

DOPE LABS

Healing Through Art Therapy – Lab 064

Zakiya I feel like all the products, all the apps, everything is marketing itself as good for your mental health. Like the coloring apps, matching games. I'm like, this game is against a timer. How is this relaxing and good for mental health?

Titi All it's doing is raising my anxiety. Well, since the pandemic started in 2020, it seems like there's been a huge ramp up in things that are associated with improving your mental health.

Zakiya It's just like how things say "all natural." Like what are the qualifications for this?

Titi Right. Organic, that ain't organic. They spelled organic with a K.

Zakiya Mm hmm. Well, it is Mental Health Awareness Month, and I think we should get to the bottom of it.

Titi I'm Titi.

Zakiya And I'm Zakiya.

Titi And from Spotify, this is Dope Labs.

Zakiya Welcome to Dope Labs, a weekly podcast that mixes hardcore science, pop culture and a healthy dose of friendship.

Titi May is National Mental Health Awareness Month, and we have never shied away from talking about mental health on Dope Labs. We've talked about harnessing the power of our anxiety in Lab 038 So Anxious with Dr. Wendy Suzuki, and in Lab 032 Life Avalanche, we talked about the danger of burnout with Dr. Anne Helen Peterson.

Zakiya This week, we're talking about art therapy, specifically we really wanted to know more about the process that takes place between the therapist and the patient and what's happening inside our brains when we engage with art and how we can harness the tools of art for healing. So let's get into the recitation.

Titi Okay. So what do we know?

Zakiya Well, I think we all know already that mental health is important. We just had an episode recently talking about the connection between the mind and the body.

Titi And we also know that therapy is a really helpful tool for a lot of people.

Zakiya Absolutely. And then I think also we know our surroundings, our environment can affect our mood and our emotional state. You know, so not just, "am I in a place that smells good?" Am I in the place that looks good? Am I in a place that makes me feel calm? We have multiple inputs for our state of being, so things we see like art can affect how we feel.

Titi Absolutely. Okay, so what do we want to know?

Zakiya I think when we start to consider art therapy, yes, I understand in the literal sense it's a combination of art and therapy. But how exactly is it working?

Titi Right. And then when we figure out how it works, I want to know who it's most helpful for. Was it people who are more artistically inclined that art therapy will help? Or is it everybody no matter what, any art level, you can use our therapy?

Zakiya That's a good question. And then also, if you are using art as therapy, what is happening in your brain? Right. I want to know how is working? What part of the brain is activated?

Titi My friend always want to know that biology. That's a very good question. And so me, I want to know if the type of art you're engaging with have different effects, like does painting do something different for you than pottery would? You know what I mean?

Zakiya Yeah, you talk about my biology, but it feels like you're going into materials. Materials, science, like.

Titi Yes, those nice, smooth pastels. Hmm. That seems very calming.

Zakiya And I think it would be great to define the parameters of art therapy because I see a lot of things getting swept under that broad term. So like those apps where you paint by number, is that art therapy like those coloring books?

Titi That's a very good question.

Zakiya I think we're ready to jump into the discussion.

Titi Our guest for today's lab is Professor Juliet King.

Professor Juliet King I'm Juliet King. I'm an associate professor of art therapy at the George Washington University, and I'm an adjunct associate professor of neurology at the Indiana University School of Medicine.

Zakiya Professor King is pursuing a Ph.D. in translational health sciences. Her research is focused on using neuroscience and art therapy to treat psychological trauma.

Titi She also wrote a book on these issues. It's called Art Therapy, Trauma and Neuroscience Theoretical and Practical Perspectives.

Zakiya Okay. So before we dove into art therapy specifically, we want to be clear. Art therapy is one of many different kinds of therapeutic practices out there.

Titi When it comes to therapy, there's no one size fits all approach. What works for you may not work for me and vice versa.

Zakiya So let's jump in to figure out exactly what art therapy is.

Professor Juliet King I love to answer this question by defining what I say is a continuum. And so on one end of the continuum, we might call Therapeutic Arts, where a cellist is playing on a cancer unit and hearing the music might help people feel better, more calm. Or if you're walking down the halls of the school and the walls are gray and cinder block, as opposed to painted by an artist in residence with colors and movement, then you're going to feel differently walking down those halls.

Zakiya So Professor King is saying that art is inherently therapeutic, and that makes sense to me. You know, we love.

Titi Oh, yes. Yes, me and my friend, we love to walk through a museum together. They're usually really quiet. So it's a really good time to just, you know, sit down, look at really beautiful art.

Zakiya We went to MIA, the Minneapolis Institute of Art. So when we travel, we try to find museums around us.

