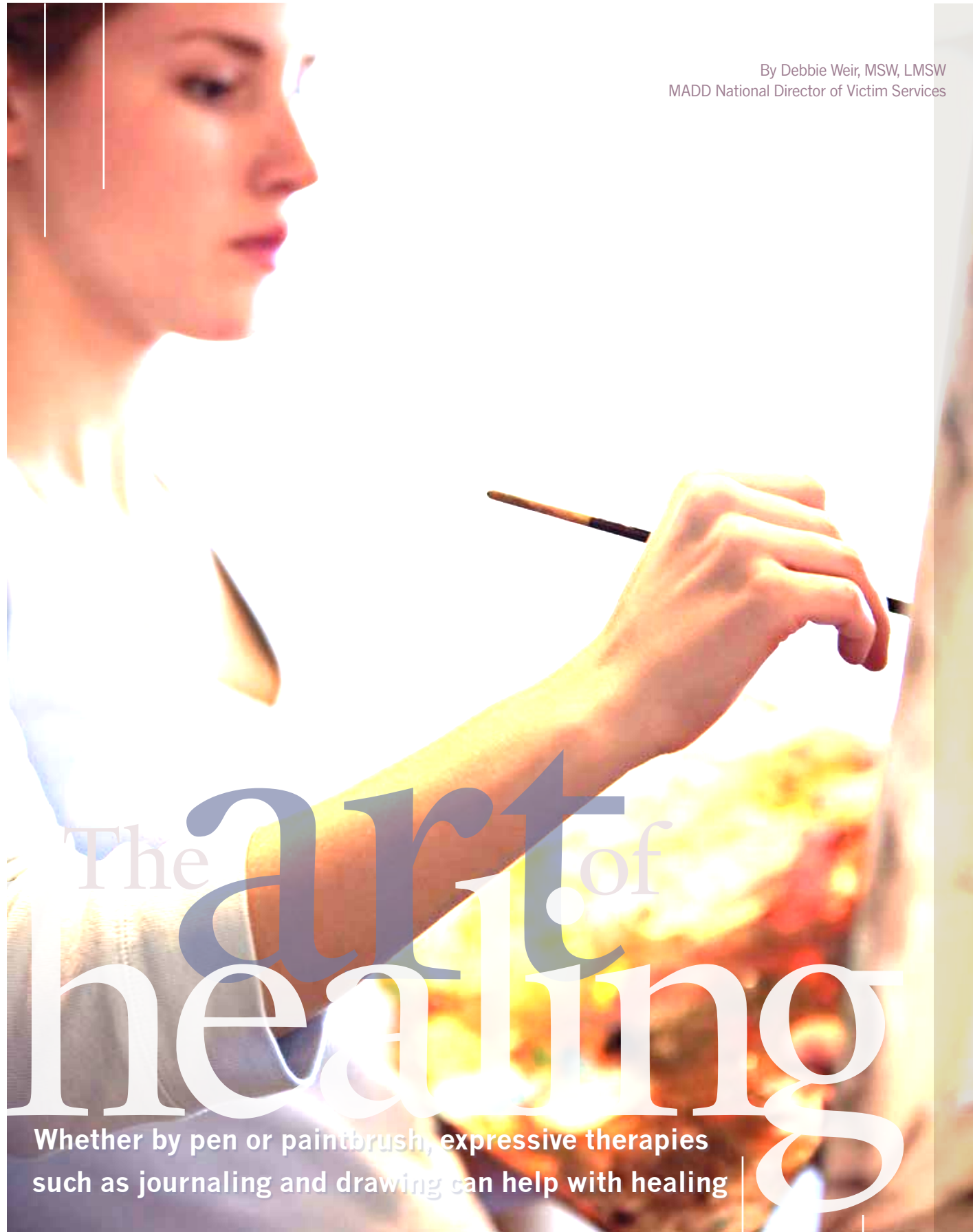


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The art of healing

Whether by pen or paintbrush, expressive therapies such as journaling and drawing can help with healing

Everyone experiences grief at some point in their lifetime. It's not optional. But how do you make sense out of tragedy, especially when it could have been prevented? How can you express the pain?

Stephanie Ostmann knows these haunting questions well. "I kept asking myself, 'How is it possible that one minute I am talking to my husband on the phone, and 10 minutes later he has been hit by a drunk driver just blocks away from our home?'" Stephanie says of the 2004 crash that seriously injured her husband, Jim, who still faces months of rehabilitation.

