Module 6: Interpreting and Responding to Client Artwork

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# Module Introduction

Analyzing and Interpreting client art are both integral parts of the meaning making processes in art therapy. Analysis includes collection and organization of information, with some preliminary thinking about what may be indicated by the classified data, and interpretation includes a collaborative, client-validated understanding of that organized information; searching for patterns, symbols and connections that relate to the client. It is an iterative process that will include switching between analysis and interpretation, indeed, at points where there may be no distinction.

Analysis focuses on collecting, organizing and codifying observations of the many and fluid elements of artistic expression. Without this analysis, it becomes difficult to gain a holistic picture of client expression. We can certainly gain insights through observation of unclassified elements of an artwork, but a comprehensive view is only possible through analysis; the relational links and connections that may not be obvious. Analysis also increases validity and reliability since we are applying a standardized set of observational criteria systematically. Interestingly, validity and reliability increases exponentially as the process is used consistently over time.

Meaning is derived through interpretation of the patterns revealed in analysis plus client input. Interpretive insights may also be gained by observing information that is not analyzed. But without applying analytical processes, we may fail to grasp connections and associations that can significantly impact interpretation. The analysis and interpretation then is about meaning making, and the understanding derived informs treatment.

Artistic expression itself has significant therapeutic value. Even during the creation of art, there is opportunity for the practitioner to support therapeutic creative expression by enabling the individual to explore and manifest their thoughts, feelings, and emotions through the art-making process; useful insights can be uncovered.

Engaging the client in interpretive analysis is often where the therapeutic experience produces maximum outcomes. A skilled practitioner creates a non-judgmental and supportive environment where the client feels safe to discuss and explore their thoughts and feelings, providing ongoing opportunities for the practitioner to assess, guide and support. This engagement and guidance will help clients to come to their own understanding about their artwork, what it means to them; how it perhaps manifests the issues at hand.

In this module, we will explore approaches to analysis and interpretation of client artwork and how to engage the client in self-discovery and meaning making.

## Module Objectives

This module will help the practitioner understand the processes and tools used to analyze and interpret client artwork. By the end of this module you will:

1. Understand common symbology to reveal meaning in artwork.
2. Create and use appropriate tools and approaches to analyze client artwork.
3. Use appropriate psychological models to interpret your analysis of client artwork to uncover the significance of your observations.
4. Learn to respond to and engage clients to understand the indications of their issues and the therapeutic value of their artistic expression.

# Symbology

Symbology is the study and use of symbols and symbolism. This can include the analysis of symbols in art, literature, and other forms of cultural expression, as well as the creation of symbols for use in communication, branding, and other contexts.

Symbols can convey complex ideas or emotions in a simple and easily recognizable form and may be used, consciously or unconsciously, to represent aspects of the self, past experiences, or emotions that may be difficult to put into words. By creating art that incorporates symbolic imagery, clients can access deeper levels of meaning and insight into their inner selves.

## Icons

Common iconic symbols that may be represented in art therapy include:

**The sun**: This symbol can represent vitality, warmth, and energy. It may indicate that the client is feeling positive and optimistic, or it may indicate a desire for these feelings.

* It can represent self-esteem and be a representation of the inner self.
* The sun can also represent spiritual and religious beliefs
* Clients may create a sun in their artwork to express feelings of self-worth or to explore their spirituality or inner selves.

**The moon**: This symbol can represent emotion, intuition, and femininity. It may indicate that the client is feeling introspective and reflective, or it may indicate a desire for greater understanding of one's inner self.

* The moon is often used as a symbol in art therapy because it represents the unconscious mind, emotions, and intuition.
* It can be used to explore feelings of mystery, change, and the unknown.
* It can also represent femininity, fertility, and the cyclical nature of life.
* In art therapy, clients may be asked to create a moon in their artwork to explore their inner emotions and unconscious thoughts.
* The moon can also be used to represent spiritual and religious beliefs, and to explore these themes in art therapy.
* The different phases of the moon can also be used to represent different stages of emotional growth and healing.

**The tree**: This symbol can represent growth, stability, and connectedness. It may indicate that the client is feeling rooted and grounded, or it may indicate a desire for these feelings.

* Trees are often used as symbols in art therapy because they represent growth, strength, and stability.
* They can be used to represent the self and personal growth, as well as connection to the natural world.
* They can also represent the passage of time, cycles of life and death, and the passage from youth to age.
* In art therapy, clients may be asked to create a tree in their artwork to explore their personal growth and development, or to express their feelings of rootedness and connection to the earth.
* Trees can also be used to explore themes of family, ancestry and cultural heritage.
* Tree can also symbolize spiritual growth, wisdom, and inner strength, and can be used to explore these themes in art therapy.

**The snake**: This symbol can represent transformation, healing, and wisdom. It may indicate that the client is going through a period of change, or it may indicate a desire for personal growth.

* Snakes are often used as symbols in art therapy because they represent transformation, rebirth, and healing.
* They can be used to represent the process of change and the shedding of old patterns or behaviors.
* They can also represent wisdom, knowledge, and the ability to access the unconscious mind.
* In art therapy, clients may be asked to create a snake in their artwork to explore their feelings about change and transformation, or to express their desire for personal growth and development.
* Snakes can also be used to represent spiritual beliefs and the connection to the spiritual realm.
* They can also be associated with the concept of good and evil, and can be used to explore themes of morality and personal ethics in art therapy.

**The spiral:** This symbol can represent movement, growth, and change. It may indicate that the client is feeling a sense of progression, or it may indicate a desire for change and evolution.

* Spirals are often used as symbols in art therapy because they represent movement, change, and growth.
* They can be used to represent the cyclical nature of life and the journey of self-discovery.
* They can also represent connection to the natural world, and the continuity of life.
* In art therapy, clients may be asked to create a spiral in their artwork to explore their feelings about change and personal growth, or to express their connection to the natural world.
* Spirals can also represent spiritual beliefs and the connection to the spiritual realm.
* They can also be used to represent the concept of infinity and the infinite potential of the self, and can be used to explore themes of self-discovery and personal growth in art therapy.

**The key**: This symbol can represent unlocking secrets or finding solutions which may indicate an awareness of deeply recessed issues and the client’s interest in accessing and resolving these hidden aspects of their being.

* Keys are often used as symbols in art therapy because they represent access, power, and the ability to unlock hidden aspects of the self.
* They can be used to represent the process of unlocking the unconscious mind and accessing inner thoughts and emotions.
* They can also represent the ability to unlock the potential for change and growth.
* In art therapy, clients may be asked to create a key in their artwork to explore their feelings about accessing hidden parts of themselves or unlocking new opportunities for growth.
* Keys can also be used to represent spiritual beliefs and the connection to the spiritual realm, they can symbolize the search for meaning, truth and understanding.
* They can also be used to represent the concept of decision making, and the power of choice, and can be used to explore themes of self-discovery and personal growth in art therapy.

**The butterfly**: This symbol can represent transformation, metamorphosis, and freedom. The butterfly's metamorphosis from a caterpillar to a beautiful winged creature is seen as a metaphor for the process of inner transformation and healing.This can refer to personal growth and development, as well as the process of healing and overcoming difficult experiences. Additionally, the butterfly's grace and beauty can also evoke feelings of hope and inspiration.

* Butterflies are often used as symbols in art therapy because they represent transformation, metamorphosis, and the journey of self-discovery.
* They can be used to represent the process of personal growth, change and the shedding of old patterns or behaviors.
* They can also represent beauty, grace, and the fleeting nature of life.
* In art therapy, clients may be asked to create a butterfly in their artwork to explore their feelings about change and transformation, or to express their desire for personal growth and development.
* Butterflies can also be used to represent spiritual beliefs and the connection to the spiritual realm.
* They can also be used to represent the concept of duality and the balance between light and dark, and can be used to explore themes of self-discovery and personal growth in art therapy.

**The heart**: The heart is often used as a symbol for feelings of love, compassion, and empathy. It may be used as a metaphor for the emotional center of an individual, and is associated with physical and emotional healing and can symbolize the process of healing from emotional trauma or distress.

* Hearts are often used as symbols in art therapy because they represent emotions, love, and the inner self.
* They can be used to represent the process of emotional healing and the exploration of feelings.
* They can also represent the connection to others, compassion, and the ability to give and receive love.
* In art therapy, clients may be asked to create a heart in their artwork to explore their feelings and emotions, or to express their desire for emotional connection and healing.
* Hearts can also be used to represent spiritual beliefs and the connection to the spiritual realm.
* They can also be used to represent the concept of wholeness, balance and integration, and can be used to explore themes of self-discovery and personal growth in art therapy.

**The cross:** The cross can be used as a symbol of faith, hope, and spiritual connection, as well as a symbol of sacrifice, redemption, and overcoming adversity. Clients may use the cross symbol to represent their struggles and hardships, and the hope and strength that they find through their faith. It can also be used as a reminder of the resilience and inner strength that can be accessed through one's spiritual beliefs and practices.