Titi That's so true. And it got us in the right mood for that show.

Zakiya Yes. And I also feel like even when you see other art, it can stimulate your own creativity.

Titi Absolutely. So on one side of the continuum, we have therapeutic arts, and on the other end, we have art therapy. And just because something is therapeutic doesn't make it therapy. There's a difference. Art therapists have specific training in how they provide clinical support.

Professor Juliet King Art therapists are trained as talk therapists, like psychologists or counselors. And also we carry this extra toolbox around where we use different art materials and methods to help a person express themselves. Can that mind body state understand a little bit more about themselves that they might not have direct conscious access to?

Zakiya So art therapists use the tools of art making in addition to more traditional talk therapy techniques. But how exactly do these tools help us connect better to ourselves?

Titi Juliette says that communicating through art is nothing new. In fact, we've been doing this since the beginning of time.

Zakiya Art is everywhere, and it's a critical part of being human. And Professor King says that our survival is somewhat dependent on our capacity to be creative, to look at things from different perspectives.

Professor Juliet King We have an innate pool to express ourselves. Think back to the cave paintings, right where pictures were drawn to let the world know what it was that people were experiencing at the time.

Zakiya Art and art making have existed in various forms across cultures throughout our history. Art shows up in religion, record keeping, protests, storytelling. It truly is everywhere.

Titi And when you put it that way, it makes a lot of sense that combining the tools of art with therapy would be very powerful, especially now that we know that art is inherently therapeutic and people are inherently drawn to making art.

Zakiya So can everyone do art therapy?

Titi Who is the ideal person? Because I can't draw.

Professor Juliet King Everybody has the capacity to engage in the arts. My specialty is in visual art therapy, but there are many different kinds of expressive therapies and expressive arts. There's dance, there's music, there's drama, there's writing, there's poetry, there's play. So all of these forms of expressive abilities are inherent in all of us.

Titi Remember that time when we were in grad school and we were at your house per usual, and your mom was there and we were line dancing with her in your living room.

Zakiya Oh, my goodness. Yes, yes.

Titi That was very therapeutic for me. So I could definitely see how dance can be therapeutic because I was sweating. Your mom didn't break a sweat. I was sweating through my clothes. I had such a good time.

Professor Juliet King And in fact, these capacities are really healthy and important for us, especially in times where we deal with such stress, isolation, trauma.

Zakiya Professor King told us that anyone who's seeking therapy can try art therapy, and you don't need to have any artistic skills at all.

Titi That's perfect for me.

Professor Juliet King A lot of people think that they're not creative, so they don't want to draw or I can't draw, I draw stick figures, you know, and that's very common. And one of the fun things about it sometimes is that you learn new things about yourself and new talents that you have that you may not have realized before.

Zakiya There are a lot of reasons to go to therapy, whether it is processing or healing from a specific experience or if it's even part of just maintaining your overall mental health.

Titi Like Professor King mentioned earlier, it's important to remember that art therapy takes place within the therapeutic context and therapeutic relationship between the patient and therapist.

Professor Juliet King The work of psychotherapy takes place between the therapist and the client, and there's a triangular relationship with art therapy in that the art making process and what the person makes is really a central part of that. So we can understand that within the relationship with the therapist, we have the capacities to rebuild fractured attachment patterns. We have that capacity to facilitate emotional regulation. A lot of times

the people that we see in the clinical context are dysregulated. Hey now, pandemic, everybody's dysregulated.

Zakiya That makes a lot of sense.

Titi Yes, a pandemic is not normal. I know it has become our new normal, but it is not normal. So we are all experiencing this collective dysregulation.

Zakiya And in previous labs, we've learned how dysregulation can lead to the body's automatic stress response because of the uncertainty and anxiety.

Titi Right. Right. That's such a good point.

Zakiya And so that brings us right to the brain. Yes. And, you know, I want to know more about what's happening in our brains when we practice art therapy.

Titi Well, for starters, Juliet says it's not happening in just one place.

Professor Juliet King There's not one targeted area that we would correlate with our therapy, but we would correlate artistic activity and creative activity with whole brain engagement. The more we learn about the brain is that we are a system of functional hubs and networks. Very little is connected to a specific biological or physiological or anatomical function in the brain. Our brain operates in relation to itself. This rests on the molecular biological understanding of neuroplasticity and really it goes back to the neurons, neurons that fire together, wire together. The capacity for neuroplasticity is what allows our brains to change and form different pathways throughout the entire lifespan, which is really exciting.

Titi Neuroplasticity means our brains have the capacity to rewire themselves and form new connections in response to new information, sensory stimuli and following an injury. This is what's happening in your brain when you're learning.

