



# The Emotional Gifts of Expressive Arts Therapy

Jamie Marich, Ph.D., LPCC-S, REAT  
The Institute for Creative Mindfulness, Akron, OH, USA  
[www.jamiemarich.com](http://www.jamiemarich.com)

## Abstract

*The author, a Croatian-American expressive arts therapist and trauma educator, uses the vehicle of the scholarly personal narrative (SPN) to orient readers to expressive arts therapy contextualized by her personal evolution through the practice. Her personal narrative references experiences of connecting with her ancestral ties through the expressive arts (i.e., folk dancing) and spending time in Bosnia-Herzegovina teaching English using expressive arts methods. The author explains how early connection to the expressive arts and its multi-modal nature — bringing in various avenues of expression, not just one art form —gave her an outlet for working with emotions while growing up in a home that was stressful and traumatic. The narrative concludes with broader contentions on how the integration of expressive arts therapy into well - established clinical modalities for healing trauma enhances trauma treatment. A sample expressive arts process used by the author during the COVID-19 pandemic is also provided.*

**Keywords:** expressive arts therapy, trauma, scholarly personal narrative (SPN), COVID-19 pandemics

## 1. Introduction

The expressive arts were the first truly helpful devices that I could access for coping. My parents, the grandchildren of

Croatian immigrants, met as teenagers in *Tamburitza* folk groups that many children in the Croatian diaspora par-

anticipated in to stay connected to the traditions of their ancestral homelands. My mother was a dancer and *bugarija* player in a small group in the Ohio town in which I was raised, and my father sang and played string bass in a very large group in a nearby city. One year at the national festival of the *Hrvatska Bratska Zajednica* (HBZ) they met and learned to make a different kind of music. So, it is truly not a stretch to say that I am alive because of the music and folk traditions of my people, and the expressive arts played a literal role in my creation story. Through the use of a device called scholarly personal narrative (Heidelberger & Ueker, 2009), I will use some elements of my own lived experience to paint a picture of what expressive arts therapy is (especially as a field that is related to, yet fundamentally different than art therapy). This narrative form, which is becoming increasingly known as a way for marginalized groups to have greater voice in academic literature (Nash & Viray, 2013), is ideal for showing how expressive arts modalities can play a role in the overall trauma recovery process. Scholarly personal narrative is also becoming more widely accepted as a method of inquiry for theses and dissertations.

Robert Nash (2019), one of the leaders of the movement to legitimize scholarly personal narrative as valid form of inquiry and publication, does not see it as a replacement for other forms of research or scholarship. Aware of the criticism that scholarly personal narrative has received for lacking scholarly rigor or even being too “touchy feely,” (p. 5), he sees this form of writing as filling in a necessary gap in any field’s literature. After spending 35 years in traditional academics, Nash elevates scholarly personal narrative not only as a way to amplify the voices of the marginalized, rather, as a format that allows readers and students to feel more personally connected to the material in any given subject matter. The comparison he makes is when students connect more to teachers who can share fully from their lived experience (both professionally and personally) in illuminating content. In sum, he defines scholarly personal narrative as acknowledging that “your own life has meaning, both for you and others. Your own life tells a story (or a series of stories) that, when narrated well, can deliver your readers those delicious aha! moments of self and social insight that are all too rare in more conventional forms of research” (p. 24).

*The use of personal narrative as a teaching device largely defines my career as a writer. Trained as an academic and researcher through a phenomenological lens, I've found that shifting to the scholarly personal narrative form in my book writing allows me to best serve as a teacher to other clinicians in my area*

*of specialty: psychological trauma. The word trauma simply comes from the Greek word meaning “wound,” and in my work as a trauma-focused therapist and educator, the general definition of trauma that I use is any unhealed human wound. Some of these wounds and their prolonged impacts may qualify one for a clinical diagnosis, as was my case (being treated in my early twenties for both a substance use disorder and a dissociative disorder). Yet other times the wounds we deal with can come from not fitting in to one’s family of origin or being significantly bullied or tormented by peers, church systems, or larger society.*