* The cross is often used as a symbol in art therapy because it represents sacrifice, redemption, and spiritual beliefs.
* It can be used to represent the process of spiritual growth and the exploration of religious or spiritual themes.
* It can also represent the connection to a higher power, and the struggle for understanding and faith.
* In art therapy, clients may be asked to create a cross in their artwork to explore their feelings about their spiritual beliefs and practices, or to express their desire for spiritual growth and understanding.
* The cross can also be used to represent the concept of sacrifice and the ability to overcome suffering and adversity, and can be used to explore themes of self-discovery and personal growth in art therapy.
* The cross can also be used to represent different religious and spiritual beliefs and can have different meanings depending on the context, culture, and tradition it is used in.

**The boat:** This symbol can represent journey, navigation, and direction and may be used as a metaphor for the journey of life and the struggles and challenges that individuals may face along the way. The boat can also be used as a symbol of emotional or psychological navigation, representing the process of navigating one's inner landscape and understanding one's emotions and thoughts. It can represent a sense of direction and purpose, as well as the ability and interest to move forward through difficult times.

* A boat is often used as a symbol in art therapy because it represents journey, navigation, and the passage of time.
* It can be used to represent the process of personal growth, change and the exploration of the self.
* It can also represent the idea of passage, a change in direction, or a safe haven.
* In art therapy, clients may be asked to create a boat in their artwork to explore their feelings about change, journey, or to express their desire for personal growth and development.
* Boats can also be used to represent spiritual beliefs and the connection to the spiritual realm, representing the idea of a journey towards enlightenment or the search for meaning.
* They can also be used to represent the concept of safety and protection. and the ability to navigate through difficult times,

**The clock**: This symbol can represent time, age, and the passage of time. It can be used to symbolize time and its relationship to life events, emotions and personal growth. The clock can also be used to represent the idea of time running out, or the pressure to achieve certain goals or milestones within a specific time frame and so may be used to explore feelings of stress, anxiety, and the fear of missing out or not achieving one's potential. Clients may use the clock to explore feelings of nostalgia, regret, or longing for the past or the importance of living in the present and making the most of the time that one has.

* The clock can represent the finite nature of human life, and the need to make the most of the time we have.
* The clock can also stand for the concepts of rhythm and cycles, such as the rhythm of nature or the cycle of the seasons.
* The clock can represent time management related to daily tasks.
* The clock can also be a symbol of change, as the hands of the clock move continuously forward, representing the constant movement of time and the need to adapt to changing circumstances.
* The clock can represent the passage of time, helping to explore issues related to aging, mortality, or the changing nature of relationships.
* The clock can be used in art therapy to explore issues related to punctuality, time management, and the pressure of deadlines.

## Themes & Patterns

The recurring use of symbols in an artwork or across several pieces particularly, may indicate themes and patterns of challenges faced by a client. Common themes and patterns that may be indicated through recurring symbols include:

**Self-esteem**: Clients may explore and express their feelings about their self-worth and identity through art. Here are recurring themes that may suggest issues with self-esteem:

* Small or insignificant figures in the artwork may indicate feelings of inadequacy or low self-worth.
* Dark or gloomy colors may indicate negative emotions such as sadness or depression, which can be related to low self-esteem.
* Closed or blocked off spaces in the artwork may indicate a lack of openness to new experiences or a fear of vulnerability.
* Isolated figures or lack of interaction between figures in the artwork may indicate feelings of loneliness or disconnection from others.
* Negative or self-destructive themes in the artwork may indicate self-esteem issues.

**Trauma**: Art therapy can be a safe and effective way for individuals to process and cope with past traumatic experiences. Here are some recurring symbolism and themes commonly associated with trauma:

* Images of violence or aggression
* Depictions of confinement or entrapment
* Use of dark or somber colors
* Inclusion of weapons or weapons imagery
* Depictions of self-harm or self-destructive behaviors

**Grief**: Art therapy can be a way for clients to process and express their feelings of loss, mourning, and healing. Here are some recurring symbolism and themes commonly associated with grief:

* Broken or shattered objects, which can represent the brokenness and fragmentation caused by loss
* Empty spaces or voids, which can represent the feeling of emptiness or loss of something or someone important
* Images of weeping or crying, which can represent the emotional release of grief
* Birds, particularly those flying away, which can represent letting go or moving on
* Themes of rebirth and renewal, such as flowers or trees, which may represent the hope for healing and growth after a loss.

**Behavioral Issues**: Art therapy can be a way for clients to explore and change patterns of behavior that are problematic. Here are some recurring symbolism and themes commonly associated with behavioral issues:

* Chains, cages, or locked doors, which can represent limitations or confinement or feelings of being trapped or limited
* Weapons or aggressive animals, which can represent issues of anger or impulsivity
* Portrayal of self-harm or self-destructive behavior, such as cutting or burning, which can represent issues of self-injury or self-sabotage
* Themes of control or manipulation, such as puppet strings or a figure controlling others, which can represent issues of power and control.

You see then that the elements of symbology help you gain insight into your client's thoughts, feelings, and experiences and can aid in identifying patterns and themes that may be related to the client's mental health.

## Colors

The choice of colors can be an important aspect of the therapeutic process. Different colors can evoke different emotions and associations in people, and exploring these associations through art-making can be a powerful tool for self-expression, personal growth and exploration of the inner self.

Analyzing the use of color involves understanding the symbolic and emotional meanings associated with different colors. The practitioner will use the client's artwork to gain insight into their inner thoughts and emotions by analyzing the use of color in the image.

The practitioner will consider the placement, saturation, and brightness of the color, as well as the relationship of the color to other elements in the image. For example, a bright, saturated red may indicate feelings of anger or passion, while a pale, washed-out red may indicate feelings of sadness or vulnerability.

The cultural and personal associations that the client may have with certain colors must be considered. For example, white is often associated with purity and innocence in Western cultures, but in some Eastern cultures, it can be associated with mourning and death.

The practitioner will also look at the overall composition of the image and the use of color to gain insight into the client's emotional state and inner thoughts. For example, a mostly monochromatic image may indicate a sense of despair or sadness, while a bright, vibrant image may indicate a sense of hope or optimism.

It's important to note that the interpretation of color in art therapy is not a scientific process, and the practitioner must use their professional judgment and take into account the context and culture of the client. Let’s take a look at some common color associations:

**Red** is often associated with feelings of energy, passion, and excitement. It is also associated with danger, anger, and aggression.

**Orange** is often associated with feelings of warmth, enthusiasm, and cheerfulness. It can also be associated with caution and warning.

**Yellow** is often associated with feelings of happiness, optimism, and creativity. It can also be associated with caution and warning.

**Green** is often associated with feelings of growth, harmony, and balance. It can also be associated with envy and jealousy.

**Blue** is often associated with feelings of trust, security, and calmness. It can also be associated with sadness and depression.

**Purple** is often associated with feelings of luxury, nobility, and ambition. It can also be associated with mourning and sadness.

**Black** is often associated with feelings of sophistication, elegance, and mystery. It can also be associated with mourning, death, and evil.

**White** is often associated with feelings of purity, innocence, and cleanliness. It can also be associated with mourning and death.

These associations and meanings can vary from person to person and can be influenced by cultural and personal experiences. In art therapy, the client's own associations and meanings are most important, and the art therapy practitioner will work with the client to explore and understand their use of color in their artwork.

## Shapes

Shapes can be used as a symbolic representation of a person's inner thoughts and feelings. Different shapes can evoke different emotions and meanings, such as circles representing wholeness, while sharp angles may represent feelings of anger or aggression.

The interpretation of shapes in art therapy is often used in combination with other elements of the image, such as color and placement, to gain a deeper understanding of the individual's emotional state. Here are some common shapes and associated meanings:

**Circles** are often associated with wholeness, completeness, and unity. They can also symbolize the self and the infinite. A circle can also represent a cycle or a journey and is often used to represent the idea of "coming full circle" or finding closure.

**Squares** and rectangles are often associated with stability, balance, and security. They can also represent the physical world or the material realm. Square shapes can also represent the idea of being grounded and rooted.

**Triangles** are often associated with growth, change, and movement. They can also represent the idea of a journey or a path. Triangles can also symbolize emotion, as the point can be directed up to represent positive emotions, or down to represent negative emotions.

**Star Shapes** are often associated with the divine, the spiritual, and the aspiration for something greater. They can also represent hope, guidance, and inspiration.They can represent the idea of reaching for something greater, setting goals and aspirations, following one's dreams, and setting and achieving goals.

**Hexagons** can represent a sense of balance, harmony, stability and organization in a person's life. They can be used to explore the idea of balance and harmony in relationships, emotions, and thoughts. In nature, honeycomb structures are an example of hexagonal shapes, and they can be used to explore themes of community, cooperation and interdependence.

