

Therapist gets creative

Patients use art to express emotions BRIAN TOWIE,
METRO May 28, 2008 07:15



Who knew you could equate red meat with personal conflict? It could be a symbol of how powerful carnal urges and irascible dispositions can compromise reasoned and careful attempts to improve quality of life. It might represent a person wrestling with the idea of becoming a vegan. It may unearth a painful childhood memory of how someone burned a hand on a barbecue, uncovering a fear of fire or heat. And it all might start with drawing something as simple as a hamburger.

Self-exploration through creative acts is just one aspect of what art therapy is all about: The lesser-known psychological discipline chooses the canvas (among other media) over the couch as means to express thoughts and emotions. The therapist acts as a guide and analyst for patients who use imagery, colour and creativity to stimulate, heal, and journey into the mind. In this world, the old adage of a picture being worth a thousand words couldn't be truer.

"Everyone has an artistic thought process. You have a thought process when you look at different colours," says Toronto-based art therapist Esther Zeller. "It's learning about who you are, how you react to the world and how it reacts to you. This is just a different way to get there." Art therapy is a more established and widespread discipline in both the U.S. and the U.K. than in Canada, but some domestic universities do offer art therapy courses (such as Concordia and the University of Alberta). For the most part, however, tomorrow's art therapists get their training at specialized private schools such as the Toronto Art Therapy Institute or Vancouver Art Therapy Institute (TATI and VATI, respectively). Requirements vary between schools, but degrees in either art or psychology are usually what they look for in their prospective students.

Dr. Helene Burt, executive director of TATI, says public funding for education has limited the availability of art therapy training in Canada. "The education systems are different. Universities in the States are businesses and if they can offer something that people will buy, they will," Burt said. "Here, they're publicly funded with taxpayer money and they're much more conservative. They don't take risks, and they don't offer something unless it's really tried and true."

The art therapist won't enjoy the same profile or widespread acceptance as his or her talking therapist peer, but perhaps that's part of the point: A career for the creative thinkers looking to blaze their own trail.

"Why do we have to do everything the same way?" asks Zeller. "We're so busy making a living getting into courses and getting into schools and reading the right things that we don't take the time to be creative, and being creative is something that will help you no matter what you do in life."