Zakiya And so this potential to change is exciting because you don't have to be stuck in your ways. And if there's something you want to do differently, your brain has the capability to do it differently. Now it might be a little bit harder, but once you start walking on that path, you just beat it down and it becomes easier. You're no longer hiking through rough terrain, right? That's what neuroplasticity is. You begin to make a smoother path for yourself and eventually is paved.

Titi I love this analogy. It's a word.

Professor Juliet King So when we're little, those neuro plastic capacities are much greater than when we're 95. However, what we know about the brain is that the capacities for neuroplasticity span the entire developmental continuum. And what we also know about neuroplasticity is the more input we have from sensory motor visual systems right then, the more capacities we have to change and grow.

Zakiya So if more sensory input means more capacity to grow and change, then art is giving you more input with more opportunity to change how we regulate or do things, it seems like.

Titi I love that. With that in mind, it feels like with art the possibilities are endless. Yeah. The capacity to change and grow is so important because it allows our brains to learn new

things and make changes moving forward. And making changes in our behavior and thought patterns is essential to healing and often a really big part of therapy.

Zakiya Absolutely. So let's take a break. And when we come back, we'll talk about how art therapy can help us find balance during times of stress, the importance of non-verbal communication, and how different mediums can be used for healing.

Titi And we're back and we've been talking with Professor Julia King about art therapy. What parts of the brain are stimulated? And who exactly is art therapy made for? It's everybody. But before we jump back in, let's talk about what we're going to be focusing on in next week's lab.

Zakiya In next week's lab, we're talking all about games, and strangely, we somehow come around to the meaning of life. We also talk about gamification and you tell us about what are your recent new favorite games, too?

Titi Yes. So check it out to make sure you hear about all that.

Zakiya Let's get back to the lab. We've been talking about how art therapy can help with emotional regulation and finding a balance throughout times of stress.

Professor Juliet King How do we understand how to use our art process and products and ourselves and that relationship to help with emotional regulation and regaining homeostasis?

Titi Our bodies are constantly striving for balance, which is essentially what homeostasis is. Stress disrupts balance and can lead to dysregulation like we've been talking about where it's difficult to make decisions because our bodies are stuck in a stress response.

Zakiya And we've talked about this stress response in some earlier episodes. So fight and flight and freeze. And before we can understand how to move towards homeostasis, we need to unpack how our bodies experience, process and store trauma.

Professor Juliet King The nature of traumatic experiences, the nature of disease and distress. The nature of stress is such that our systems engage in an upheaval, a disruption of homeostasis. Things become out of balance. But what we know from science and using contemporary neuro imaging, such as EEG, which measures brain waves or functional MRI, which actually is looking at the structures and functions in the brain, is that when we experience stress, adversity, trauma, then our memory, the way that we process that memory, it gets stored implicitly, meaning it gets stored at a less conscious level, meaning that it gets stored in our body. And when memories are stored in our body, we don't have conscious access to that and we also don't have verbal access.

Zakiya You know, I was reading some really interesting things about how folks think about memories. It's said that a lot of times we consider memories to be these intact accounts of what happens and that they get buried. But that's not actually how they work. They are restructuring or retelling to preserve self, right? And so sometimes we just don't remember things or we have buried things because we don't want to think about them a lot. And we may not be able to actually recover a full memory, but we may be able to process through some of the feelings we had. It's really a complicated thing, considering a traumatic event. How you cope around that trauma if you're even able to cope, right? And then what? Some of the effects of those coping mechanisms are. So you may have high anxiety for a

long time, which we know means you may have different hormonal levels, you may have different effects of long term stress physically manifesting from a psychological event.

Professor Juliet King And so what ends up happening also is in the recall or re-experiencing of a trauma, the talking centers of the brain aren't working as actively. And so we see from neuro imaging capacities how different parts of the brain aren't operating as fluidly as they might. And so that, too, is going to hinder a person's ability to construct a story, to tell their memory, to put together a narrative.

Titi That's really amazing. So the nature of trauma is that sometimes we literally can't even talk about it. That's really tough.

Zakiya Yeah.

Professor Juliet King And that also gets in the way of this really important part of the brain called the prefrontal cortex. And that's the part of the brain behind our eyes. That's how we live our life, our organization, our executive functions. Well, when we're experiencing traumatic events, when we're experiencing emotional upheaval, then the capacities for our prefrontal cortex to process information, to process emotions that also get stymied.

Zakiya And that's something we talked about in the so anxious episode, lab 038 with Dr. Wendy Suzuki.