As a bisexual woman who was never able to fully embrace my family’s traditional Catholicism, or the Evangelical Protestantism to which my father eventually converted. Their marriage, which began as a happy musical union, took a turn into spiritually abusive territory when my father converted, and I spent my entire childhood feeling marginalized, misunderstood, and religiously bullied in my own home. And the expressive arts were there to help me experience these emotions and not fully destroy myself, learning to cope along the way. I fortunately had access to dance and music lessons, both in the same *Tamburitza* group to which my mother belonged and in other forms like classical violin, ballet, and jazz. I later participated in speech and drama actively, and began writing voraciously in my preteens. I believe that the reason I was able to embrace my recovery and healing journey so fully in my early twenties, which included feeling the strong feelings that are required in that process, is because expressive arts

forms gave me a safe enough container to manage emotions. Visual arts would not enter my story until many years later.

## **2. Expressive Arts Therapy Fundamentals**

Any practice that gives us a channel for expressing ourselves to the world or expressing what we have kept inside, can be described as an expressive art form.

- Dancing & mindful movement
- Visual arts (painting, drawing, collage, mixed media, pottery, sculpture)
- Writing (short stories, novels, other fiction, poetry, scenes, memoir, other non-fiction)
- Music (drumming, playing an instrument, songwriting, making playlists and listening to music)
- Drama and spoken word performances
- Meditation and guided visualization
- Photography

- Filmmaking
- Fashion design & hair design
- Cooking, baking, and other forms of food styling
- Gardening

Multi-modality (working with two or more forms) and inter-modality (working with the forms in combination) defines formal expressive arts therapy and distinguishes it from any one of the forms existing on their own (e.g., art therapy). Metaphorically speaking, expressive arts therapy challenges us to use the whole fruit basket or garden, not to eat just one fruit. This doesn't just mean exploring the different aspects of ourselves, it means embracing as many of the expressive practices available to us as possible. The expressive arts challenge us to work with as many practices as we are willing to engage and to notice what the multi-modal and inter-modal connections may reveal (Marich, 2019).

What terrifies many people about expressive arts therapy is that there may inevitably be one fruit (i.e., expressive practice, such as dance or visual art alone) that does not appeal to them. I've heard so many times as a therapist, "I can't dance," or "I can't draw." For many years, I personally stayed away from visual art because I felt that I had no talent in it. As I stayed with my practices, I was pleased to discover that visual art really did have the most to teach me because there were no performative expectations.

Staying with the fruit and vegetable metaphor, consider this: I did not like tomatoes as a child. Their beautiful red color fascinated me, especially the tomatoes that came from my Deda Prosenjak's lush garden. I enjoyed toma-to-based products like ketchup and spaghetti sauce, but whenever I tried to eat an actual tomato, I spat it out. When I was about twelve, one of the beefsteak tomatoes my Deda expertly cultivated in his garden just looked too beautiful and I decided to experiment. I put it on a hamburger and doused it with ketchup. I took a bite, savored it, and didn't directly notice the tomato yet felt very happy that I was letting myself eat something so pretty. I finished the entire hamburger. I continued to eat tomatoes this way and by summer's end, I let myself try eating a tomato on its own, seasoned with just a bit of table salt.

I loved it.

To this day I adore eating tomatoes of all varieties in a wide range of presentations — on their own, in salads, on buttered toast, and in many other ways I steered clear of as a child. The expressive arts, like my hamburger and ketchup, allows us to experience a practice we might otherwise shy away from in the larger context of a combined and more palatable process that makes the practice safer to approach. In the process, we may unexpectedly discover we love the practice, or at very least that it's more "okay" than we expected and we have something to learn

about ourselves through engaging with it (Marich, 2019).

The formal field of expressive arts therapy and education is currently regulated by an organization called The International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA), founded in 1994. IEATA recognizes that no one person invented expressive arts therapy; the 2017 IEATA conference was even themed *The Indigenous Roots of Expressive Arts Therapy* to honor the people of our first nations as truly the ones who identified practices like drumming, dancing, storytelling, song, meditation, and ceremony as healing. These form the basis for what we know as expressive arts therapy today.

