

# My creative practice

As a therapist in private practice who is also actively involved in amateur theatre, **Sandra Zecevic-Gonzalez** considers the reasons why being creative makes her a better therapist

In May 2014, *The Psychologist* published an article about psychologists who play rock music in their free time.<sup>1</sup> The author, Jon Sutton, posed two interesting questions: how does psychology help me become a better musician?; and how does being a musician help me become a better psychologist? A fascinating read, Sutton humorously explored whether knowledge of psychology (eg memory and learning processes) could provide shortcuts to musical expertise. His search for evidence that psychological knowledge could shorten the lengthy climb of the 'stairway to guitar heaven' was a bit disappointing, however. Being a psychologist was useful in understanding the process of learning but ultimately, he mused comically, to achieve competence in a musical instrument takes practice, practice, practice – experts believe about 10,000 hours of it.

The second half of the article, a reflection on whether being a musician helped academics and researchers become better psychologists, was of particular interest to me. Some interviewees responded that experience of performing in public was advantageous when giving academic lectures to students. It enabled them to develop crowd control techniques and provided opportunities for exposure to performance anxiety and the habituation needed to overcome it. Others felt that being a musician had an impact on research projects or teaching material.

As I read the article I wondered how to describe the benefits of participating in creative pursuits for clinicians themselves. What benefit does being a musician or an artist have for the therapist who sits weekly in front of depressed or avoidant clients? Or for the counsellor who once struggled to learn a particularly complex piece of music or choreography and, with practice, eventually managed it? Or perhaps didn't succeed in managing it and learned something important in that experience itself? What a profound understanding to bring to the therapeutic relationship.

How we manage our own successes and challenges in life, of course, finds its way into the consulting room, and impacts on the support we offer clients. Whether we engage in the challenges of pursuing a creative hobby or not, life constantly throws opportunities or curve balls our way that help us to grow: a promotion, having a baby, our child being bullied at school, dealing with an illness in the family or achieving work-life balance. As a therapist working in private practice who is also actively involved in amateur theatre, this artistic experience itself offers so much for me, not only as a person but also as a clinician, that I feel it is only natural to consider it part of my upkeep, my CPD in some ways. Besides support from loved ones, the joy of spending time with my child and the essential input from reading, supervision, colleagues and workshops, it is my creative practice that makes me the best therapist I can be.

## What do I mean by being creative?

Contemporary business executives encourage creative 'out-of-the-box' thinking to generate new ideas, resolve problems and stimulate communication between people.<sup>2</sup> Einstein defines creativity as 'seeing what everyone else has seen and thinking what no one else has thought'.<sup>3</sup> The airplane, Picasso's cubist works, the Eiffel Tower and the formula  $E=mc^2$  are creative acts. This type of creativity is often called 'Big C' creativity and is the breakthrough kind of thinking that most people are familiar with, but it's relatively rare, according to Jeff Mauzy and Richard A Harriman in their book *Creativity Inc: building an inventive organisation*.<sup>4</sup>

'Small c' creativity describes the small ideas and 'a-ha' moments that enhance and enrich our lives, such as landscaping your own garden, developing a dance choreography with your children, planning a wedding, changing the layout of your accountancy report or even trying out a new recipe. These rarely bring us fame or fortune and are often overlooked as sources of creativity. A suitable definition of 'small c' creativity could be like that offered by Rollo May in *The Courage to Create*: '...bringing something new into being which requires passion and commitment' or 'bringing to our awareness something that was previously hidden and points to new life'.<sup>5</sup>

Joseph Anderson, author of *Weirder Than Fiction: the reality and myths of creativity*, defines creativity as 'nothing more than seeing and acting on new relationships, thereby bringing them to life'.<sup>6</sup> I assume we can think of these new relationships in many different ways: two novel ingredients brought together in a recipe perhaps, or the building of relationships between people or groups of people. As I reflect on the countless definitions of creativity I have come across during the writing of this article, I am only too aware of the parallels between the creative process itself and our work as therapists – of how instrumental we may be to our clients' journeys as they develop creative and innovative ways out of emotional distress and turmoil.<sup>7</sup>

## Creativity and wellbeing

There is considerable research suggesting a solid correlation between creativity and wellbeing. The arts and creative therapies specialise in the theory and application of a variety of creative pursuits for therapeutic purposes. Research emerging from these disciplines includes Carine Lewis's and Peter Lovatt's findings that engaging in unstructured dancing can be helpful for divergent thinking where there are multiple answers to a problem.<sup>8</sup> When participating in structured dance practice, convergent thinking gets activated, which involves mental processes required to find a single or specific answer to a problem. Music, the most researched medium of art, has been shown to decrease anxiety and restore emotional balance.<sup>9</sup> In cancer patients, the use of music in the control of chronic pain has been reported to increase a sense of control, reduce pain and promote the positive aspects of patients' lives.<sup>9</sup>

Studies of older people who practise creativity found they stayed healthier longer, had fewer visits to healthcare providers, used fewer medications and were more outgoing and optimistic.<sup>9</sup> Ruth Richards, a professor at Harvard Medical School, says that creative behaviours make us more dynamic, conscious, non-defensive, collaborative and brave.<sup>2</sup> She also emphasises that being creative makes you more resilient, more present to the moment and connected to the world. The Positive-Living-Now website sums up the main benefit of practising creativity: it's just plain fun.<sup>10</sup>

