
- Be thoughtful about materials – **avoid paints**. Use pastels, crayons, markers, colored pencils, clay or playdough, make collages with a theme (no scissors, rip instead!)
- For music, consider drumming, beat-making, or listening to playlists
- Consider journaling (stream of consciousness, lists, writing down feelings) or poetry
- Externalize emotions using writing and ripping up, puppets, sand tray figures, art cards, stuffed animals, bean bags!



# MEANING MAKING: EMBODYING ANGER

1. Choose two different colors of construction paper. On the first, cut or rip paper into strips, large enough to write a sentence on.
2. Using any writing utensil of your choosing, write down as many specific things as you can think of that cause you to feel frustrated, angry, or enraged.
3. Once you're done creating your strips, stand up. Using your whole body, really step into anger (use your voice!) and read each one out loud. Find a way to destroy each strip (rip, cut up, crumple and stomp on it, throw it, chew it up and spit it out, etc.). The only rule is the paper eventually needs to end up in the trash can.
4. Once you're done, notice how your body feels. What is the quality of your breath? What is the temperature of your body? Does anything feel loosened up? Next, take the other color of paper and create 2 strips. On those strips, write down a positive memory, or something that brings you joy and/or nourishes you. Read this out loud. Fold this up and put in your pocket.

# Arts modalities based on need:

## **Sadness, depression, isolation, hurt, low mood:**

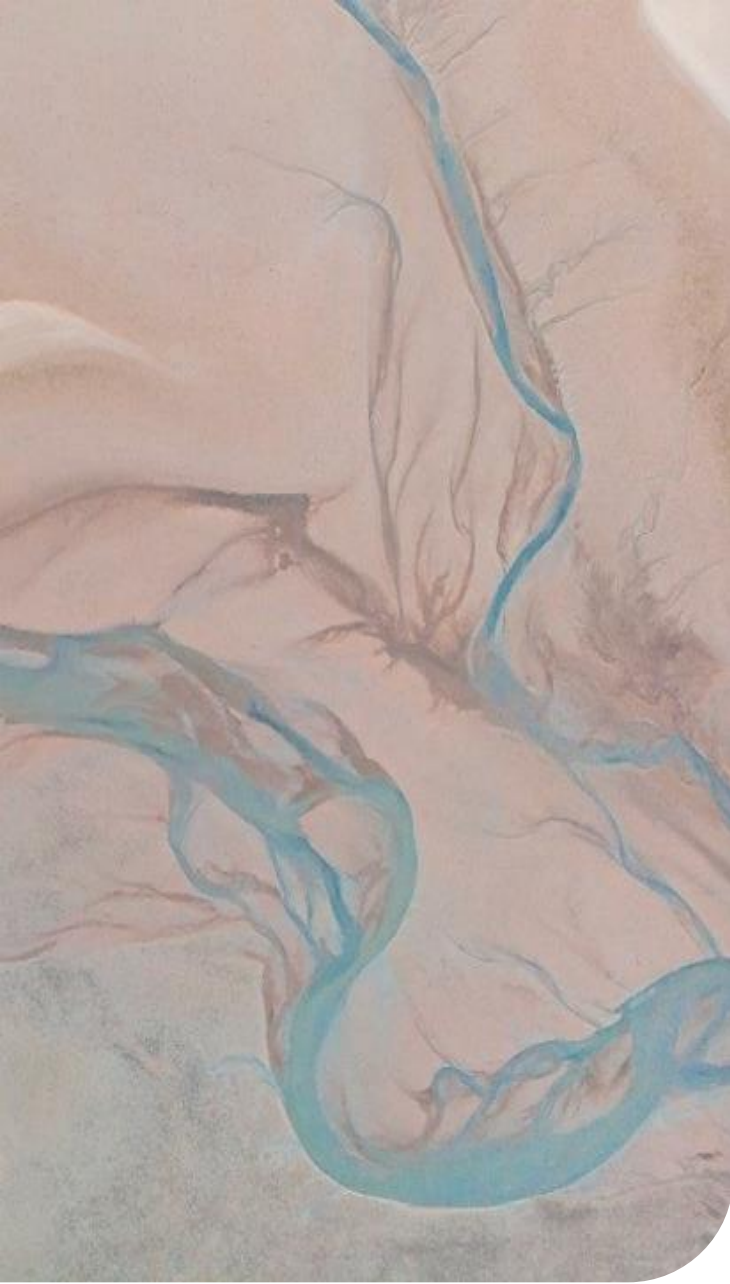
- Open space, less structured
- Amplify, take up space in the room
- Paint (finger painting, watercolors, tempera paints)
- Mask-making (inside/outside masks)
- Movement-based interventions, process where feelings are located in the body
- Drama therapy (open chair, scene creation, embodiment, characterizing feelings, thoughts, experiences)
- Creative visualizations, guided imagery/meditations – follow with poetry, visual arts, journaling, collage (aesthetic responding)
- Try to use up space in the room