Titi Now that we know that trauma is stored in the body, something like art therapy makes a lot of sense. Someone might not be able to use words to talk about or process their experience, and that could make healing really difficult.

Zakiya This makes me think about what Professor King said earlier about how art therapy can help people express and understand themselves without having conscious access or verbal access to whatever they're working through in that therapy.

Professor Juliet King Now, we live in a verbal society. We live in a society that's saying, forget the unconscious, whatever. Let's just stay focused.

Titi Okay, so exhibit a social media, podcasts. Not this one, though. Keep listening to Dope Labs. Everybody is talking about something and talking is a primary way of processing our subconscious and the primary mode of communication in talk therapy.

Professor Juliet King But a lot of times talking just doesn't cut it. We need other methods to help a person feel safe enough to understand their situation, enough in order to be able to engage. Art therapy inherently allows for emotional regulation.

Zakiya Professor King told us about the importance of non-verbal communication. There's so much we say without using words, which is why I know you give me a hard time for it. But it's why, hands down, ten times out of ten, sometimes 11. I'm choosing facetime for an important conversation.

Titi Ha ha. That is very true. I know. If I hear that facetime tone, I know it's Zakiya. I just know if I hear coming through my computer, I'm like, Yes, that's my friend.

Zakiya But I think that's because so much of how I communicate, even though I'm saying it, a lot of words, you do not want these text messages unless you really know me and can decide how these things are going, you know.

Titi I totally understand.

Professor Juliet King I understand we use nonverbal communication all the time. That's how we come out of the womb. When we're born, we experience the entire world through our senses. So that really forms a strong foundation for how engagement and sensory, motor, visual, tactile movement engaging in these sensory experiences is innately part of who we are and innately part of how we need to express ourselves. And so this evidence points to the value of the nonverbal sensory therapies in treatment and in fact emphasizes the expressive therapy is not only as an important treatment, but as crucial when it is that we're dealing with a lot of the mental health and wellness issues that we deal with today.

Zakiya When you look back at it and I think about the things that we've learned in a lot of our episodes, exploring the brain and unpacking, understanding development, even in that book that I recommended. And I know you read it. Good morning, Monster.

Titi Monster. Oh, my gosh.

Zakiya Yes. And Oprah's book What Happened to you?

Titi Right.

Zakiya All of these things make me think about being an infant is really traumatizing. You have no way to express yourself. You're trying to make sense of all these things around us. And really, our brains don't remember that.

Titi No. I would imagine being birthed into this new world with all these, like, very foreign things. It's like being dropped on another planet. We're aliens. And then all of a sudden, people are like, all right, develop here, eat this, drink this. I'm going to carry you here. I'm going to put you down there. That's scary. Sometimes I think about my dog, Daisy, like that.

Zakiya Daisy must be like she's barking. You know, you're trying to say things. You're trying to express yourself, think about how much babies babble and make noises. But they're trying to learn, okay, how can I tell this person there is poop on my backside? Help. Right, right.

Titi Or they'll be kicked in one direction and then all of a sudden they're airborne and they're like, Wow, I'm flying because somebody picks them up and then moves them somewhere else. They're like, They're on a mission to do something. They're like, Oh, I would like to touch that thing. And they start moving and all of a sudden they're being lifted by a crane.

Zakiya They don't know what's going on.

Titi Imagine you walking down the street to the corner store and a crane picks you up and drops you in another state.

Zakiya It's a lot of information to take in. For some people, art may not be the magic key. Right? Right. You may have to ask something else. And I've been seeing the adoption of a lot of different things that to me, I would say, oh, nontraditional. But they may be rooted in something that I didn't know about before. Like, remember when people were doing yoga with goats?

Titi Yeah. And the goats were jumping on their backs.

Zakiya But now what we see is animal assisted therapy. So, like, emotional support animals. And I'm, like, where those two things connected? Does one come out of the other?

Titi Right. And, I mean, even when you think about just yoga. There was a time where yoga was very new in Western culture, and folks were very confused by it. And now, you know, there's a yoga studio on every corner. Yep.

Zakiya There's a whole history of that. And I think what we're seeing is that those types of practices were being discredited in favor of a much more medical approach to things, which is something that we talked about in our last two labs about maternal health when we talked about overall wellness and sometimes just needing a more holistic approach. And now we're seeing a shift right back to those same things that have been working for societies and cultures for many, many moons.

Titi Did you ever see that video of that older woman? Really? Oh, and she's in like the. Hospital or something like that and they play Swan Lake or something like that and she starts moving. Mhm. That's all this reminds me of. I'm like yes. A woman that is practically immobile but when she hears certain music played it triggers something in her mind that recalls, you know, her time as a prima ballerina.