**Octagons** can represent the idea of control and regulation, such as self-control, managing emotions, and setting boundaries. They can be used for exploring the idea of self-regulation and self-discipline.

**Diamonds** are often associated with clarity, sharpness, and precision. They can represent the idea of seeing things clearly, and the ability to focus on what's important. They can represent the ability to make difficult decisions, and to cut through ambiguity or confusion. Diamonds can be a symbol of strength and resilience, representing the idea of overcoming challenges and adversity. They can also represent wealth and success.

**Spheres** are often associated with the universe, completeness, and perfection. They can represent the idea of wholeness, unity, and completeness, as well as the idea of infinity and the endlessness of the universe. They can also be used to explore the idea of perfection, and the idea of striving for perfection in one's self, relationships, and life goals. Spheres can be seen as a symbol of balance in emotions, thoughts, and actions. They can also represent unity and interconnectedness; the idea that everything is connected and interdependent.

**Cylinders** are often associated with stability, balance, and continuity. They can represent the idea of a stable foundation and the ability to maintain balance, as well as the idea of continuity and progression. They can also be used to explore the idea of stability and balance in one's self, relationships, and life goals.

**Other Shapes** like crosses, circles with crosses, and triangles with crosses are also used in art therapy and have a symbolic meaning, often related to religion or spirituality.

## Textures

Different textures can evoke different emotions and meanings, and the interpretation of textures in art therapy often involves looking at the specific texture, as well as its placement, size, and relationship to other textures in the image. Here is a look at a few common textures and associated meanings:

**Rough** textures can evoke feelings of agitation, anger, or aggression. They can be used to express the idea of being unsettled, disrupted, or disturbed. They can also be used to explore the idea of struggle, both internal and external, and the ability to navigate through difficult situations.

Rough textures can also represent the idea of change and transformation, being able to adapt to new situations or to persevere, work through difficult emotions and thoughts and overcome obstacles.

**Smooth** textures can evoke feelings of calmness, serenity, or peace. They can also indicate a sense of control or mastery. They can be used to express the idea of being tranquil, balanced, or content, being able to find inner peace and harmony. They can also be used to represent the idea of fluidity and ease, being able to navigate through life with grace and poise.

**Hard** textures can evoke feelings of strength, rigidity, inflexibility, or stubbornness. They can indicate a sense of protection or defensiveness and can convey the idea of being unyielding, unbreakable, or unmovable. They can also be used to explore the idea of boundaries, both physical and emotional, and the ability to protect oneself.

Hard textures can also be used to represent the idea of stability and security, being able to withstand challenges and adversity. They can represent solidity and permanence, representing the idea of being able to rely on oneself and one's relationships.

**Soft** textures can evoke feelings of vulnerability, tenderness, or sensitivity. They can also indicate a sense of openness or receptiveness, comfort and security. Soft textures can evoke feelings of being cared for and protected, and can be used to explore themes of nurturing and self-care.

Soft textures can also be associated with vulnerability, sensitivity, and emotional expressiveness and can invoke an atmosphere of introspection and self-reflection. Soft textures may also be used to express a desire for healing or to symbolize the process of healing.

Textures can be used to represent a person's emotional state and to help clients express their feelings. For example, a client whose artwork is dominated by hard and rough texture may have feelings of being stuck or trapped in a difficult situation, or may be expressing their desire to break free from something. The client may be expressing that they feel out of control and overwhelmed in their life and they want to regain control.

## Summary of Key Points

* Symbology is the study and use of symbols and symbolism in art, literature, and other forms of cultural expression. It can also include the creation of symbols for use in communication and branding.
* Symbols can convey complex ideas or emotions in a simple and easily recognizable form and may be used to represent aspects of the self, past experiences, or emotions that may be difficult to put into words.
* Here are a few common symbols used in art therapy include:
  + The sun, representing vitality, warmth, energy, self-esteem and spiritual beliefs.
  + The tree, representing growth, stability, connectedness, personal growth, connection to the natural world, family, ancestry and cultural heritage.
  + The snake, representing transformation, healing, wisdom, spiritual beliefs, good and evil and personal ethics.
  + The spiral, representing movement, growth, change and evolution.
  + The cross can be used as a symbol in art therapy to represent faith, hope, spiritual connection, sacrifice, redemption, and overcoming adversity.
  + The boat can be used as a symbol in art therapy to represent journey, navigation, and direction and may be used as a metaphor for the journey of life and the struggles and challenges that individuals may face.
  + The clock can be used as a symbol in art therapy to represent time, age, and the passage of time. It can be used to symbolize time and its relationship to life events, emotions, and personal growth.
* The choice of colors in art therapy can be significant as different colors can evoke different emotions and associations, which can be explored through art-making for self-expression and personal growth.
* Some art therapy practitioners use color psychology as a guide, while others take a more intuitive approach. The art therapy practitioner must be attuned to the client's personal associations and meanings of color.
* Common color associations include:
  + Red - passion, anger, love, warmth and energy,
  + Blue - calmness, trust, reliability, sadness
  + Yellow - happiness, sunshine, cheerfulness and caution
  + Other colors like Orange, Green, Purple, Pink, Brown, Black and White are associated with emotions and feelings such as creativity, growth, healing, spirituality, luxury, mystery, earthiness, stability, security, purity, and innocence.
* Shapes and textures in art therapy are used as symbols to represent a person's inner thoughts and feelings
* Different shapes and textures can evoke different emotions and meanings. Here are some examples:
  + Circles can represent wholeness and completeness.
  + Sharp angles may represent feelings of anger or aggression.
  + Rough textures can evoke feelings of agitation, anger, or aggression.
  + Smooth textures may evoke feelings of calmness and serenity.
* The interpretation of shapes and textures is often used in combination with other elements of the image, such as color and placement, to gain a deeper understanding of the individual's emotional state.

## Exercises

**Materials:**

* Sheets of blank paper and a notebook
* Several color markers, paint, pens, crayons…

**Exercise 1: Your emotional color wheel:**

1. Draw a circle on a sheet of paper and divide the circle into six sections
2. Color each section in a different color to represent our basic emotions: happiness, sadness, disgust, fear, surprise, and anger.
3. Reflect on the emotions and color associations you have chosen.

The colors you chose are personal to you and may have a deep connection to your experience, culture, geography etc. For example if you chose blue to represent anger, this may reflect a predisposition for calmness and tranquility when you feel angry, or, it may mean that you associate feelings of sadness or melancholy when angry, only you know.

**Exercise 2: Symbolism Exploration**

1. Create a piece of artwork that incorporates a symbol or image that is significant to you.
2. Reflect on the meaning of the symbol or image and how it relates to your personal experiences, emotions, and thoughts.
3. Analyze the artwork using techniques discussed and note any insights you may have gained into your inner thoughts and feelings.

# Artwork Analysis

Analysis involves the identification of patterns, themes, and elements in the artwork that may indicate the client's emotional state and mental health. It is the process of examining the visual elements and artistic techniques used by the client, as well as recognizing any recurring motifs or patterns. The purpose of analysis is to gather information about the client's thoughts, feelings, and experiences by observing their artwork objectively.

## During the Creative Process

The creative process itself can have powerful therapeutic value. That which is physically manifested must first be conceived internally.The hands become a channel which flows from inside, conscious and subconscious, out through the artistic rendition of the client. The selection of media, colors, shapes, and textures, in addition to body language and attitude during the creative process all provide ways to explore emotions and experiences that may be difficult to put into words.

Consider the weight of a brush stroke, for example, or the shaping and forming of clay; What is the client’s general disposition while creating? What are your thoughts and feelings about what you are observing? What are your instincts telling you and what information can you capture in your engagement with the client. This manifestation of internal into external is the therapy.

Some elements of body language that may be exhibited during the process include:

* Movements: A client who is using repetitive motions may be expressing feelings of stress or obsession, while a client who is using random, spontaneous motions may be expressing feelings of impulsivity or creativity.
* Touch: A client who is using light, delicate brushstrokes may be expressing feelings of vulnerability or fragility, while a client who is using heavy, thick brushstrokes may be expressing feelings of power or assertiveness.
* Tension: A client who is gripping the art materials tightly may be expressing feelings of anger or frustration, while a client who is holding the art materials loosely may be expressing feelings of relaxation or acceptance.
* Distance: A client who is keeping a large distance between themselves and the art materials may be expressing feelings of fear or discomfort, while a client who is working closely with the art materials may be expressing feelings of engagement or connection.
* Speed: A client who is working quickly and efficiently may be expressing feelings of determination or urgency, while a client who is working slowly and methodically may be expressing feelings of contemplation or introspection.

An astute practitioner will note these client manifestations and engage in appropriate dialog to make meaning out of the ongoing artistic expression. This real-time interpretation can help both practitioner and client to gain insights into the psychology that is being revealed.