If you look at the cultural history of any nation on the planet and trace it to its roots, you will likely find many examples of expression as healing and as vehicles for gathering in community. Practicing expressive arts is a way to connect to the most ancient and sacred pathways for healing that exist on our planet and within our human experience. There is a collection of notable scholars and practitioners from various parts of the world who have played pivotal roles in developing what we now call expressive arts therapy.

Angeles Arrien, whose specialty is studying the healing arts of indigenous peoples, wrote, *The Four Fold Way: Walking the Paths of the Warrior, Teacher, Healer, and Visionary* (2013). In a popu-

lar passage from this book that I regularly use in my teaching, she introduces us to the concept of the four, universally healing salves — storytelling, singing, dancing, and silence. She posits that the gifted healer restores the soul by using these healing salves, for a the root causes of distress and *disease* are when we:

- stop singing
- stop dancing
- are no longer enchanted by stories
- become uncomfortable with silence.

A contemporary of Arrien, Natalie Rogers, the daughter of Carl Rogers is another significant mother in modern expressive arts therapy. It's impossible to leave a graduate training program in the United States and many places in the world and not have at least one unit of content on Carl Rogers and the humanistic, person-centered approach to psychotherapy he developed. Many of the person-centered psychotherapy principles that define the work of Rogers were adopted by Natalie in her expressive arts therapy training programs.

As explained in her landmark book *The Creative Connection: Expressive Arts as Healing*, there are three main conditions that foster creativity within an individual. The first is psychological safety, which we experience when, as an expressive arts practitioner, we are accepted as being of unconditional worth. We also experience this when external evaluation of our work

is absent, and when we feel understood in a spirit of empathetic connection. The second condition is psychological freedom — a state that can result in expressive worth when we are given many options for exploration. Freedom can also result when we are invited, rather than commanded, to try out new things. The third condition is to engage in experiences that stimulate us and challenge us (Rogers, 1993). Expressive arts work naturally allows for this because we are invited to explore, to the degree we are willing and able, those practices and processes that may feel outside of our comfort zones when we begin.

For any client or student I work with who is interested in bringing the expressive arts into their healing process, I invite them to discard any ideas they may have that expressive arts work or formal expressive arts therapy is about creating “good” art that will hang in a museum, or produce high-quality movement choreographies that belong on the stage. True, some people identify as artists and perhaps even make a living with their craft. Even if one considers themselves an artist or makes a living in this area, I encourage them to release any trappings of those external or performance-based metrics in order to fully benefit from the healing gifts of expressive arts therapy.

### **2.1. Expressive Arts and Healing the Traumatized Self**

As a young person, being expressive was so critical to my overall well-being, even if I didn’t have the words or insight at that time in my life to express it as such. My own trauma and addiction healing journey brought me back to the homelands of my grandparents and great-grandparents when, in 2000, I moved rather unexpectedly to Bosnia and Hercegovina. I first volunteered and then later worked with the Parish of St. James in the Catholic pilgrimage center of Medjugorje. My duties included directing English language liturgy, assisting with translations and other language matters and, most significantly, working as an English language and music teacher at Majčino Selo, a home for displaced children founded by the parish in the aftermath of the Homeland War. Working with children and some adult facilitators at Majčino Selo showed me how bringing in the arts — singing, dancing, dramatics, drawing, and movies — was a much more engaging way for them to learn and to retain English. Most of the children I worked with at Majčino Selo had parents who were still alive yet they were unable to care for them following the economic and social upheaval of the war’s aftermath. In working with young people who were still sifting through their own traumatic experiences, and using the arts to help them learn a skill like speaking English, I was further motivated to engage in my own healing.



