

art helped me make sense *of my reality...*

a story of recovery from schizophrenia

Hi, my name is Andrew.

Several years ago I experienced having schizophrenia, brought on by drug use. It lasted for four years from 1999-2003, and throughout this time it came and went in waves. Three times it came on really intense where I had to be hospitalised. It was a frightening time in my life. It was a time when I was also studying art, something I believe helped to save my life.

While often I had no control over my illness I continued to study art ... it was the one thing which gave me a sense of hope, though I did not realise this at the time. It was only later that I realised that my use of art, and my studying of art, and having people help and teach me through art, was teaching me how to deal with what I was going through.

For example, I would make some really chaotic art work – a reflection of my manic mind at the time - and a teacher would look at it and say, “It’s really chaotic ... why not isolate some of it ... work with this ... put some more feeling here,” and so on. So through this process I learnt how to organise and focus and put more care into the different aspects of my art, and in turn my mind. Through applying a range of different art movements (such as minimalism, surrealism and expressionism) I learnt about different facets of human nature. Through studying these and implementing these I learnt about how to deal with my mind – how to navigate out of the chaos inside me.

external focus ...

Art gave me an external focus, it was like throwing myself out in front of me. Not only could I look at it and learn from it and deal with it, but other people could too, and through this they could help me. Because it was now outside of me, others could also see and have input and teach me about what I was seeing. Quite often unbeknown to them, people were responding to things inside me, helping me without realising it.

Art helped me make sense of my reality ... I could be objective about what I was thinking. My ‘visible’ artwork allowed me to be conscious of the fact that my thoughts were a bit crazy.

When I looked at my art during this time I felt unsettled, and I knew that through learning more about art I could feel more empowered. Art helped give me a structure. I remember making a conscious decision about wanting to make art that was more cohesive - it was my mission.

creating balance ...

I knew I was looking at chaotic elements because of the frenetic nature of the schizophrenia in my mind - and I knew



“Tawny frogmouth owl and the nurses conversation”



“Bush stone curlew healing” - both drawn during Andrew’s recovery

that through applying some focus I could create balance in my art. I would allow a certain amount of chaos but then I would

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work with it. For example, I would throw the ink down, but then I would maybe blow on it to direct it into something I appreciated as an art work. I could influence the chaos into a more balanced state. Very slowly, through this process, art helped to balance my mind.

While I saw a range of counsellors during this time I did not find many good ones, and often it was confusing. I would just get to know one and then they would leave or I couldn't connect with them as people. I wasn't as capable of talking about what was happening to me or about accepting help.

Instead I threw myself into my art. My teachers in art school were kind of like my doctors and counsellors. All of my lecturers knew I had schizophrenia. They didn't judge me ... these are people that deal with the hugest array of people, whether it's oppressed people or abused people. Through teaching art they are exposed to many people's inner natures because they see the paintings.

I studied a lot, whether sitting and reading in a library – learning about how different cultures used art or studying different mind and learning techniques – or through experimenting with art. I wanted to learn all I could about how art had been used throughout history.

power of belief ...

One of my lecturers said something which had a big influence on me. She said one day there might come a time where a belief I had may no longer mean anything to me, and that I would have to create a whole new belief. I realised I could change what I believed.

For me the schizophrenic state was a set of beliefs. I genuinely believed I could talk to an animal and they could talk back; I believed telepathy was real – that other people could read my mind ... you have to believe something is happening to you for it to be happening to you.

It was then that I consciously made a choice to change

some of my beliefs about my illness. It was very much like in the movie “A Beautiful Mind” ... he believed he was working for the government though he wasn't; to get better he had to change his belief – create a new belief. But it wasn't an easy time for me. I did a lot of work to get out of there, I'm not sure if everyone would do this.

art and healing ...

Art is a physically tangible thing. You could learn about and express illness in other ways, like through sport or something that really matters to you. But art worked for me.

As an occupational therapy art is very useful – it helps people to open up. It acts as a point of tension and release – people can create and release tension through their art rather than bottling it all up or perhaps even hurting themselves. Through art you can put it “out there” ... you can mess with the form (the painting, the object) instead of keep on internalising it ... art has helped to focus and calm my mind.

I'm not claiming to know the answer or that there is any one solution, but I know that art has really helped me with my illness. That's why I am interested in using art as art therapy, so that if people did want to they could have this option.

While I have recovered from my illness I still have to take care. I take things slowly step by step ... bit by bit I work to get my strength back up. Like a seed that's just been planted you have to look after yourself until your roots grow strong. ✕

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