## Content Analysis

Content analysis is a method of analyzing the content of artwork in order to understand the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the person who created the artwork. Content analysis can be applied to a variety of forms of art, including drawings, paintings, sculptures, and written material.

In addition to the individual elements of the artwork, the overall composition and layout of the piece can also convey psychological meaning. For example, a piece that is chaotic and disordered may indicate feelings of confusion or distress, while a piece that is balanced and symmetrical may indicate feelings of stability and harmony.

The art therapy practitioner may use these visual elements as a way to understand the individual's emotional state, identify areas of difficulty or concern, and develop interventions to help the individual achieve therapeutic goals.

The interpretation of these elements is highly individualized and is based on the context of each person's unique experiences, cultural background, and personal associations. You should always ascertain the individual’s distinguishing elements to develop a deeper understanding of their artwork.

To demonstrate, let’s take a closer look at the color red, and the variety of meaning ascribed; just one color:

* Red is a symbol of love in China, Korea, Japan, and North America.
* Unluckiness is symbolized by red in Chad, Nigeria, and Germany.
* Luckiness is symbolized by red in China, Denmark, and Argentina.
* The traditional bridal color is red in China and white in the USA.

As you can see, it’s complex, and analysis can be significantly flawed if we fail to account for mitigating elements. Additionally, an individual's current emotional state, past experiences, and personal beliefs can also influence the meaning and significance of their artwork. An individual who has experienced trauma may use certain colors, shapes or textures to express their pain, fear or other difficult emotions, whereas another person might not associate those same elements with the same emotions.

For some people, certain elements may not have any specific symbolic or emotional meaning. You should take all this into account when interpreting the artwork. It's important for you to develop an understanding of the uniqueness of the individual in order to effectively analyze the artwork and provide appropriate interventions to help your client achieve therapeutic goals.

A combination of color, shape, texture and placement can give a deeper understanding of the individual's emotional state. For example, a client who is struggling with feelings of sadness and isolation may use dark, muted colors to represent feelings of sadness, with isolated shapes and symbols tucked away in corners may represent feelings of being alone or trapped. These visual elements can help clients express their emotions and gain insight into their experiences, allowing them to process and understand their feelings in a safe and non-verbal way.

It is important to note that the analysis of artistic elements in art therapy is not a scientific process. You must also use your professional judgment and take into account mitigating factors.

Here are some steps to conduct a content analysis:

1. Clearly define the range of inquiry for your content analysis. For example you may be investigating client depression and lack of motivation.
2. Select the artwork that will be analyzed. More than one successive piece helps to increase reliability.
3. Apply the coding system to a piece of artwork, and record the results in a structured format. (See Coding Systems above.)
4. Analyze the results to identify patterns, themes, and relationships. Make notes and highlight areas that represent the focus of your inquiry.

Here are some examples of narrative summaries that may be noted in the analysis of a client’s artwork:

* "Bright and bold colors indicating a feeling of confidence," or "dark and muted colors indicating a feeling of sadness."
* "Sharp and angular shapes indicating anger," or "round and organic shapes indicating a sense of calm."
* “Frequent symbols of time and clocks indicating urgency or stress or running out of time," or "the use of hard textures indicating a sense of rigidity and self-protection."
* "A crowded and chaotic composition indicating feelings of anxiety," or "a balanced and harmonious composition indicating feelings of contentment."

Content analysis can provide valuable information about an individual's thoughts, feelings, and experiences, but it is important to keep in mind that the interpretation of the artwork may vary and it can be subject to personal bias. It's recommended to use this method as part of a comprehensive approach to assessment, which may include other measurement tools, and collaboration with clients.

In addition to the analysis of specific elements of an artwork which is discussed above, a practitioner should also examine broader factors that may have meaning including the following:

**Composition**: Examine the size, color, and placement of elements within the artwork. For example, a large figure may indicate that the artist feels powerful or important in that area of their life. Size can also indicate the artist's focus or attention in the artwork, such as if a figure or object is large in the artwork, it indicates that the artist is focusing on that area of their life.

A large, brightly colored symbol may indicate a significant feeling or experience, while a small, muted symbol may indicate something that is less important to the client, or perhaps deeply recessed.

A figure placed in the center of the artwork may indicate that the artist feels a sense of importance or centrality in that area of their life. If a figure is placed off to the side, it may indicate that the artist feels marginalized or unimportant in that area. Placement of elements can also indicate the artist's perspective, such as if objects are placed high or low in the artwork, they can indicate the artist's power or lack of power respectively in a situation.

**Context, cultural and personal significance:** Consider the context, culture and meaning of the client's artwork. This can include understanding the artistic elements in relation to the client's lived experience. An individual who grew up in a war-torn country may create artwork that depicts violence and destruction.

An individual from a Native American culture may create artwork that incorporates traditional symbols and imagery that holds significant meaning within their culture. By understanding the individual's cultural background, the practitioner can gain insight into the cultural references in the artwork and how they relate to the individual's emotional state.

An individual who has recently experienced the loss of a loved one may create artwork that depicts feelings of sadness and loss. By understanding the individual's current emotional state, the practitioner can gain insight into how the artwork relates to their therapeutic goals and how it can be used to support the individual in their grief journey.

An individual who is going through a personal development journey may create artwork that reflects their personal goals and beliefs. By understanding the individual's personal significance, the practitioner can gain insight into how the artwork relates to the individual's personal growth and development.

**Client's verbal explanation**: So far we have discussed analysis and interpretation based on common meaning attached to elements of an artwork. But the client’s input may provide deeper, more relevant and accurate insights about their thoughts and feelings and the symbolism used in their artwork. This validation is crucial.

## Standardized Assessments

Standardized assessments are tools in art therapy that are used to evaluate a client's issues and progress, and to measure the effectiveness of therapy. These assessments are usually created and validated by experts in the field and are used to evaluate specific areas of functioning, such as cognitive, emotional, or behavioral.

Some examples of standardized assessments that are used in art therapy include:

**Draw-a-Person (DAP) test**: This is a projective assessment tool meaning that it allows the individual to project their own thoughts, feelings, and conflicts onto the pictures, which can reveal unconscious thoughts, feelings, and conflicts that the individual may not be aware of or may not want to share directly.

The Draw-A-Person test (DAP) is administered by asking the client to draw a picture of a person. The picture can be of a man, woman, or child, and the client can be asked to draw the picture from a specific point of view, such as front view, side view, or full-length view.

The DAP test is scored based on a number of factors, including the overall appearance of the picture, the size of the various body parts, the level of detail, and the placement of the various body parts. The test can provide information about the individual's self-perception, self-esteem, emotional functioning, and cognitive development. The test can be used with children, adolescents, and adults, and is considered a simple and effective way of assessing an individual's psychological functioning.

**To conduct a Draw-A-Person (DAP) test, you can follow these steps:**

1. Prepare materials: Gather paper and pencils or markers for the client to use to draw the picture.
2. Explain the task: Explain that you would like them to draw a picture of a person. man, woman, or child. The client can be asked to draw the picture from a specific point of view, such as front view, side view, or full-length view.
3. Provide time: Give the person enough time to complete the task, usually between 30 minutes to an hour.
4. Record observations about the picture including the following (each of these points will be detailed below):
   1. Overall appearance of the picture.
   2. Size of the body parts.
   3. Level of detail.
   4. Placement of the body parts.
   5. Symbols and themes.
5. Interpretation of The Draw-A-Person Test (DAP)

Results should be interpreted in the context of the client’s developmental level, culture, and other factors that might influence the test. The test can provide information about the individual's self-perception, self-esteem, emotional functioning, and cognitive development.

The following are some general guidelines for interpreting DAP results:

* 1. **Overall appearance of the picture**: A well-proportioned and detailed picture may indicate that the person has a positive self-image and good emotional functioning. A poorly drawn or incomplete picture may indicate that the person has a negative self-image or emotional difficulties.
  2. **Size of the body parts**: The size of the head, torso, and limbs can provide insight into the person's self-perception. A large head may indicate a strong sense of self, while a small head may indicate a lack of self-esteem. A large torso may indicate a strong sense of self-worth, while a small torso may indicate feelings of inferiority.
  3. **Level of detail**: The level of detail in the picture can provide insight into the person's cognitive functioning. A detailed picture may indicate good cognitive functioning, while a poorly detailed picture may indicate cognitive difficulties.
  4. **Placement of the body parts**: The placement of the body parts can provide insight into the person's emotional functioning. A picture with the body parts in proportion may indicate good emotional functioning, while a picture with the body parts out of proportion may indicate emotional difficulties.
  5. **Symbols and themes**: The presence of certain symbols or themes in the picture can provide insight into the person's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. For example, the presence of weapons may indicate aggression or trauma, while the presence of a protective figure may indicate a need for support.

**House-Tree-Person (HTP) test**: A projective assessment tool used to evaluate a person's emotional and psychological well-being. It consists of three separate drawings: a house, a tree, and a person.