# MEANING MAKING: LIFE STORY PLAYLIST

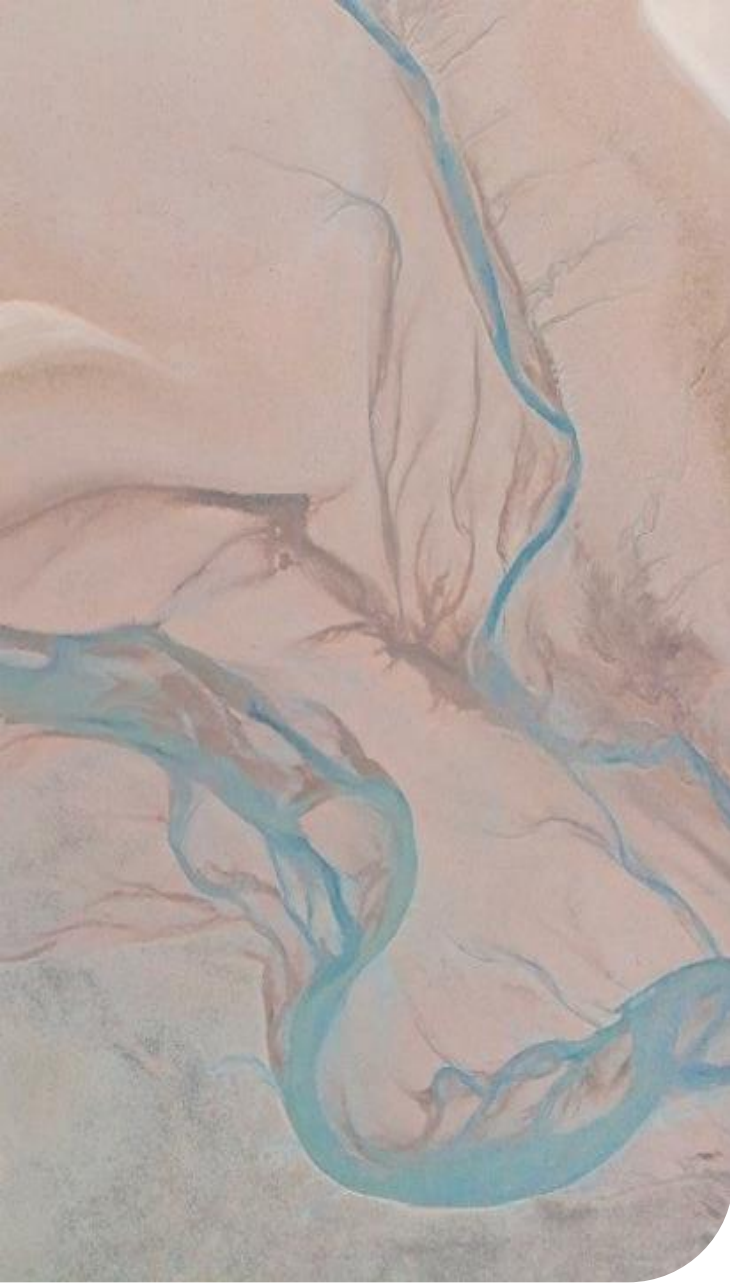
1. Think of every significant time period or major transition of your life, beginning with the present. Now, go back in time, as far as you can remember. Think about children, marriages, relationship changes, career changes, graduations, moves, losses, etc. What images, memories, smells, tactile sensations, tastes, sounds, colors and feelings are associated with?
2. Now, use Youtube, Spotify, any way of obtaining music/searching for songs to put together a playlist. You may simply write the songs down in order, including the artist, or you may create an actual playlist on any of these sites or you may simply write them down or create a timeline. Visual artwork, poetry, and/or journaling to accompany is encouraged.
3. I invite you to actually pause and listen to the music as you go.

CONSIDERATIONS



## Suggestions for Creating Safety: Visual Arts

- Consider creating art yourself, especially if working with kids. Ideally, this looks like non-representational squiggling, coloring a mandala or coloring page
- Bring in music – silence can be quite uncomfortable and intense! Always ask the client what they prefer!
  - Avoid music with words, popular music (even if instrumental!), and music that is loud or fast-paced
  - Consider using Lofi music – it is incredibly regulating! Check out Chillhop or Mindful Vibes on Youtube
  - Create your own playlist that will work without internet access, such as a downloaded playlist on Spotify
  - Make sure the music is free of ads



## Bringing the Arts in: Simple, Effective Interventions

- Art cards, sand tray, archetypal figures/imagery, metaphor
- Move from one modality into another – give voice, sound, music, character, and/or movement to an image. Mask-making into Narrative work into Drama.
- Create visuals, sounds, do drama work connected to one's inner critic or parts work (IFS). Example: for those doing EMDR, maybe you actually make the container for the Container Exercise or visually create the Safe Place (collage, paint, sculpture, etc.) and make a playlist or assign a song to each.
- Create playlists for feelings, relationships, experiences
- Collage based on a simple theme. Example: how you'd like your relationship with your mother to be vs. how it is now
- Practice being messy and resisting perfectionism with finger painting!
- Art as psychoeducation with children. Example: Feelings Candyland, Somatic Illustrations, etc.