As Stephanie and other drunk driving crash victims have discovered, there are times when verbally expressing grief is inadequate to express the deepest of thoughts and feelings.

That's where art can help. Sometimes a creative work—whether by paintbrush, pen, camera or other means of expression—allows victims to tap into another medium to express pain. Just ask people who have unlocked its potential.

Creative Expressions

"Even though I was comfortable talking about my feelings, the pain was so powerful, I needed other ways to express my grief," says Linda Amos, whose 20-year-old son, Michael, and his fiancé, Patricia, were killed in a 2001 drunk driving crash that occurred as they pulled out of the church parking lot after attending services.

"A day after their joint memorial service, I began to journal," Linda says. (For an excerpt, see page 9.) "I've always been interested in writing, but I never felt I had anything to write about. I feel closer to Michael through my journal. Every time I read it, it's like a visit with him."

According to Linda McCarley, founder and director of the Art Therapy Institute in Dallas, Texas, "Creative expression through art gives an opportunity for expression that words alone cannot. It is difficult for many people to describe feelings verbally, because speaking about them can make the feelings more complex and intense."

Formal, recorded expressions of "healing art" can be traced to more than a century ago, when a number of European writers described spontaneous art done by patients in mental hospitals. This urge to make art out of any available materials confirms the compelling power of artistic expression to reveal inner experience.

This makes sense when you consider the glaring differences between talking and creative expression. In face-to-face communication, facial expressions or verbal cues may lead to unintended meanings. Expressions through art and writing do not judge or walk away. In fact, expressions through art and writing can become safe



How to Journal

- Keep paper and pen nearby.
- Find a comfortable pen; it will become your trusted friend.
- Write whenever you feel the need to express.
- Do not pressure yourself to write.
- Let thoughts flow.
- Do not worry about grammar and punctuation.
- No one should read your journal without your permission.
- If writing is uncomfortable for you, you can record thoughts and feelings using a cassette recorder.

outlets of suffering and conflicts and give voice to hope. It is guided from within, rather than imposed from outside.

“Artwork can express our innermost thoughts visually through painting, drawing, sculpting and photography, rather than using words alone,” McCarley says. “If a person doesn’t feel comfortable drawing or painting, they can make a quilt or collages with pictures. Through art, there is discovery that is easily available to the conscious.”

There are many explanations of ways that creative expression can aid emotional and physical health. One long-held idea is that repressing troubling thoughts and feelings causes short-term increases in autonomic nervous system activity, which over time can increase the likelihood of stress-related diseases.

And, as Lisa Yakes discovered, art can aid physically—right down to recovering fine motor skills. “Art has been my life and professional endeavor. When I was injured in a drunk driving crash, I incurred severe injuries and nerve damage in my hand. I couldn’t hold a paintbrush for nine months,” she says. “I began doing some artwork to relearn how to use my hand again, but eventually it led to me healing both emotionally and physically. I allowed myself to acknowledge the pain and the suffering through my artwork.”

A collage series titled “Happy” that Lisa made during her rehabilitation (see page 9) divulges the emotional pain she suffered during her recovery. “Most people were not aware I was struggling,” she says, noting that her art allowed her to convey the raw pain that her positive spirit was masking in public.

Healing Through the Written Word

Writing about grief allows a person an opportunity to sort through it and gain a sense of control. Writing can lead to relaxation rather than repression. It also can help the writer gain perspective, clear the mind and bring new insights or solutions to problems.



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“I thank God for my journal,” says Linda, reflecting on life without her son. “The ink bleeds out the pain, the angst and the questions. I am able to open up, reflect upon, cry over and rejoice with the tears of my heart time and time again. It reminds me of this road traveled and how far the lessons have taken me from an abyss I could have been drowning in.”

Calling journaling a gift in her healing, Linda says it has helped her move forward while allowing her to keep the past close to her heart. “I believe journaling is a gift in my healing. I’m learning, changing and moving forward without having to fully let go of the past, for I keep it all close to my heart in the pages of a book,” Linda shares.