When I left the United States at the age of twenty-one, I struggled significantly with consuming drugs and alcohol, a natural progression of the dissociative behaviors I engaged with to deal with my own intensive stress at home following my father's conversion. Moreover, my classmates in middle school bullied me constantly and even though secondary school proved to be a better experience, I still dealt with significant pain around cognitions like "I do not belong," and "I am defective." Being an overweight and clumsy child by American standards didn't help either. Getting conventional psychological help in the United States did not seem like something I could access as both of my parents were in their own denial about what was wrong with me, although a brief experience at my university's counseling center was a necessary yet temporary life raft.

Having begun my explorations of Croatia and surrounding countries in 1998 while still a university student, something inside called me back to my ancestral home-land. On the surface, many people judged my decision as running away to Europe to avoid my problems. Yet I am glad that I followed my intuition. While working for Majčino Selo and St. James Parish, I met the people I needed, who gave me the assistance that I needed to confront my own issues, including my superior Fr. Svetozar Kraljević, OFM and Janet Leff, a retired American social worker and Medjugorje devotee who went on twelve

aid missions during the Homeland war. Deciding to spend time in Medjugorje in her retirement, she helped me admit to my own problems with addiction and mental health struggles and provided me the necessary initial counseling that I needed to heal. She agreed that the work I did with the children and people at Majčino Selo was critical to what I needed to heal relationally and learn about trauma and its impact on the human experience. Now looking back, I am amazed at just how many of those human connections and healing experiences were forged through the expressive arts. Singing a song like "You Are My Sunshine", in English, with my young students while we worked on a coloring page was not just an exercise in learning a skill. Those moments were also experiences for me (and hopefully for them) in learning how to soothe and to regulate the nervous system while forging real human connection.

There are many reasons why engaging in expressive arts practices and processes can assist in one's healing from trauma and its legacy. Expressive arts therapy emphasizes process and organic unfolding of one's experience instead of output or product. Analysis of the work is also not a factor in expressive arts therapy. Rather, as a therapist or facilitator, we may witness what a client expressed and point out what he expresses and point out what we notice or what we experience emotionally by witnessing their work. Yet we do not interpret and at most might ask a question

like, “What does this part of your creation mean to you?” All of these qualities teach non-striving in recovery, whether that recovery relates to addiction, traumatic injury, another mental health condition, or any combination of these. Through practicing non-striving and working with some of the challenges you encounter in this practice of not forcing outcomes, you will hopefully experience a greater sense of self-compassion. A major vehicle for healing from the legacy of trauma and transforming negative core beliefs is to allow ourselves to feel the emotions we’ve traditionally repressed. Yet a common cliché used in holistic circles informs us, *if you can feel, you can heal*.

Which of course can be much easier said than done.

As a trauma survivor I relate, and I attempt to meet my clients and students with empathy. Burying emotion likely developed as a survival strategy for you at some point in your life so it can feel like a great risk to give up that strategy.

People participating in an expressive arts journey will decide if the risk of feeling is worth it. The practices, beginning with the ones a person most enjoys, can hopefully ease them into this experience. Expressive arts practices are action-based steps you can take that use all the senses and their possible combinations. Expressive arts allow you to work with all areas of the brain affected by unhealed traumatic experience. The emotional charge that accompanies un-

healed traumatic memories and those problematic internalized negative beliefs about ourselves is primarily limbic in nature. The limbic brain, sometimes called the middle brain, cannot be accessed using words alone. Therefore, you may not be able to talk about what happened to you — there may simply be no words to express it. For some survivors of trauma, you may be able to explain in great detail what happened to you, and yet you’ve never truly healed because you still engage in some of the same self-defeating behaviors. Your rational head may know what’s wrong, but your emotions and body are still stuck. There’s a good reason for that — we need action-based, emotionally-focused and embodied interventions to heal ourselves totally (Marich, 2019).

Expressive arts practices can complement many well-established interventions for trauma-focused care (e.g., EMDR therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, Gestalt therapy, psychodynamic psychotherapy, or any of the new wave somatic therapies for processing trauma). The expressive arts therapy offers creative adjuncts for building resources that can allow a client to experience sufficient stability to proceed with the deeper work that their therapist may recommend in any number of modalities. The practices can also be supportive in between scheduled sessions, especially if intense affect or activation arises.



