Art Therapy Techniques:

Mask Making

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Art therapy is a combination of art and psychology applied in a specialized way that uses the power of creative process as a vehicle for healing, communication, self expression, and personal growth. Expressive arts therapy and art therapy are two terms that are commonly used interchangeably, but whereas art therapy includes various techniques including painting, sculpting, collage making, art journaling, drawing, sand art, mandalas, poetry, music, etc., expressive arts therapy is an inter-modal discipline where the therapist and client moves freely between drawing, dancing, music, drama, poetry, etc. The focus of this paper is on art therapy and a specific technique used within art therapy: mask making. In the therapeutic setting, mask making is an interdisciplinary activity that may incorporate the expressive arts therapy, or it can be used alone.

**History of Masks**

Masks have been used throughout history for a variety of reasons including religious or cultural ceremonies, healing, or for casting out demonic spirits. In many of the ancient tribal rites the identity of the person wearing the mask was actually transformed into the deity of the mask. Masks are the most ancient means of changing identity and assuming a new persona. The very nature of a mask requires an audience of at least one observer, as the wearer transforms his/her identity into that of the mask.

Masks have also been used in contemporary societies for holidays, festivals, theatrical performances, and social protests. During the Middle Ages in Venice, the wearing of masks became popular as prominent social figures donned disguises to conceal their identities as they performed unscrupulous and immoral acts in
pursuit of carnal pleasures.

During the 16th through 18th century Venetian Masks became the signature of the Commedia Dell’arte. The Commedia Dell’arte were popular plays in the form of improvisational theater that were performed by theater companies that traveled the Italian peninsula producing comedies involving the topics of adultery, jealousy, and love. (touritaly.org, para 6)

In 1797 Venice became part of Austria, and masks were shortly outlawed. Mask making in Italy was not revived until 1979 when art students resurrected the tradition in order to earn money from tourists.

**Masks in Art Therapy**

In therapy, the use of masks can be quite diverse. Designing masks enables clients to project their thoughts into objects that can be viewed as self representative. The goal of mask making in therapy is largely personal, and may vary throughout the client’s progress in therapy, and the themes that emerge are often quite varied. Masks have been used in individual and group settings to help clients of various ages explore identity and identity formation, to identify and integrate disowned aspects of self, to explore spirituality, to form a deeper connection with a higher power or find a totem, to assume a different or more empowered self, to process an event or emotions and to find balance (Brumleve, 2009; Buchalter, 2009; Ching & Ching, 2006; Malchiodi, 2010; Moon, 2009; and Scott, 2009). The chosen theme of the mask is to be determined within the context of the participant’s life and the issues at hand.
Mask making is also a popular intervention in art therapy because it touches upon Jungian concepts, including persona and shadow (Malchiodi, 2010). The term persona comes from the Latin word, meaning "mask," or "false face," as in the mask worn by an actor on a stage. Jung (1981) wrote, “One could say, with little exaggeration, that the persona is that which in reality one is not, but which oneself as well as others think one is.” In other words, our persona is the appearance we present to the world. It is the character we assume-through it, and how we relate to others. “The persona includes our social roles, the kind of clothes we choose to wear, and our individual styles of expressing ourselves. In order to function socially at all, we have to play a part in ways that define our roles” (Frager & Fadiman, 2005, para 36). According to Carl Jung,

a major task in acquiring self knowledge is understanding the relationship between who one is and how one presents oneself to the world. Adapting to certain occasions, behaving in a manner suitable to that occasion, and knowing how best to navigate a vast multitude of situations is a necessary part of life. For this one needs to develop a healthy persona. . .the persona serves both as "interface" with the world and protection from the "outer" world, depending on life experience including how one has been accepted, wounded or rejected when one has naively presented an authentic thought, feeling, or reaction. (Fitz-Randolph, 2008)

Similarly, Boeree (2006) wrote that our persona is, its best, the "good impression we present as we interact with the world on a daily basis. However, it can also be the false impression we use to manipulate people's opinions and behaviors" (para
And, at its worst, it can be mistaken (even by ourselves) for our true nature. In fact, some people have a difficult time differentiating their persona with who they really are. Hopcke (1995) pointed out that as the ego identifies with the persona, people start to believe that they are what they pretend to be. According to Jung, we eventually have to withdraw this identification and learn who we are in the process of individuation. Minority group members and other social outsiders in particular are likely to have problems with their identities because of cultural prejudice and social rejection of their personas. (Frager & Fadiman, 2005, para 38)

The shadow, according to Jungian psychology, is the side of our personality that we do not consciously display in public. The shadow contains all the negative tendencies the individual wishes to deny, including our animal instincts, as well as undeveloped positive and negative qualities. According to Jung, the shadow is derived from our pre-human, animal past, when our concerns were limited to survival and reproduction. It is the "dark side" of the ego, and the evil that we are capable of is often stored there. The shadow exists as part of the unconscious mind and is composed of repressed ideas, weaknesses, desires, instincts and shortcomings. It typically represents wildness, chaos and the unknown. The shadow is most dangerous when unrecognized. Then the individual tends to project his or her unwanted qualities onto others or to become dominated by the shadow without realizing it. Symbols of the shadow include the snake, the dragon, monsters, and demons.