The steps for administering the House-Tree-Person (HTP) test are similar to those for the Draw-A-Person (DAP) test:

1. Prepare materials: Gather paper and pencils or markers for the client to use to draw the pictures.
2. Explain the task: Explain that you would like them to draw three pictures: a house, a tree, and a person. The client can be asked to draw the pictures from a specific point of view, such as front view, side view, or full-length view.
3. Provide time: Give the person enough time to complete the task, usually between 30 minutes to an hour for each drawing.
4. Record observations about the picture including the following:
   1. The House: Look at how well the the house is drawn and the level of detail
   2. The Tree: Look at the level of detail, colors, shapes
   3. The Person: Look at placement and proportions including the position and size of the eyes, mouth, and ears.
   4. Size and Scale: Look at the size of the house and the proportions relative to the other pieces in the composition.
   5. Symbols and themes: Look for any symbols or themes that may be present in the drawing, such as a person being drawn with a dark cloud over their head, or a person being drawn in a cage.
5. Interpretation of the House-Tree-Person Test (HTP)

Interpret the results in the context of the person's developmental level, culture, and other factors that might influence the test. The house represents the person's sense of security and stability, the tree represents the person's sense of vitality and growth, and the person represents the person's self-image and emotional functioning. The test can provide information about the individual's self-perception, self-esteem, emotional functioning, and cognitive development.

The following are some general guidelines for interpreting HTP results:

* 1. **The House:** The overall appearance of the house can indicate the person's feelings about their home or family environment. A well-drawn, detailed house may indicate a positive feeling about home and family, while a poorly drawn or incomplete house may indicate negative feelings or difficulties in the home environment.
  2. **The Tree:** The overall appearance of the tree can indicate the person's sense of vitality and growth. A well-drawn, detailed tree may indicate a positive feeling about personal growth and development, while a poorly drawn or incomplete tree may indicate negative feelings or difficulties in personal growth.
  3. **The Person:** The overall appearance of the person can indicate the person's self-image and emotional functioning. A well-drawn, detailed person may indicate a positive self-image and good emotional functioning, while a poorly drawn or incomplete person may indicate a negative self-image or emotional difficulties.
  4. **Size and Proportion:** The size and proportion of the parts in the HTP test can indicate the person's self-perception and self-worth, just like in DAP test. A large house, tree, or person may indicate a strong sense of self, while a small house, tree, or person may indicate a lack of self-esteem.
  5. **Composition:** placement and size of the house, tree, and person in relation to each other, which can provide insight into the person's perspective on their life. For example, if the house is drawn in the background and the tree and person are in the foreground, it may indicate that the person sees their home life as less important than their personal growth and development.

Both the DAP and HTP test should be administered by a trained professional and should be used as part of a comprehensive assessment, as it does not provide a definitive diagnosis, but it can provide valuable information about an individual's psychological functioning.

## Coding Systems

Analysis of artwork relies on the skill and expertise of the individual or team classifying and interpreting the artworks, which can be subjective because of personal biases and perspectives. Bias can be mitigated by having multiple people involved in the process, or one person making multiple passes or, reliability can be built into the approach by standardizing the analytical instrument or coding system.

The objective of coding systems in art therapy is quite simple; observe and record (code) the elements and attributes of a client’s artwork with the intention of using this information to analyze and gain insights into the client’s condition. It is interesting to note that the more such an instrument is used, the more reliable and normalized it becomes; so use it always and often to increase its validity.

Coding systems can be quite sophisticated, using powerful software and teams of experts to mitigate bias and increase reliability. Since this approach isn’t widely available, consider the following simplified approach using common tools:

1. Define the categories you want to use to classify the artwork. There are many ways to categorize artwork for analysis. Some practitioners use a small number of categories and elements. The categories selected may reflect the interest and specializations of the practitioner. Some categories to consider include:
   1. Formal elements: such as shape, color, texture, and composition, that can give insight into the client's emotional state, unconscious feelings, and ways of coping.
   2. Symbolism: This refers to the meaning of the imagery and symbols used in the artwork, which can provide insight into the client's thoughts, feelings, and experiences.
   3. Emotional expression: This includes the feelings and emotions that the artwork evokes in the viewer, as well as the emotions that the artist may have been expressing through the artwork. It can give insight into the client's emotional state, coping strategies and inner conflicts.
   4. Personal significance: This includes the personal and cultural meanings that the artwork holds for the client, as well as any associations or memories that the artwork may evoke. It can give insight into the client's past, present and future.
   5. Process: This includes the steps and stages of creating the artwork, and the client's thoughts, feelings and behaviors during the process. This can give insight into the client's coping strategies, and how the client processes and manages emotions.
2. Create a list of keywords that correspond to each category. For example, for emotional expression, you might use keywords such as "anger," "sadness," "happiness," and "fear." For symbols, you might use keywords such as "home," "family," "isolation," "loneliness" and "connection." For colors, you might use keywords such as "red," "green," "blue," and "yellow." For shapes, you might use keywords such as "circle," "square," "triangle," and "rectangle."
3. View the artwork and classify the content using the keywords you have created, taking into account the context of the client's therapy session and their self-reported feelings and experiences. Analyzing several pieces may have a ‘leveling’ effect which can increase reliability.
4. Tag each artwork with the appropriate keywords from your list. For example, you might create a spreadsheet with rows for each keyword and other assessment criteria that you may be using such as Standardized Assessments, Composition, Context etc**…** discussed below, and columns for each artwork. What you track will be driven by your expertise, areas of practice, and approach to therapy. Use a system and use it consistently.
5. As you view each artwork, count the number of times you observe an element in the artwork and enter that number next to each keyword that is noted on the artwork. For instance, 3 triangles or 2 suns. This numbering can be especially useful in some types of analysis and can be used to track increase/decrease in particular elements, which can indicate changes in client condition.

How you record your observations is up to you but must be systematic and consistent. Some elements, like color or texture, may be difficult to enumerate; one possibility is to use a scale of numbers (e.g 3=heavy, 2=medium, 1=light). Instead of numbers you may choose to use another scale (color, letter, a comment). Whatever scale you use, try to use it consistently. Create a legend of your codes to support consistent use.

1. Review the information you have collected and organized above. Look at each category and its elements and enter narrative observations about patterns and indicators that are relevant to the client and the issues being treated.

Use the system to classify new artworks as they come in, and to track the client's progress over time. A spreadsheet such as Excel offers some simple and powerful functions for data analysis.

It is important to work collaboratively with the client, discussing the artwork and their feelings, to develop a deeper understanding of the client's experiences and emotions.

## Summary of Key Points

* Analysis of artwork involves looking at content, composition and symbolism, including elements like colors, shapes, and textures, and specific imagery or themes.
* Practitioners may use knowledge of psychology and art therapy techniques to understand deeper meaning of the artwork.
* Analyzing and interpreting client art are integral parts of the meaning-making process in art therapy.
* Analysis includes collection and organization of information, with some preliminary thinking about what may be indicated by the classified data.
* Interpretation includes a collaborative, client-validated understanding of that organized information; searching for patterns, symbols and connections that relate to the client.
* It is an iterative process that will include switching between analysis and interpretation, and at points where there may be no distinction.
* Analysis increases validity and reliability when applied consistently over time.
* Client engagement and guidance will help clients come to their own understanding about their artwork, what it means to them, and how it perhaps manifests the issues at hand.
* Coding systems in art therapy aim to observe and record elements and attributes of a client's artwork in order to analyze and gain insights into the client's condition.
* Bias is a natural element of observation and can be mitigated by using multiple people or standardizing the analytical instrument or coding system.
* A simplified approach to coding systems includes: defining categories to classify the artwork, such as themes, symbols, colors, shapes, formal elements, symbolism, emotional expression, personal significance, and process.
  + Creating a list of keywords that correspond to each category and using them to classify the content of the artwork while taking into account the context of the client's therapy session and self-reported feelings and experiences.
  + Tagging each artwork with the appropriate keywords and counting the number of times an element is observed in the artwork to track and analyze over time.
  + Use a consistent system and increase the reliability and validity by using it often
* Content Analysis is a method of analyzing the content of artwork in order to understand the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the person who created the artwork.
* Steps to conduct a content analysis:
* Clearly defining a range of inquiry through research questions.
* Selecting the artwork to be analyzed.
* Applying the coding system to a piece of artwork.
* Analyzing the results to identify patterns, themes and relationships
* In addition to the analysis of specific elements of an artwork, practitioners should also examine broader factors that may have meaning, including composition, context, cultural and personal significance.
* Standardized assessments are tools used in art therapy to evaluate a client's issues and measure the effectiveness of therapy, and are usually created and validated by experts in the field, and are used to evaluate specific areas of functioning, such as cognitive, emotional, or behavioral.
* Examples of standardized assessments that are used in art therapy include: Draw-a-Person (DAP) test, House-Tree-Person (HTP) test, Kinetic Family Drawings (K-F-D)
* Analysis and interpretation of elements in an artwork is not a scientific process, and practitioners must use judgment and take into account the context and culture of the client.