I returned from Bosnia and Hercegovina in the autumn of 2003 and at the urging of both Fr. Svetozar and Janet Leff, I began a graduate degree program in clinical counseling. Janet famously said, “Being at Majčino Selo you’ve learned so much about the art of doing good trauma work. It’s about relationships. Now go back to school and learn the science of it.”

During my first clinical internship, I worked with a supervisor who was a gracious woman and a little too burned out to care what I did as a clinical intervention. I worked at an adolescent residential unit for mental illness. After I told her a little bit about myself she said, “You’re a singer? You play guitar? Do music with them. Dance with them. It’s got to work better than what we’re doing here.” During that experience I had the great privilege of putting my expressive arts teaching methods from Majčino Selo to use with disenfranchised teenagers. We sang, we danced, we painted, we wrote. To this day one of my proudest accomplishments as a clinician was organizing two summer concerts performed by kids for the entire hospital.

As I grew as a clinician interested in working with embodied and holistic methods for healing trauma and addiction, namely EMDR therapy, I always saw a pathway for working in the expressive arts to expand coping skills, as well as vehicles to enhance the other therapies I used. During my own experience as an EMDR client I developed a mindfulness

meditation practice and eventually a yoga practice, which led to me creating a program in 2012 called *Dancing Mindfulness*. Dancing mindfulness started as a community network of classes and has developed into a global movement with facilitators trained all around the world. In 2015, I wrote a book (with help from members of our community who shared their stories) that teaches people how to build and to cultivate a personal dancing mindfulness practice for healing, transformation, and wellness (Marich, 2015; 2019).

## **2.2. Expressive Arts Therapy in Troubled Times**

The lockdown and global upheaval resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic gave me, and others, ample opportunities to engage in the expressive art forms as a way to cope, to process, and to make sense of the new world as it was unfolding. I had the privilege in the early days of the lockdown to lead several process groups for other therapists and some members of the general public in our new, online reality using expressive arts process. In expressive arts therapy process is both a verb and a noun. As a verb, *process* means not focusing on outcome or the destination, rather, enjoying the journey of expressing and noticing what it may reveal as it unfolds. Process can mean embracing and rolling with anything you may initially judge to be a mistake. As a noun, a *process* is a collection of two or

more distinct expressive arts practices (e.g., singing a song and then engaging in some free form drawing; or possibly engaging in some guided movement and then taking it to the page to free write on compose a poem). Some processes can be quite lengthy — up to six or more practices that can unfold over a day or series of days. And others can be quite compact, appropriate for closing a clinical session.

To close this article, I'd like to share with you a process (i.e., series of practices) that I developed and shared actively in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic to help people in my community have an outlet for expressing their often intense and diverse emotions during unpredictability. Even if it feels like COVID is becoming more of a past experience for you, please consider how such a practice can also be supportive for you and your clients in the wake of trouble or adversity.

Here are some suggestions for safe practice that I encourage with all of my clients or students before they engage with this or any other process (Marich, 2019):

- Honor your limits, both physical and emotional. Although expressive arts can challenge us to explore those areas outside of our comfort zones and beyond, I do not endorse forcing or striving.
- If your body is telling you to stop, honor that. Establish a practice early on in your work that feels safest and most grounding for you and use that as a “retreat” practice if you need it.

- If you have a support system or people you identify as safe enough to confide in, let them know that you're engaging in expressive arts work. Use them regularly to check-in with as you need to, especially if you are feeling overwhelmed. They may even have a willingness to do a practice or a process with you!
- Physical safety is important. If you choose to engage in some of the movement practices described in this expressive arts process, be sure that you've cleared a sufficient amount of space to not bump yourself on anything. If your dancing on a hardwood floor, avoid wearing socks — either move barefoot or with footwear that has some grip, even shoes will work. Watch your pant length as well. If you have an injury or a chronic illness, I recommend getting clearance from your medical provider before engaging in any physical practices.
- Start a fresh journal for this experience. Blank page journals are my favorite because you can mix writing and visual art in a more elegant way. However, if you need lined pages for support or such a notebook is all you have access to, that will work just fine.