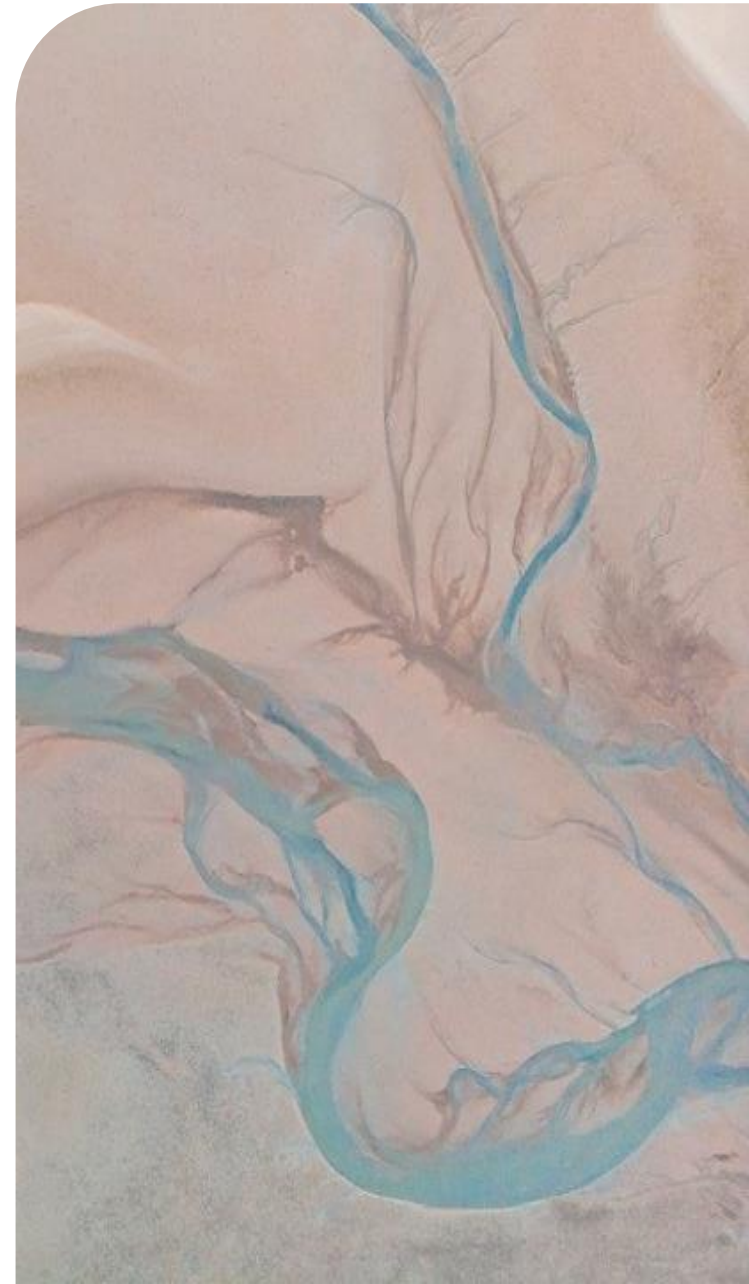
# Bringing the Arts in: How to facilitate

- Stay connected to a theme
- Simple, concise directions
- “I invite you to...”
- Begin with modalities the client has interest in (make this a part of your intake questionnaire!)
- If a client expresses fear, hesitation, or discomfort, stay curious
- Don't hold the client to the time limit of being done by the end of session, arts practices can be homework and/or completed/built upon in a later session. Please treat artwork as confidential clinical docs!
- Avoid value statements
- Learn about and honor the culture of the client as well as the culture from which the intervention originated or was inspired by (i.e. worry dolls, shrines to deceased loved ones, etc.)



# Ethical issues

- You cannot advertise as an Expressive Arts Therapist or an Art Therapist, unless you are specifically credentialed, however, you *CAN* use the arts in therapy, with some education and practice!
- Please practice the interventions you'd like to bring into your work with yourself and/or a colleague before trying with a client
- Ask for feedback from clients – what worked for them? What didn't?
- STOP, regroup, repair if harm happens in the room
- When in doubt: consult and get more training!



# MEANING MAKING: TREE OF LIFE

1. On a large sheet of blank paper, draw a large tree with the following elements: roots, ground, trunk, branches, leaves, fruit, compost pile, sun, and flowers nearby.
2. Each of these elements represent an aspect of the client's identity and experience.
  1. Roots – where you come from
  2. Ground – where you are now
  3. Trunk – skills, positive attributes, things you like about yourself
  4. Branches – goals (big and small)
  5. Leaves – supportive others in your life
  6. Fruit – gifts you've been given
  7. Compost – what you're mulling over/what you'd like to let go of
  8. Sun – bright spots/what you're looking forward to
  9. Flowers – what you want to grow within yourself.

# CASE EXAMPLE: CHILD WITH SELECTIVE MUTISM

# FINAL REFLECTIONS



1. What was today like?
2. What are you taking into your work with the clients you serve?
3. Any final thoughts, questions, comments, observations, images?

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