Tying into Jungian concepts, mask making can be used to bring to
consciousness how we both see ourselves or what we fantasize we would like to be. Masks can be made to represent our persona as well as our shadow archetypes. According to Malchiodi (2010), because masks have both an outside and an inside, the outside can be used to portray “how others see you” and the inside of the mask for “how you really feel inside” (Malchiodi, 2010, para 5). After the masks are created, the clients can discuss with the therapist, or in a group: a) how they feel when they wear each mask; b) they can discuss reasons they have to wear a different mask in society; c) and they can ponder if they are being true to themselves if they act differently in one mask as opposed to the other (Moon, 2010).

Similarly, others have used mask making with adolescents in order to help them identify appropriate identity formation. These mask making activities might include creating a mask that represents the “past self, present self, and future self.” This activity is closely related to the theory on possible selves by Markus and Nurius (1986). Possible selves represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming. Possible selves are the cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals, and threats, and they act as strong motivating factors for future behavior. Specifically, possible selves act as perceived selves that need to be avoided or approached. For example, a positive possible self might be an “educated self” or a “wealthy self” and thus, serves as a strong motivating force to earn an education. However, the opposite of the future positive possible self might be the feared possible self. This might be a feared possible self as an “unemployed possible self” or “homeless possible self.” When an individual compares his/her positive future possible self to his/her feared future
possible self, it acts as a motivating force to work towards the positive possible self and avoid the negative or feared possible self. The theory of possible selves has been applied to adolescent academic achievement, school persistence, career expectations, self-esteem, delinquency, identity development and altruistic behaviors. It has also been applied to adults in parenthood, physical and mental health, self-esteem, motivation, professional roles, coping and aging (Dunkel & Kerpelman, 2006). Thus, mask making might serve as a tool in art therapy to explore present and future possible future selves (including past self, present self, possible positive future self as well as possible feared future self). To assist clients, a worksheet is often distributed that serves as a prompt for clients when creating their masks as well as a place for them to privately record insights discovered during their mask making process (Brumleve, 2010).

**Mask Making Techniques**

There are several ways of making masks for art therapy activities. The approach you use will really depend upon your client and his/her skill level or age, but also upon available materials. For young children, masks can be made out of paper plates. For more professional masks, you can create plaster masks using plaster gauze. If you opt for this procedure, you will need a partner to help you place the gauze on your face, remove it, etc.

The supplies you will need for this approach include:

- Oil based lotion to protect the maskgiver’s face and under the chin
- Petroleum jelly to apply to the eyelashes, any facial or stray scalp hairs
- Clear plastic wrap to cover the ears and all scalp hair
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- Plastic garbage bag to wear to protect the maskgiver’s clothes
- Plaster of Paris gauze roll (four inches wide by five yards long). You will need to cut these into 4” or 5” strips.
- Hairband (you will need to pull and tie long hair back)
- Warm water, about dishwater temperature, in a bowl
- Scissors
- Masking tape
- Brushes (a small one and a medium size one)
- Acrylic paints
- Indelible Ink pens
- Old jewelry, gems, sequins, paint brush, bottle caps, feathers, glitter, wig hair, wire, etc.
- Glue or glue gun

Sculpting the Mask

1. Push hair back off of your face with the hairband or hairclips. Wrap towel around neck.
2. Smear Vaseline over your face placing extra Vaseline around the hairline, eyes and eyebrows.
3. Cut plaster strips ahead of time. Dip in warm water and smooth over face (there is a right side with more plaster on it — place this side up).
4. Add three layers over entire face. Reinforce the nose area with extra strips. When the mask feels like it’s pulling on the face (approximately 20 minutes) it is time to remove it. Let your mask dry for 24 hours.

5. Basecoat the entire mask with gesso.

6. Paint mask with acrylic paints.

7. Paint a rim of glue around the eyes and sprinkle on some glitter.

8. Adhere feathers, jewelry, gems, silk flowers, sequins etc. with glue gun to your mask.

9. I added a painted and glittered old paintbrush to the mouth to represent the fact that I communicate through my art.

10. Dangle a bottle cap that has been painted and hung from the brush with a piece of wire. (Creativity-portal.com, 2006, para 6)

In sum, masks have been used since the beginning of time and across cultures. Mask making is a potentially powerful technique used in art therapy, allowing clients to explore the personality they project in various social settings, hidden and unconscious desires and components of one's self, past self, present self and possible future selves. It can be used with children, adolescents and adults, in either a group or individual setting. Mask making draws upon psychological theories developed by Jung, and the archetypes of persona and shadow, as well as the theory of possible selves developed by Markus and Nurius (1987). Mask making can also be used for spiritual self discovery, prompting clients to create masks of their totem (ie, animal, sea creature, or bird that serves as a protector or guide for them), masks can be created based upon dream visions, for role playing among trauma victims.
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