

Art Therapy Training and Professional Credentialing

National requirements for professional entry into the practice of art therapy include, at minimum, a master's degree and extensive post-graduate clinical experience under the supervision of credentialed art therapists—a process which typically requires a minimum of four years. Some art therapists also have a doctorate degree. Because of the uniqueness of the study and practice of art therapy, practitioners must be trained within an approved art therapy master's degree program recognized by the American Art Therapy Association. The Association has approved thirty-nine art therapy master's degree programs at thirty-five accredited colleges and universities in twenty states and the District of Columbia.

Art therapy master's level education requires training in studio art (drawing, painting, sculpture, etc.), the creative process, psychological development, group therapy, art therapy assessment, psychodiagnostics, research methods, and multicultural diversity competence. Students must also complete 100 hours of supervised practicum, and 600 hours of supervised art therapy internship. The art therapy graduate curriculum is uniquely guided by the premise that focused art-making constitutes reflective practice and facilitates learning. The curriculum includes students' immersion in their own art practice, and art-based learning is integrated into all courses and clinical supervision.

Nationally, both the American Art Therapy Association and the Art Therapy Credentials Board (ATCB) regulate the profession. AATA's Education Program Approval Board (EPAB) sets the education standards for the profession and monitors compliance with educational institutions providing art therapy master's degree programs, while ATCB sets the parameters of ethical practice for the profession through the ATCB Code of Professional Practice. Following completion of the master's degree, graduates of approved programs must complete a minimum of 1000 hours of direct client contact, with 100 hours of supervision, to be eligible to apply to ATCB for the ATR "Art Therapist, Registered") credential. Those who also pass the ATCB examination become Board Certified and hold the ATR-BC credential. To maintain these credentials, art therapists must comply with a renewal process that involves continuing education requirements.

Comparison with other Mental Health Training

The professions that most closely align with art therapy are professional counseling and marriage and family therapy. All three professions share a common foundation in human psychological development, theories of personality, group and family therapy, appraisal and evaluation, and therapeutic knowledge and skills. Like art therapy, these professions require a minimum of a master's degree for entry into the profession and engage in practice that focuses on assessing and treating adults and children experiencing developmental, medical, educational, social or psychological impairments. In states without specialized art therapy or creative arts therapy licenses, many art therapists also qualify for licensure as professional counselors or marriage and family therapists with master's degrees from dual academic programs that prepare them for both state licensure and the ATR credential.

While having elements in common, art therapy differs markedly from these mental health professions in both its academic training and scope of practice. Art therapy master's level education is distinct in its emphasis on imagery and art-making. The art therapy curriculum includes course content based on two

underlying theories: the Expressive Therapies Continuum which guides decision making processes in art therapy practice, and the premise that focused art making constitutes reflective practice and facilitates learning. The art therapy graduate curriculum encourages students' immersion in their own art practice, and art-based learning is integrated into coursework and clinical supervision.

In practice, art therapists also must employ a broader range of knowledge and skills. Art therapists use distinctive art-based assessments to evaluate emotional, cognitive and developmental conditions. They must understand the science of imagery and of color, texture, and media and how these affect a wide range of potential clients and personalities. The trained art therapist also must make parallel assessments of a client's general psychological disposition and how art as a process is likely to be moderated by the individual's mental state and corresponding behavior. It is this understanding of the potential for art-making to reveal emotions, together with the knowledge and skill to safely manage the reactions it may evoke, that distinguishes art therapy from these mental health professions.