## Exercises

**Materials: as is available**

* Sheets of blank paper and a notebook
* Several color markers, paint, pens, crayons…
* Material for Collage: paper, magazines, fabric, glue, tape
* Plasticine, Modeling clay
* Drawing instruments, rulers, cookie cutters, protractors….
* A computer or other device that has spreadsheeting capabilities or If you prefer, sheets of grid paper
* A client or volunteer to act as a client

**Exercise 1: Build a Coding System:**

1. Consider what elements of an artwork you would include in your system
2. Make a list on a sheet of paper or electronic spreadsheet
3. Review the potential meaning associated to these elements
4. How would you record the presence or absence of an element in an artwork?
5. Use the Freeform Art technique and create an artwork of your choice: Drawing, Painting, Sculpture or Collage.
6. Use your coding system to perform an analysis of your piece

**Exercise 2: Create a Worksheet that may be used to Analyze Art**

1. Consider how you would use a worksheet to record and organize your observations of client art and other elements of the therapeutic exchange.
2. Use the first 4 or 5 rows to title the spreadsheet: Client Name and other particulars that may be useful to note.
3. Start at column 1, and use row 7 to enter headers or titles: Elements, Artwork 1, Artwork 2. Add a column for narrative descriptions.
4. Enter the elements to be tracked in the first column: Red, Yellow, Triangle, Circle, Boat, Clock, etc. This is a work in process so start with what you know at this point.

There it is; you now have a simple classification system that will grow as needed. Spreadsheets are worthwhile tools to put some effort into learning to use..

**Exercise 3: Analyze a few pieces of a client’s artwork**

1. Work with a client or someone you know and have them create pieces on a specific topic or theme
2. Engage in a discussion during the creation process and use the spreadsheet to record thoughts and observations.
3. After completion, find a quiet spot and prepare yourself mentally to review the artwork.
4. Complete the spreadsheet with observations and insights about elements and characteristics of each piece.
5. Look for patterns and themes across the pieces.
6. Discuss your observations with the artist and get their feedback.

# Interpretive Models

Following the analysis of the client's artwork, the art therapy practitioner moves on to the interpretation process, utilizing various interpretive models such as humanism, psychodynamics, neuroscience, and behaviorism. These models help in understanding the emotions and experiences depicted in the client's artwork more comprehensively. The practitioner will look for specific visual cues in the artwork, such as dark colors, chaotic imagery, or a lack of detail, that may indicate mental health conditions.

Using the chosen interpretive model, they will then facilitate a discussion with the client about their mental health and provide them with tools and strategies to better manage their symptoms. Additionally, the practitioner may use the interpretation of the artwork to help the client identify patterns of thoughts and behaviors that may be contributing to their distress and develop coping mechanisms to address them.

## Humanistic Interpretation

This approach emphasizes the importance of the client's unique perspective and the role of empathy in understanding the art and the client's experience.The humanistic approach recognizes the subjective nature of the creative process and the unique personal meaning that the art holds for each individual.

Using the observations and analysis done on the artwork, you will help the client to explore their emotions, thoughts, and feelings through their art, and to gain insight into their challenges. Here are some suggested elements of focus:

**Self-expression**: The practitioner will help the client understand how the art reflects their inner feelings, thoughts, and experiences.

**Personal meaning**: The practitioner will help the client to understand the personal significance of the art and how it relates to their life experiences.

**Symbolism**: The practitioner will help the client explore the symbolic meaning of the art and how it represents their thoughts and feelings.

**Emotion**: The practitioner will help the client to understand the emotions that are expressed in the art and how it relates to their emotional state.

**Creativity**: The practitioner will help the client to understand the creative process and how it relates to their self-expression and personal growth.

Speaking to the client, here is an example of how a practitioner may take a humanistic approach to discussing the client’s artwork:

Practitioner: "Can you tell me more about this painting you've created? What feelings or emotions does it evoke for you?"

Client: "It makes me feel very serene and peaceful. I feel like I'm in a beautiful place."

Practitioner: "I notice that the painting is of a nature scene, with lush greenery and a peaceful stream. Can you tell me more about how this image relates to your own sense of self?"

Client: "It reminds me of the times when I feel most connected to myself and the world around me. Being in nature helps me to feel grounded and at peace."

Practitioner: "I see. It sounds like this painting is helping you to tap into your own sense of inner peace and connection to the world. How can you bring this feeling into your everyday life and continue to access it?"

Client: "I can try to spend more time in nature. I can remind myself of the feeling I get when I look at this painting."

Practitioner: "That's a great idea. Let's continue to explore ways to access your inner peace and connection to the world in our art-therapy sessions."

## Cognitive-Behavioral Interpretation

This approach focuses on the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, and how they're represented in the art.

The practitioner uses art as a tool to help clients identify and challenge negative thoughts, beliefs, and cognitive distortions (things that make us feel bad about ourselves). This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding how thoughts and beliefs influence emotions and behavior, and how changing them can lead to positive changes in behavior and emotions.

Using the information collected in the analysis of the artwork, the practitioner may engage the client in the following:

**Identify negative thoughts and beliefs**: The practitioner will help clients to identify negative thoughts and beliefs that are reflected in their art.

**Challenge and reframe negative thoughts**: The practitioner will help clients to challenge and reframe negative thoughts by providing alternative perspectives and encouraging self-reflection.

**Identify patterns and themes**: The practitioner will help clients to identify patterns and themes in the artwork and understand how they relate to their thoughts, beliefs and behaviors.

**Develop coping strategies**: The practitioner will help clients to develop coping strategies to deal with negative thoughts and emotions by exploring new ways to express and process their emotions through art.

**Encourage self-reflection**: The practitioner will encourage clients to reflect on the artwork and their experience of creating it, and help them to gain insight into their thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Speaking to the client, here is an example of how a practitioner may take a cognitive-behavioral approach to discussing the client’s artwork:

Practitioner: "Can you tell me about your painting? What feelings or emotions does it evoke for you?"

Client: "It makes me feel very angry and frustrated. I feel like the person in the painting is lashing out."

Practitioner: "I notice that the painting is of a figure with fists clenched and a fierce expression on their face. Can you tell me more about how this image relates to your own feelings of anger and frustration?"

Client: "It reminds me of how I feel when I get angry. I feel like lashing out and expressing my anger physically."

Practitioner: "I see. It sounds like this painting is helping you to visually express and understand the anger you are experiencing. Can you tell me some of the thoughts or beliefs that are fueling your anger?"

Client: "I keep thinking that people are treating me unfairly and that I'm not being heard."

Practitioner: "I understand. It sounds like these thoughts and beliefs are leading to a feeling of injustice which is leading to your anger. Let's work on reframing these thoughts and developing more effective coping mechanisms in our art-therapy sessions."

## Psychodynamic Interpretation

This approach delves into the unconscious mind and explores the influence of past experiences, relationships, and unresolved conflicts on the client's current emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. As an art therapy practitioner, you will seek to uncover the underlying psychological dynamics that may be reflected in your client's artwork and how they relate to their present situation.

Incorporating the psychodynamic perspective, you may focus on the following aspects while interpreting your client's artwork:

**Unconscious thoughts and desires:** You will help your client identify and explore unconscious thoughts, desires, and feelings that may be expressed in their art.

**Defense mechanisms:** You will help your client recognize any defense mechanisms that may be present in their artwork, such as repression, projection, or denial.

**Early experiences and relationships:** You will help your client examine how their early experiences and relationships may be influencing their current emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, as well as their artistic expression.

**Symbolic representations:** You will help your client identify and explore the symbolic representations present in their artwork, which may provide insight into their unconscious mind and inner conflicts.

Speaking to the client, here is an example of how you may take a psychodynamic approach to discussing the client’s artwork:

You: "Can you tell me more about this painting? What feelings or emotions does it evoke for you?"

Client: "It makes me feel a bit anxious and confused. I'm not sure why, but there's something unsettling about it."

You: "I notice that the painting depicts a chaotic scene with various fragmented images. Can you tell me more about how this image relates to your own experiences and emotions?"

Client: "I'm not sure. Maybe it has something to do with the feeling of being overwhelmed and not being able to make sense of everything that's happening in my life."

You: "I see. It's possible that this painting is helping you express some unconscious thoughts and feelings related to past experiences or unresolved conflicts. Let's explore this further in our art therapy sessions to better understand the underlying dynamics that may be contributing to your current emotional state."

In conclusion, by incorporating the psychodynamic approach into the art therapy process, you can deepen your understanding of clients' underlying psychological dynamics, which can ultimately help facilitate personal growth and healing.