For Stephanie, the one whose husband was struck by a drunk driver last year, keeping a journal allowed her to stay focused. (For excerpts, see page 9.) “I

started a journal the day after Jim’s crash. We weren’t sure he would survive and I had to keep track of so many things,” she says of his medical needs and of her thoughts and feelings. “I took my thoughts of anger and frustration out of my head and put them on paper. For me, journaling was a way of cleansing my mind and encouraging more positive thoughts.

“I journaled each night after Jim and our children were asleep,” she continues. “I looked forward to that time. It helped me relax and sleep better. Journaling at night before bedtime was like ‘erasing the blackboard’ of negative thoughts.”

Journal writing provides an avenue for reflection and a safe place to express pain, frustration, fear and loneliness. It can be a companion in the middle of the night. And, experts point out, it need not be formal or structured. Random thoughts jotted down and collected in a folder can become more valuable to you as time passes.

“I revisit my journal over and over, poring over precious memories and feelings. I am comforted to look back with such gratitude for the preservation of all that was written,” Linda says.

In a way, journaling not only helped carry Linda’s stress and emotional pain, it allowed her to move through her healing journey at her own pace and in her own way.

“Opening and writing in my journal became the most precious tool for my healing when days, weeks and, at times, moment to moment made no sense to me at all,” Linda reveals.

Expressions Through Art

Through art, a person often can approach difficult issues and convey a message that is much clearer and safer than words. Art serves as a record of events, which a person can later reflect on and understand with greater clarity. You need not know how to draw or paint—feelings will provide the creative drive.

“Creative expression through art can offer a way of exploring thoughts and feelings that lie beyond the reach of words. It can build a bridge between the inner and outer. No talent or training is required; it is the process that is important, not the product,” McCarley says.

Expression through art also can help increase self-esteem and self-confidence. The ability to identify feelings and fears of emotional expression and growth can evolve through art.

“‘Forever Yesterday’ is an interpretive series of photos that I took early on to help me deal with my injuries,” Lisa says. “Although the scars are only a portion of the remnants of injuries to my body, I found that focusing solely on their detail and existence helps to portray my self-image. I wanted to reveal that behind these scars there is continuous pain—physical and emotional. My photos helped me to accept that this would be my body for the rest of my life.”

And while her positive attitude continues to help her heal, Lisa’s artwork illustrates the difficulty and the grieving that are part of the process. As she can attest, in the end, everyone grieves in their own way and on their own timetable. But art can help provide hope. It can be a sacred space to continue the healing journey.

“Art belongs to everybody,” McCarley says. “It can provide a therapeutic launching pad and can facilitate emotional healing.”

Excerpt of journal entry from Linda Amos

Crash date—July 11, 2001

Journal date—July 11, 2004

The day is here. 12 a.m. I watch the time change on my computer screen. I wasn’t ready and now it has come. The word “anniversary” was never like this to me before. It always meant rejoicing, celebration of love and marriage, of birth. But an anniversary of death? That had not been in my vocabulary...

The tears well up more quickly, easier than before with the passing of time. How odd, yet makes perfect sense because there is so much more that we have missed you for that I wish you could be here for, share in, play in, live in...

It is that deafening silence again as I look at your picture and know I will live the rest of my life without you.

The rest of my life without you...

Excerpts of journal entries from Stephanie Ostmann

Crash date—July 13, 2004

Journal date—July 27, 2004

I think I hit an all time emotional low this morning since Jim’s crash two weeks ago. Everything is starting to hit me all at once, the lawyer, the car insurance company, the health insurance people, the doctors, nurses and therapists, PIP, caring for kids, coordinating childcare, spending time with Jim, driving back and forth to the hospital three times a day, fielding e-mails, returning calls, checking with the state attorney’s and sheriff’s offices, and thanking people for their overwhelming show of love and support.

Journal date—September 10, 2004

We spoke with our lawyer today and were devastated to discover there was no recourse for jointly held property in terms of recovering any money from the other driver. Jim was really hit hard by the information, I am still rather numb from it all. There is no justice for us in our situation. We are still waiting on the blood alcohol results and it has been nearly nine weeks now. It seems utterly ridiculous that the offender is able to drive his vehicle as if nothing has happened, when in reality he is a significant risk to the community. We are saddened by this news, but not beaten down. We will grow from this experience, we will be better people, and teach our children to take the same path by example. We chose to rise above the circumstances and make our own happiness. The offender will be answering to a higher calling than the U.S. legal system.



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Artwork (left) titled “Glad” from the series “Happy” by Lisa Yakes