

# #weekly WISDOM

## At a Loss for Words: Art for Trauma Survivors

This message of #WeeklyWisdom is brought to you by Katrina Clark, the Youth Educator at the Advocacy Center of Tompkins County, which is a proud partner of the Community Coalition for Healthy Youth. This week's message focuses on how art helps people, including teens, recover after traumatic experiences.

*"For a hundred years or more, every textbook of psychology and psychotherapy has advised that some method of talking about distressing feelings can resolve them. However, as we've seen, the experience of trauma itself gets in the way of being able to do that. No matter how much insight and understanding we develop, the rational brain is basically impotent [unable] to talk the emotional brain out of its own reality."* - Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*

Oftentimes, when one has experienced trauma, the suggested plan of action is to find someone to talk with - most typically (if access is available) a therapist. There seems to be an ever-increasing collective belief that "talking it out" *will* help us overcome the pain; which is not the experience for all people. And, considering the stigma and associated shame with expressing these traumatic realities (e.g. abuse, social isolation, job loss, etc.), *especially* when that expression is happening outside of a traditional therapy setting - we must look deeper.

Although many people attempt to work through trauma with talking-based practices, trauma and talking are *no* peanut butter & jelly - in other words, they do not always go well together.

To understand this, let's get a general sense of how our brain responds to trauma. Our brain is built to protect us from danger at all times - thanks, brain! When a threat is perceived, the instinctive part of our brain (the limbic system) sounds an alarm and switches our body into survival mode. Adrenaline increases and non-life-sustaining functions turn off, including the speech-language center of the brain. For some people, this looks like an inability to yell for help, or having difficulties articulating what happened after a traumatic event.

If there is recurring trauma, and the speech-language center of the brain *is repeatedly* shut down, there can be additional consequences. For example, repeated exposure to stress and trauma in children can delay speech-language development. It is important to note that these non-essential brain functions are *not only* shutting down during the traumatic event itself, but are likely doing so any time a memory from that event is stimulated.

This is because our fast-acting instinctive brain does not distinguish between present and *perceived* danger. The memory of a dangerous or traumatic experience can activate our brain and body responses in much the same way as experiencing that situation in person. For a more nuanced understanding of the physiological responses to trauma as well as its long term impacts and potential paths to recovery, the book highlighted above ([The Body Keeps the Score](#)) is a great resource.

Since the speech-language center of the brain goes offline when we shift into survival mode (and since survival mode can kick-in even when *'real'* danger is not present), it is evident that trauma and talking do not go together - at least not gracefully. How can we heal from trauma if talk-therapies may not be the easiest approach?

While there are many potential answers to that question, our focus today is on **art!** The following are some reasons why art-making can be an effective healing tool.

1. **Telling without talking:** Art provides an opportunity to tell *without* talking. Serving as a visual voice, art allows us to express that which may have otherwise been inexpressible.
2. **Engaging the senses:** Art-making is sensory-based. Since trauma is experienced primarily through the senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch), with little engagement from the more logically-motivated parts of the brain, exercising our senses to *create* allows us to connect with those centers in a constructive way. This alone can be incredibly healing.
3. **Increasing agency:** The act of creating also allows us to regain a sense of agency (we are able to exercise our freedom of choice as we choose what marks to make, colors to combine, etc.). Oftentimes our sense of agency feels inaccessible during traumatic experiences. For example, if someone is in a car accident, they may be unable to move due to injury or physical-restraints caused by the collision. The individual is thus unable to choose the survival response of 'flight,' which may compromise their sense of agency.
4. **Creating space:** Another huge benefit of art-making is the felt-sense of release that comes with doing so. Jason, a former Combat Engineer for the Marines who began using [art therapy to help ease his post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#), shares, "each time I did something with art therapy, I felt better because there was something in me that was dying to get out, and through art I was able to express it." Sometimes we have really yucky, scary, or overwhelming feelings inside that we want to release. Making artwork about those feelings can create a sense of distance between us and the trauma.
5. **Being seen:** Furthermore, if you're able to share this artwork with someone - perhaps a trusted friend, or an art therapist - there is the added benefit of having someone else see, possibly understand, and most importantly, *honor* whatever you have communicated visually. This can decrease the sense of isolation that traumatic events typically create.

Just as individuals can use art-making to help with their healing processes, so can communities! The power of social art is potent, and especially during times of collective trauma (ahem, the current pandemic) we can really benefit from harnessing the power of shared creativity. I will be exploring more about the ways social art can facilitate community healing in a later blog - stay tuned!

In honor of the power of artistic expression and its ability to facilitate healing, the Advocacy Center Teen activist group, ACTION, is currently inviting local teens to share their creativity in a "QuaranTeen" Art Showcase and Poetry Slam! Entries are due Friday, June 5th. Learn more and submit pieces at [bit.ly/actionartwork](http://bit.ly/actionartwork).

*If you or a teen you know is struggling with trauma after experiences of sexual or relationship abuse, the Advocacy Center offers emotional and advocacy support including assistance with local services, safe housing, and safety planning. Reach us through our hotline at 607-277-5000.*



**Our Community Partners:** Alcohol & Drug Council of Tompkins County, Tompkins County Youth Services, TST BOCES Youth Development Program, Tompkins County Health Department, The Advocacy Center, Cooperative Extension- Tompkins County, Catholic Charities- Tompkins/Tioga