## Neuroscience-Informed Interpretation:

This approach is done through a lens that incorporates knowledge of the brain and its functions. This can involve understanding how different areas of the brain are activated during the creation of art, as well as how the brain processes and interprets visual information. The art therapy practitioner may also consider the client's individual cognitive and emotional processing style, and how that may have influenced the creation of the artwork.

A practitioner may connect the client's artwork to specific neurological processes and structures in the brain. Here are some examples:

If a client creates artwork that depicts intense emotions, the practitioner may discuss how this is related to activation of the amygdala, which is responsible for processing emotions such as fear and anger.

The practitioner may also discuss how the artwork may be related to the neural circuits involved in emotional regulation and self-regulation, such as the prefrontal cortex and the anterior cingulate cortex. By discussing the artwork in terms of specific neural processes and structures, the practitioner can help the client better understand their own emotional experiences and how they relate to their mental health.

Let’s take PTSD as a specific example. If a client is struggling with PTSD, the practitioner can discuss how the artwork may be related to the neural circuits involved in memory, specifically the hippocampus. The practitioner may also discuss how the artwork may be related to the neural circuits involved in emotional regulation, such as the prefrontal cortex and the anterior cingulate cortex. The practitioner may discuss how these neural circuits may be affected by traumatic experiences, and how this can lead to symptoms of PTSD such as intrusive memories and emotional dysregulation.

Additionally, a practitioner may discuss how certain art techniques or mediums may affect the brain. For example, the use of bright colors or repetitive patterns in art may be related to the neural processes involved in attention and perception, while the use of certain art techniques such as drawing or painting may be related to fine motor skills and the neural processes involved in spatial cognition.

The goal of this approach is to use the artwork as a window into the client's inner experience and to use this understanding to help the client gain insight into their emotions and behavior, and ultimately improve their mental health.

Speaking to the client, here is an example of how a practitioner may take a neuroscience-informed approach to discussing the client’s artwork:

Practitioner: "Can you tell me about this painting you've created? What was your inspiration for it?"

Client: "I've been feeling really sad and hopeless lately, and I wanted to express that in my painting."

Practitioner: "I can definitely see that in the colors you've used, the dark blues and grays seem to convey a sense of sadness and despair. Can you tell me more about why you chose to use those specific colors?"

Client: "I just felt like that's how I've been feeling inside, like everything is gray and dark. I couldn't think of any other colors to use."

Practitioner: "I understand. The blues and grays you've used here can be seen as a reflection of the decreased activity in the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for regulating emotions. Low activity in this area can lead to feelings of depression. The empty space in the painting could also be interpreted as a symbol of feeling empty inside."

Client: "Yeah, that's exactly how I've been feeling. I feel empty inside. So this is not just a feeling, you are saying that there may be a physical impact in my brain!"

Practitioner: "Yes, there may be and we can take steps to correct the issues. I'm glad you were able to express that through your art. It's important to remember that depression is a common and treatable condition. We can work together to find ways to increase activity in the prefrontal cortex and fill that empty space you're feeling inside. Can we explore different techniques for this in our next session?"

Client: "Yes, I would like that…. So I am not just *feeling* empty… there *is* a space and we can work to fill it… Outstanding!"

Practitioner: "Great, I'm looking forward to our next session. Remember that expressing yourself through art can be a powerful tool for understanding and managing your emotions."

## Summary of Key Points

* Humanistic interpretation emphasizes the importance of the client's unique perspective and the role of empathy in understanding the art and the client's experience. The practitioner helps the client explore their emotions, thoughts, and feelings through their art, and to gain insight into their challenges. Elements of focus include self-expression, personal meaning, symbolism, emotion, and creativity.
* Cognitive-behavioral interpretation focuses on the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, and how they're represented in the art. The practitioner uses art as a tool to help clients identify and challenge negative thoughts, beliefs, and cognitive distortions. This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding how thoughts and beliefs influence emotions and behavior, and how changing them can lead to positive changes in behavior and emotions.
* The psychodynamic interpretation in art therapy delves into the unconscious mind, exploring the influence of past experiences, relationships, unresolved conflicts, and defense mechanisms on the client's current emotions, thoughts, and behaviors; using symbolic representations in the artwork, the practitioner gains insights into the client's unconscious mind and inner conflicts, ultimately facilitating personal growth and healing.
* Neuroscience-informed interpretation in art therapy incorporates knowledge of the brain and its functions, focusing on how different brain areas are activated during art creation and how the brain processes and interprets visual information; by connecting the client's artwork to specific neurological processes and structures, the practitioner helps the client gain insight into their emotions, behavior, and mental health, ultimately leading to improvement in their well-being.

## Exercise: "Individual Interpretive Models Practice"

This exercise is designed to help you practice interpreting art based on the humanistic, cognitive-behavioral, psychodynamic, and neuroscientific interpretive models.

**Materials:**

* You will need access to the internet or an art book collection for you to choose four of your favorite paintings.
* You will also need paper, and pens or pencils for note-taking.

**Instructions**:

* Familiarize yourself with the humanistic, cognitive-behavioral, psychodynamic, and neuroscientific interpretive models. If needed, review the course materials or conduct additional research to ensure you have a clear understanding of each model.
* Choose four of your favorite paintings from either an online source or an art book collection.
* Analyze and interpret each painting using each of the four interpretive models. Make notes on your interpretations, considering the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that may have influenced the creation of the artwork.
* After completing your initial interpretations, research the artist and the context in which the paintings were created. Look for information about the artist's life, experiences, and artistic influences to see how much of your interpretation aligns with the artist's intentions and the painting's historical context.
* Revisit your initial interpretations and compare them with the information you discovered. Note any similarities or differences between your interpretations and the artist's intentions, as well as any insights you gained from this exercise.
* Adjust your interpretation to refine your understanding of the artwork based on your research findings. With this refined interpretation, consider what issues the artist may have been facing and how you might address those issues in future art therapy sessions.

# Responding and Engaging Clients

We have collected a great deal of information, we have organized it in a usable form, and have ascribed meaning to the client art. We have gained some insights into the client’s thoughts and behaviors. Now it is time to use these insights into the inner nature and being of the client to address the client’s issues.

The practitioner might help the client to explore the hidden meanings of the art work, explore emotions and feelings associated with the analysis and interpretation, and how this relates to the client's life and challenges.

Here are some of the approaches that can be used to engage the client in co-creation of meaning:

## Interpretive Dialogue Approach

This is perhaps the most powerful tool in your arsenal. Use a series of reflective questions to build a dialog about the meaning of the artwork. Open-ended questions encourage clients to reflect on their artwork and the emotions, experiences, and unconscious material it represents. This helps clients to gain insight into their inner thoughts and feelings, and to explore the symbolic meanings in their artwork. Use open ended questions to guide discovery.

Use details gathered in the analysis to guide the exploration. Speaking to the client, here is an example of how a practitioner may interpretive dialog to discussing the client’s artwork:

“I notice that you use a number of triangles in your most recent work, but not in your earlier pieces. How did that come about? Does this mean anything specific to you?”

….. ….. during the dialog about triangles, as appropriate, introduce some of the known symbolism e.g.

“Triangles are often associated with growth, and movement. How does that relate to what you have portrayed in your art?”

…. ….. If appropriate, “Depending on direction, triangles may represent positive or negative emotions… what are you seeing in your work?”

Or drill down deeply into the psychology “Is that a shadow I see on the left? How is that reflective of the story you are telling?” This level of engagement can get past the obvious elements of the piece and perhaps tap into subconscious manifestations.

By continuing in this manner to use the insights noted in analysis and interpretation, you will be able to lead the client to better understand the challenges faced and explore coping strategies and treatment.

## Personal Narrative Approach

An artwork may tell a story of an event or period of time in the client’s life. Begin by looking at the artwork itself, noting the colors, shapes, materials and composition used.

Consider the client's verbal or written explanation of the artwork, if any, and the context in which it was created, such as the client's emotional state or the specific therapeutic task or theme the client was working on.

A piece may have centered on a specific event or issue as the therapeutic focus. Enter into a dialogue about the elements of the work and the symbolism used, and help the client construct a narrative for the experience. Look at the artwork from different perspectives, such as the client's personal history, cultural background, and current life situation.

Speaking with the client, here is an example of how a practitioner may help articulate a client’s personal narrative:

As we look at your artwork, it's clear that it tells a story of deep pain and trauma. The colors you have used are dark and muted, with shades of black and gray dominating the piece. These colors convey a sense of despair, sorrow, and hopelessness, reflecting the deep pain and suffering that you have experienced.

The images depicted in your artwork are often disturbing and violent, with twisted figures and scenes of chaos and destruction. These images provide a glimpse into your inner turmoil and the traumatic events that you have endured. The twisted figures may symbolize the way your trauma has distorted and twisted your perception of yourself and the world around you, while the scenes of chaos and destruction may reflect the sense of upheaval and loss that your trauma has caused in your life.

