

## Mile in My Shoes: Jess' story

*Estimated reading time: 7 minutes*

I always offer felt tips, that's a very comfortable thing. Colouring in is something that is really satisfying for some people. It can be really calming too. So especially near the beginning of therapy, colouring in can help people to relax and settle into the space.

I'm Jess Gordon, I'm an art psychotherapist. I live in Monmouth, and I work near Pontypool in County Hospital for Aneurin Bevan University Health Board. Art psychotherapy is a form of psychological therapy. So, it's a little like a talking therapy, where you might go and talk to somebody about your - problems, what's bothering you, what's making you anxious or whatever it is. With art psychotherapy, we don't just talk. Sometimes we don't talk at all. We use art materials to express how you're feeling and to explore those feelings.

Some people get very excited by pastels because you can use them in so many different ways. The points and the sides and then you can mess them about with your fingers and - you can get really mucky. Using art materials, like any kind of creativity, gives you the chance to get behind your usual defences. So, we all block off for ourselves, we block off the things that we don't want to think about. Those things that are uncomfortable, painful.

I provide some paper for ripping up. And if someone's really angry and they need to really vent that anger in a safe way, I might invite them to rip up the paper - screw it into little balls and then throw it as hard as they can against the wall - hard as they can. It can be surprisingly satisfying.

When you make art, your conscious mind is not in control. And you find that things come up in the art that you're making that you didn't really know were there. So here I've got a little jar full of buttons. Some shiny ones, some dull ones, different shapes and sizes.

And I might say to someone, 'OK, you're telling me about your family, so why don't you pick one of these buttons to be your mum. Which one's your mum?'

And they might say, 'Ah this one here, this shiny one. That's my mum.'

'And what about your dad?'

'Ah well, here's here, he's this one here. I'm going to put him over here.'

'Why are you putting him over there?'

'I don't want him anywhere near my mum.'

So it's a great way - using objects - a great way to explore those family dynamics which can be so important.

I'm an art psychotherapist; I work alongside two music therapists and two drama therapists. We work with people with learning disabilities. Some will have Down's syndrome; some will have cerebral palsy. Some people have a learning disability and autism which will impair their communication. Quite often people have some very unusual chromosomal deficit that

has led to their learning disability and may also affect them in other ways. There may be physical issues that mean they really have very little autonomy in their lives, very little ability to make choices about what they do every day. Sort of choices that most of us take for granted. And many people are not living with family, so very often people will be in supported living. It's a very broad range of people that I work with.

Somebody that really stays with me is a young man, originally from Syria. He saw the death of family members. He lost his home. He has a moderate learning disability. He doesn't speak any English or understand any English. The way we built our relationship was through drawing. He would draw on a piece of paper and he'd make a little pattern. And then I would make a corresponding pattern. Not copying exactly but I was doing something that showed that I got what he was doing. I got it. And then he began to draw pictures for me. I'd ask him to draw something from his past, and he would draw me a picture of his life in Syria where he lived there. I'd ask him to draw family members, and he'd draw the family members who he'd lost. So, they came into the room with us. And bit by bit we put his story together. We created a chronology of his life before the war, his life after the war, his life here in Britain. We put those altogether. So, we made a narrative of his story that I think for him had been very fragmented up until now. We started to put it together in a way that gave it meaning for him and helped establish some safety for him. The past was in the past. He's now somewhere else. The threat that had been with him for so long could become part of history.

I get very excited when I see things beginning to shift for somebody. I worked with one young man for over a year. He came to me with a moderate learning disability and anxiety. He found it very hard to go into the community without a member of his family. We had spent many, many sessions exploring the possibility of separation. We had used families of plastic animals in the sand tray and tried having - taking one away and putting it in a different sand tray. We had tried all kinds of different ways of making the concept of separation less frightening. The other day he said, 'I think I would like to try doing a gardening project.' For him, being ready to step away from his family, even if briefly, to join a community activity with a support worker, showed me that he is less afraid than he was. And that's a really important change for him. I was delighted.

I got into art therapy really because of my own mental health issues. Some time ago I had to start to deal with my past, I had quite a few difficult things in my personal life that I'd never really dealt with... I was adopted. I had some difficulties with my adoptive mother, some abusive behaviour from her. And I hadn't really dealt with that, I'd kept it in the back on my mind and tried to pretend it wasn't there. And then for a combination of reasons it all bubbled up. And I couldn't ignore it any longer. And I sort of had a breakdown, a collapse. But I had to stop. Everything that I normally did, I stopped. My whole life stopped really. And I had some fantastic mental health professionals who helped me through that, fantastic therapist. And also – artmaking, the arts, creativity helped me through that as well.

When I was feeling a bit better, I thought, 'I really... I need to put my life together again. I need to do things differently. I need to find a new direction for myself.' And somehow, I just

thought, 'Well OK, this has been such an experience for me, maybe this is the way I need to go. Maybe I need to put this to some good use, this terrible thing that happened to me. Perhaps I can make some meaning of it by having it as a catalyst to set me off in a new direction.'

So... while I was talking, I was messing about here with some, some pastels, two shades of purple. It's messy and it's tangled up. I didn't plan to, to draw something particularly here but my hands really wanted to move while I was talking. I was talking about something quite personal – quite difficult for me, those memories are quite hard to go back to. It helped me to just manipulate materials and there's something about the touch of them, the feel of them, there's something very soothing. We have our - receptors in our hands particularly are really powerful. And I think I was doing a bit of self-soothing here with this really, yeah.

I love my job, I really do. But there are some bits of it that make me so angry and so frustrated.

People with learning disabilities are generally living on pretty low incomes. Many of the people I work with are supported by the local authority but it's not generous. We have people referred to us who desperately need therapy but sometimes our funding simply isn't there for that. These are people who often have really limited lives – really limited autonomy. They need support, they need help. And so often the systems around them, the structures around them, the structures that we work in, the NHS, doesn't provide them with the support they need to have real choice. If somebody wants therapy, there shouldn't be anything getting in the way of them accessing that therapy. And so often there is.

And what happens then is that people don't get seen. And eventually things get so bad – and for people with learning disabilities it often manifests in behaviour of concern so they will start to create real problems with the people around them. And when they do that, when they start acting in ways that are very hard for the people round them to manage, then there'll get seen because then they are at crisis point. And... by that time, they're probably going to end up as in-patients. Which is going to cost a huge amount of money as well as being much, much worse for them.

So, what the government needs to do is to put the resources into early intervention. Give people the chance to get the help they need – right at the beginning. Don't wait until they are at the crisis, until they're falling over the edge.

We hope that at the end of a period of therapy that someone will go away, not necessarily with all their problems fixed, but better able to manage daily life. Better able to find their own ways of coping with the inevitable challenges that we all face.