Now that we've established the safety essentials, here are the recommended practices that compose the process, *Expressing Yourself in Troubled Times*. You are recommended to do them in or-

der although you always have complete permission to modify if it seems that re-ordering them would assist you to more fully engage. I recommend that you make time for at least an hour to do these all together, yet in the trauma-informed spi-rit of *there is always a modification*, you are free to pause your process and engage in these over the period of a few days. Remember that this is not performance — notice what you notice and document any relevant insights as your expressive experiences unfold. When the process formally concludes, I find it helpful to ask myself a question like, “What did I learn about myself *and* the power of process from this experience?”

- **Opening Meditation:** Come into a gentle seated position on the floor or in a chair. Let your body take a natural, organic stretch as if you are first waking up in the morning. Make an intention to breathe as you stretch and move and then allow your body to have any natural movements or stretches that it wants to have in response. When this feels complete, come into a sitting, still position. Notice the stillness after the movement and if it feels appropriate, set an intention for yourself. Attempt to use “I” language such as, “I can express myself,” or “I deserve to feel good things in my body.”
- **Word Chain Practice:** Get out your journal or a separate piece of paper and a pen or something else to write with. As an alternative you can use a word

processing program. At the top of the page write one of the following three words: (a) COVID-19, (b) pandemic, (c) crisis; you can choose whichever one feels most activating for you today. Then, set a timer for five minutes and just start writing the next word that comes to you as if you’re writing out a list. This is an experience in free association and you are encouraged not to censor yourselves; just keep writing. You can write in one or more language.

- **Short Form Poetry:** After the timer expires, put the pen down and take a breath. Skim over your list of words and circle the three that are most resonating or calling your attention in this moment. After you’ve identified the three words, sit with them and reflect on them for up to a minute. Then, you are invited to return to your page and write a poem of at least three lines. Any short form poetry is generally about capturing a moment in time. Poems do not have to rhyme. All that makes a poem a poem is that you decide where the lines begin or end.
- **Gesture Dance:** Reflecting back on your three words as expressed in a poem, you are now invited to create an organic gesture, posture, or movement that represents each word. You can use a simple hand gesture(s) or bring in the whole body. Spend at least five minutes

rotating between your three gestures or movements, putting on a piece of music if that would further inspire your process. Be mindful of what you are noticing or what is coming up emotionally for you during the process and try not to push it away. Rather, be with your experience compassionately.

- **Gush Art:** Now, take it to the page with any visual art materials that you have available and do not involve words. Set a timer and give yourself ten full minutes if possible to just “go with” whatever might be flowing from you right now with images and colors. Even if your practice begins by taking a red crayon and scribbling for a few minutes, don’t judge it. This is gush art! Embrace it and then see where it flows.
- **Theme Song or Playlist:** If you had to choose one song that feels like a *theme song* for you during this difficult time to remind you of your strength and resources, or even to be a symbol for your grief, what would that song be? You can end this process by listening mindfully to that theme song and noticing whatever sensations are meant to be felt. If you’d like to build a larger playlist off of that core theme song

and perhaps dance to it, you are invited to expand your practice and process even further. May this playlist serve as a reminder that you are worthy and deserving of expressing your emotions and experiences, and be accessible at anytime you may need it.

### 3. Conclusion

Expressive arts therapy is multi-modal and inter-modal in nature, which allows practitioners of expressive arts therapy to be flexible and adaptive especially during times of stress and transition. As a therapeutic approach, expressive arts therapy can work alongside any number of clinical interventions, allowing them to come more alive through experiential engagement. This article offered an example of how one expressive arts therapist, a Croatian-American female, found the expressive arts through her own lived experience as an educator and as someone in need of trauma recovery herself. In addition to presenting an overview of expressive arts therapy through the form of scholarly personal narrative, a sample expressive arts therapy process is offered to readers that can assist them and their clients through troubled times and transitions..

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