It's clear that you have experienced something traumatic, and you are using your artwork as a way to process and cope with those feelings. The artwork serves as a cathartic release for you, allowing you to express your emotions and experiences in a safe and creative way. The act of creating art can also be a therapeutic process in itself, helping you to gain insight into your trauma and begin the healing process.

Your artwork serves as a powerful reminder of your personal history, and the impact that it has had on your life. Through your artwork, you are able to communicate and share your innermost thoughts and feelings, which can be a valuable tool in the therapeutic process.

## Body-Centered Approach

A body-centered approach to interpreting artwork considers the connection between the body and emotions and how the client's physical sensations and movements may have influenced the artwork that was created.

The practitioner uses elements of the analysis that symbolizes movement, flow, strength, weakness, in the shapes, colors and composition, as appropriate, and asks the client about the physical sensations and emotional state they experienced while creating the artwork, such as tension, ease, or movement.

A body-centered approach to interpretation can be particularly beneficial for clients who may have experienced trauma, as it can help them to access and process emotions and memories stored in the body.

Speaking to the client, here is an example of how a practitioner may take a body-centered approach to discussing the client’s artwork:

Practitioner: "Can you tell me more about this drawing you've made today? What feelings or emotions does it evoke for you?"

Client: "It makes me feel very anxious and scared. I can't look at it for too long."

Practitioner: "I notice that the figures in the drawing are in a chaotic and violent scene, can you tell me more about how that relates to any experiences you might have had?"

Client: "It reminds me of the time I was in a car accident, I cannot get it out of my head.."

Practitioner: "I see, it sounds like this drawing represents some traumatic memories for you. Can you describe how you feel in your body when you look at this drawing?"

Client: "I feel tightness in my chest, and my heart starts to race."

Practitioner : "How did you feel while you were drawing the piece?"

Client: "Worse, I thought I was going to explode. I could barely get through it… I actually stopped to catch my breath and calm down.”

Practitioner: "I understand, it's normal for traumatic memories to trigger certain stimuli and for our bodies to respond in this way. Can you tell me more about how you experience this feeling in your body by using this art material? Could you use color, shape, or line to represent how you feel?"

Client: "I mean, there were a lot of broken things everywhere, a real mess. It was quiet and still, but also loud. So a lot of red and dark rough colors and sharp lines and shapes with sharp edges… It was scary, I felt lost."

Practitioner: "That's a good way to express those feelings. We can continue to work on coping techniques and also explore your traumatic experiences and emotions further in our sessions using this artwork as a starting point for our discussions."

## Solution-Focused Approach

This approach emphasizes the identification of solutions and positive change, rather than focusing on problems or deficits. This approach is based on the idea that people have the ability to solve their own problems and that the art therapy practitioner's role is to help clients identify their strengths and resources, and to develop a plan for achieving their goals.

Through this interpretation you will use art as a tool to help clients identify their strengths and resources and to visualize their desired future. You will also use art to help clients identify and focus on the changes they want to make in their lives.

Here are some elements a solution-focused interpretation may examine:

**Identify strengths and resources**: The practitioner will help clients to identify their strengths and resources that can be used to achieve their goals.

**Visualize desired future**: The practitioner will help clients to visualize their desired future and focus on the changes they want to make in their lives by exploring different scenarios and possibilities in their art.

**Develop a plan for achieving goals**: The practitioner will help clients to develop a plan for achieving their goals by exploring different strategies and options through art.

**Encourage self-reflection**: The practitioner will encourage clients to reflect on the artwork and their experience of creating it, and to use the insights gained to make positive changes in their lives.

Speaking to the client, here is an example of how a practitioner may take a solution-focused approach to discussing the client’s artwork:

Practitioner: "Can you tell me more about your painting? What feelings or emotions does it evoke for you?"

Client: "It makes me feel very stressed and overwhelmed. I feel like I'm juggling too many things at once."

Practitioner: "I notice that the painting is of a person holding several balls in their hands. Can you tell me more about how this image relates to your own feelings of stress and overwhelm?"

Client: "It reminds me of how I feel with all the responsibilities and tasks I have to juggle in my life. I feel like I am gonna drop the ball… I'm constantly trying to keep everything in balance."

Practitioner: "I see. It sounds like this painting is helping you to visually express and understand the stress and overwhelm you are experiencing. Can you tell me what one small thing you can do to alleviate some of the stress? Delegate? Prioritize? Remove?

Client: "I could make a list of my responsibilities and prioritize them to focus on the most important ones first. There are some things that I can try to pass onto someone else. Remove? That's interesting… Can I just remove things! Maybe!

## Summary of Key Points

* The practitioner should use insights gained from analyzing and interpreting the client's artwork to respond to the client's issues.
* Interpretive dialogue is a way for practitioners to explore the meaning of artwork by building a dialog with clients about the emotions, experiences, and unconscious material represented in their artwork.
* Personal narratives are another approach, where practitioners help clients construct a narrative for their artwork by considering elements such as colors, shapes, materials, and composition, as well as the client's verbal or written explanation, and the context in which it was created.
* A body-centered approach to interpreting artwork focuses on the connection between the body and emotions and how the client's physical sensations and movements may have influenced the artwork. This approach can be particularly beneficial for clients who have experienced trauma.
* Solution-Focused approach emphasizes the identification of solutions and positive change, rather than focusing on problems or deficits. The practitioner uses art as a tool to help clients identify their strengths and resources, visualize their desired future, and focus on the changes they want to make in their lives and to develop a plan for achieving their goals.

## Exercises

**Materials**:

* Sheets of grid paper, color markers, pens, paints, crayons etc.
* A notebook

**Exercise 1: Personal Narrative Creation**

1. Create a piece of artwork that represents a specific event or period of time in your life.
2. Reflect on the colors, shapes, materials, and composition used in the artwork, and the context in which it was created.
3. Analyze the artwork using techniques discussed and note any insights you may have gained into your inner thoughts and feelings.
4. Construct a narrative for the experience, looking at the artwork from different perspectives such as your personal history, cultural background, and current life situation.

**Exercise 2: Body-Centered Interpretation**

1. Create a piece of artwork while paying attention to your physical sensations.
2. Reflect on the physical sensations and emotional state you experienced while creating the artwork (such as tension, ease, or movement and the physicalness used in creating the artwork).
3. Analyze the artwork using elements that symbolize movement, flow, strength, weakness, in the shapes, colors, and composition as appropriate
4. Describe how your physical sensations and emotions may have influenced the artwork.

# Module Conclusion

Analyzing and interpreting client art in art therapy is an important aspect of the therapeutic process. It allows the practitioner to gain insight into the client's emotional and psychological well-being and to identify areas of concern that may need to be addressed in therapy. The practitioner plays a crucial role in engaging the client in a dialog of exploration and self-discovery as the client examines their emotions, thoughts, and experiences through the creative process and artistic expression.

By using various methods and techniques, such as systematic analysis of the artwork, and standardized assessments, the practitioner can help the client to understand and connect their artwork with life experience. Additionally, the practitioner should leverage the therapeutic value of the creative process itself, noting the client's emotional and psychological manifestations in their artwork as the piece is being created and use this real-time engagement to provide guidance and emotional support.

Projective assessment tools such as the Draw-a-Person (DAP) test and the House-Tree-Person (HTP) test are widely used in art therapy to evaluate the psychological status of clients and to monitor treatment progress. However, it is important to note that these tools are subjective, and the interpretation of the results can vary depending on the individual's background, characteristics, and the context in which the test was taken. Therefore, it is crucial that they be used in conjunction with other assessment methods and that they be interpreted by qualified professionals such as trained art therapy practitioners, psychologists or counselors.

To conduct a comprehensive analysis, the practitioner will examine the elements of the artwork such as the use of color, form, and composition, as well as the symbolism and imagery present in the artwork. The practitioner will also consider the client's verbal and nonverbal communication during the art-making process, such as the choice of materials, the speed of work, and the client's emotional response to the artwork.

The practitioner will use their knowledge of art therapy theory and techniques to interpret the client's artwork and to gain insight into the client's emotional and psychological well-being. This can include identifying themes and patterns in the artwork, understanding the symbolism and imagery present in the artwork, and interpreting the client's use of materials and techniques.

It's important to keep in mind that the interpretation of artwork can be subjective, and different practitioners may have different interpretations of the same artwork. Therefore, it is important that the practitioner considers the client's unique background and experiences, as well as the context in which the artwork was created.

Also, it's crucial that the practitioner maintains a non-judgmental and empathetic attitude when interpreting the client's artwork, and that they communicate their observations and interpretations in a respectful and supportive manner. The interpretation of the artwork should be discussed with the client, and the practitioner should respect the client's perspective and feelings about their artwork.

In summary, the interpretation of client artwork in art therapy is a complex process that involves using various tools and techniques to gain insight into the client's emotional and psychological well-being. It should be done by a qualified professional, considering the client's background, characteristics, and context and insights should be discussed with the client in a respectful and supportive manner.