

## PFA Tips

## Art Therapy

Art Therapy (different from art instruction) is an expressive or creative arts therapy that engages individuals' kinesthetic, sensory, perceptual, affective, cognitive, and symbolic capacities through art making processes and the art produced. Art therapy is an active, whole brain, mind-body endeavor providing a communicative, relationship-oriented platform for individuals with ASD. Individuals can find sensory and kinesthetic ways to better self-regulate, problem-solve, and practice flexibility.

### What is Art Therapy?

The American Art Therapy Association states, "Art therapy is a mental health profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active artmaking, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship."

### Who is an Art Therapist?

Art therapists are master-level clinicians who work with people of all ages who experience medical and mental health problems. Nationally, art therapists are board certified by the Art Therapy Credentials Board and are credentialed as ATR-BCs. In Maryland, art therapists are licensed and regulated by the Board of Professional Counselors and Therapists as Licensed Professional Clinical Art Therapists (LCPAT).

### Process for seeking Art Therapy services

(See Additional Resources for art therapy locator sites) During an initial meeting, art therapists will ask about

an individual's strengths, challenges, behavioral considerations, including sensory preferences and aversions, interest areas, and preferred art materials and processes. The client and/or caregiver may be involved in that meeting, but the caregiver/parent is typically not present for the sessions. Communication supports should be welcomed as needed. Following intake, the art therapist will engage the individual in an art therapy assessment for baseline information as to creative developmental level, problem solving skills, auditory and/or visual information processing of directives, self-expression and narrative capacities, process versus product orientation, and level of social engagement.

Art therapy treatment should begin with the individual's interests, whether sensory-based processes or exploration of interest areas through highly detailed works. Art therapy is not a pre-determined or stepwise curricular process of supporting a client toward a certain art product



or way of working. Rather, it is a sensitive and responsive process of respectful observation of behavior and process with materials. It often includes the therapist's narration of activity and asking of questions about the process and product with an eye toward supporting the client in connecting with the self, the therapist, and with personal meaning. The art therapist will track progress with each session along treatment goals developed within the first few sessions and in consultation with the individual and care provider(s) as appropriate. Duration and frequency of sessions, as well as group or individual format when an option, will be determined as part of the treatment plan and adjusted, as needed, over time in response to treatment progress.

*continued on back*

### What does an Art Therapy session look like?

Art therapy sessions might take place in a clinic, school, or private practice setting that has a designated studio-office space or at minimum has an office space with stored art materials. Materials might include traditional art items with varied levels of sophistication, as well as non-traditional materials, such as recycled objects for 3-D work. Within the studio-office there is typically ready access to water and ample table space. Individuals are invited to select preferred materials at the beginning of session or might be given pre-selected materials and invited to engage along a theme or self-expressive way of working. The art therapist is an active partner in the provision and facilitation of using the materials or trying a new process. The art therapist is also in continual

verbal and non-verbal communication in response to the individual's observed behaviors and seeming needs, supporting the relationship between the art, the individual, and the studio-office environment. The completed process or art at the end of session is noticed, named or given associated words or feelings if possible, and is stored safely in the studio-office for ongoing work and reference. Sometimes the art is shared with caregivers, or a synopsis of the creative process is shared at the end of session so that self-expressive accomplishments might be celebrated, and skills generalized or reinforced beyond the treatment setting.

### What are the benefits of Art Therapy?

Engagement with art materials and processes facilitates meaningful integration of visual and sensorimotor information across the brain.

Art involves activation of areas of cognitive strength in the brain, makes external the internal, and provides a meeting ground for social interaction. Art therapy encourages unique, creative self-expression. It provides continual, naturally arising opportunities to practice social skills and flexible thinking within an intrinsically rewarding atmosphere. Art therapy imparts a sense of ability, supporting the making and sharing of something personally meaningful; the experience of shared understanding. The creation of art or sustained exploration of art processes might also advance aesthetic skill development, enhance the capacity for (creative) planning, and spark artist identity that might be built upon as a vocation.

### Additional Resources

American Art Therapy Association's referral listing  
<https://arttherapy.org/art-therapist-locator/>

State of Maryland Board of Professional Counselors and Therapists  
<https://mdbnc.health.maryland.gov/pctverification/default.aspx>

Goucher, C. (2012). Art Therapy: Connecting and communicating. In L. Gallo-Lopez & L. Rubin, (Eds.), *Play-Based Interventions for Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (pp. 295-315). Florence, KY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Goucher, C. (2020, June 24). PFA Zoomcast Interview by Rob Long: Cathy Goucher MA, ATR-BC, LCPC, LCPAT. YouTube, Pathfinders for Autism. <https://youtu.be/Xnmn2XmZ7kQ?si=FKntoo3NrKiv0uT7>

Written by Cathy Goucher, Maryland Art Therapist (LCPAT) and Professional Counselor (LCPC)/ Owner, Cathy Goucher Art Therapy, private art therapy studio, in Baltimore [www.goucherartx.com/](http://www.goucherartx.com/), Associate Director of Make Studio [www.make-studio.org](http://www.make-studio.org), Founding Director and Department Chair, Art Therapy Program at Notre Dame of Maryland University (2018-2026)

© 2026 Pathfinders for Autism