## The benefits of creativity

Counselling and psychotherapy can take a lot out of us; especially if we account for the difficult material we process through our interactions with clients. Fortunately, the codes of ethics of professional accrediting organisations hold us responsible for maintaining our own physical, psychological, social and spiritual wellbeing in order to be at our best – or good enough – to engage with clients.<sup>11</sup> Freud articulates it in an insightful yet poetic way: 'No one



who, like me, conjures up the most evil of those half tamed demons that inhabit the human beast, and seeks to wrestle with them, can expect to come through unscathed.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, finding something that replenishes our 'inner reservoir' and that generates inspiration and brings balance to our lives is important. I like to conceptualise it as needing to feed that inner child in ourselves a little bit so that the difficulties that we are exposed to in our work or in our personal lives don't alienate us from our ability to experience joy – for ourselves, our loved ones and our clients. How else are we to accompany them through the darkness, if we have lost our own way to the light? By this I don't mean to understate the importance of our need to delve into the darkness with our clients as part of the work together. However, joy and transcendence are essential for the healing process when the time is right. Having fun may be the best recipe for filling the inner reservoir.

Paul Gilbert, founder of compassion-focused therapy, designed a model that for me provides a useful way to conceptualise the benefits of creativity.<sup>13</sup> The Three Types of Affect Regulation System model describes the important interaction between emotional management structures in humans: the threat-focused system, the incentive/resource-focused system and the non-wanting/affiliative system. To reduce the impact of the stress response from the threat-focused system and its release of cortisol, Gilbert emphasises the importance of bringing balance to our lives by stimulating the other two systems. The incentive/resource-focused system functions to generate positive feelings and motivate us to seek resources for ourselves and our loved ones in order to survive and thrive.

Gilbert lists some of the motivators we derive pleasure from seeking out: food, sex, comforts, friendships, status and recognition. This emotional regulation system is an activating and 'go-get' system, which is motivated by dopamine bursts. We feel pleasure in pursuing these things and by achieving or acquiring them. The pursuit of a creative hobby or activity could generate a similar drive or sense of accomplishment and competence – to finish that book, to plan the perfect wedding, to tackle that dance choreography for opening night.

The other system, and possibly the most relevant to the topic of fun, is the non-wanting/affiliative-focused emotional

*What benefit does being a musician or an artist have for the therapist who sits weekly in front of depressed or avoidant clients?*

regulation system, which promotes feelings of contentedness, safety and connectedness. Compassion, kindness and soothing behaviours towards and from others or even oneself can generate a sense of connection to those around us and to the present moment. The substances in our brains most important here are endorphins and the hormone oxytocin. They generate a sense of wellbeing and feeling loved, connected and safe. A creative pursuit is often described as conjuring up a sense of transcendence or connectedness. 'I lose myself when I'm painting,' muses Sally Smith, a counsellor in private practice. 'Time flies and when I finish, I feel replenished somehow.' 'A lot of therapists I know practise yoga,' says psychotherapist Rudy Johnson. 'For me, it's doing DIY. I feel so present and alive while I'm doing it and the high can last for hours.'

My personal experience of engaging in amateur theatre certainly stimulates my own sense of wellbeing through connectedness to others and the present moment. The task of bringing together a large group of talented people with the goal of putting on a production to be (hopefully) enjoyed by an audience and performers alike, is a perfect example of the sense of community and purpose that unites us, making us feel part of something bigger than ourselves and giving us a sense of belonging. Time flies while we're learning harmonies. We feel a sense of competence and achievement perfecting those dance steps or deciding on the costume or scenery that will evoke the ambience of the play or musical we are preparing.

### Practising what we preach

Perhaps one reason why I believe my creative pursuits are essential to my clinical work is that they give me plenty of opportunity to practise what I preach as a psychologist and CBT therapist: ie exposure and the concept of habituation (sitting with the anxiety until it naturally plateaus and eventually reduces), thought-questioning, behavioural activation (reviewing our schedules to integrate enjoyable/pleasurable activities and opportunities for accomplishments) and getting active and stimulating social and problem solving skills. Amateur theatre, writing an article such as this one, decorating the house for my son's Halloween party or simply rearranging the furniture every spring, give me opportunities to step out of my comfort zone.

As a therapist, I feel it is essential to challenge myself as much as I challenge my clients. If my husband dislikes my new dining room layout or I do not get cast for that principal role, then I have an opportunity to disappoint someone, fail or realise that getting it wrong – or not getting the admiration and acknowledgement that I may so crave at times – is OK. It also gives me the opportunity to assert my opinions, stand up for myself or negotiate with others if necessary. It does not make me a better or worse person; it just means that I am not immune to disappointment or challenges. My creative practice gives me plenty of opportunities to take risks and to practise accepting others and myself as we are.

Perhaps it would be more challenging if I actually did land that principal role. I would have to manage my own elevated levels of anxiety at rehearsals and at opening night. My perfectionist thinking is being triggered as I type words on this page and wonder if what I have got to say is relevant, interesting or well-enough researched. Exposing my current level of decorating, acting or writing skills to family, friends and colleagues may generate a sense of pride and accomplishment, while also at times triggering familiar feelings of insecurity or even place me as an ideal target of that uncomfortable emotion called envy. To quote Marianne Williamson: 'Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.'<sup>14</sup>

Exposure and managing all that comes with it (the good and the bad) is what my own creative pursuits contribute to my work with clients; coming face to face with my own demons. It is this innate confidence in many of the techniques and strategies that I 'sell' to my clients that makes me a better therapist. I know these techniques can work – they help me manage disappointments and anxieties when I challenge myself in life and through my creative outlets. And, most importantly, I get to have some fun in the process. ●

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