Zakiya We've music therapy as a great tool and I think people see it being used in classrooms. I've seen it for a lot of older adults, especially when you start considering, you know, the effects of memory loss.

Titi Mm hmm. One of our middle school science teachers shout out to Ms. Perico every time we had a test, she would play Beethoven because she was like, It makes you smarter. I don't know if that's true, but it was very relaxing and it did like kind of set the tone for every single test that we took in her class where it just made you feel calm. It kind of like just flipped a switch in your brain where it was like, okay, I know the sound. It's time to take a test. It's time to focus.

Zakiya So some of that is, like music cues. And just like there are different types of therapy, within art therapy, there are different types of mediums.

Titi We asked Professor King how different mediums can affect us differently if we're using art therapy.

Professor Juliet King So one of the guiding theories of art therapy, what I like to call our primary way of knowing, is that media, meaning art materials, have different properties. So watercolors have different properties that clay does, that pastels do. And so the theories go, which have become quite advanced over the years. And to look at parallels between different media properties and how these properties evoke different levels of expression, all of which exists on what we could call a hierarchal or a developmental continuum. We

call that the expressive therapy's continuum. And we use this somewhat naturally and innately through our training to understand how to develop interventions with specific art materials to effect or to address whatever goal it is that we're working on. A simple example would be using watercolors is likely going to evoke more of a sensory experience, more of an opening up than building something with tools and wood. Right. That's going to evoke more of a cognitive higher level of thinking.

Titi That's really interesting. And so my next question is, do art therapists see a difference from person to person? Does everyone respond to the same mediums in the same way? So watercolors may open a person up like Professor King said, but maybe not necessarily.

Professor Juliet King For another person, therapy is subjective. I think a really great example is thinking about those coloring books, which are not art therapy, but some people feel really calm when they color those intricate designs. Other people feel like, whoa, they feel insecure, they feel overwhelmed. It raises anxiety or sends them into an obsessive state.

Titi Professor King told us that art therapists are really careful when using different mediums with patients.

Professor Juliet King If we're not careful, opening a person up too much can lead to emotional flooding. A person can get overwhelmed or overstimulated. There's actually an ethical responsibility that art therapists and psychotherapists all have, and if they're not trained, then they might not realize how the different materials could open a person up too much without knowing how to help that person regain a sense of control. And that's very important and speaks to the capacities of the trained psychotherapist to know when to tap into when to kind of push boundaries, when to foster self-expression as opposed to helping a person maybe regulate, calm down and be able to engage in the process. One thing that works for one may not work with another and really bridges and points back to the importance of that relationship the assessment procedures, the goals in treatment, getting to know who it is that you're working with, which is the driver to any kind of psychotherapeutic support.

Zakiya You know, I was a little surprised to find out that those coloring books are not therapy because, you know, between coloring things that are already drawn, drawing my own doodles, doing puzzles, all those things feel very calming for me.

Titi Yeah. So they're therapeutic, but not therapy in the sense that you're working with a therapist. So for you, puzzles are therapeutic, but for me they raise my heart rate, so I'm not doing puzzles, but that makes me think and we want to know from you all what types of things that are considered art do you interact with that make you feel calm, that are therapeutic for you. If you look in the Spotify app right now, there's a poll, and you can choose which of the forms of art you use to de-stress.

Zakiya Where do you find an art therapist? It's already expensive. When we talk about just having talk therapy. Come on. I've looked at a couple of different places. They're saying, like individual sessions or, you know, in a therapeutic shower, which is like 50 to 55 minutes. And I see cost from 100 to \$200 for each session.

Titi That's a lot of money. I mean, because imagine you're doing it weekly. Yeah. You multiply that by four and then multiply that by 12.

Zakiya The numbers are up.

Titi That's a lot of money.

Zakiya And that goes right back into the insurance conversation we had in last week's lab.

Titi Yes. About maternal health care.

Zakiya That also has an effect on access. Who can access these things?

Titi Yeah. Because art therapy may be something that can really help you sort through a lot of things, but if you can't afford it, then it's just not a resource that you can tap into. So then what happens? What happens to you or your. Your development? Your mental health development?

Professor Juliet King So similar to the talk therapy an art therapist can be wherever talk therapist is. Art therapists work in many different contexts. On the individual level. At the group level art therapist can work with couples and family therapy. Art therapists can be seen in private practice, in outpatient treatment, on inpatient facilities.

Titi If you or someone you know is experiencing mental health symptoms, the best thing you can do is talk to a doctor who can work with you to come up with a plan that is right for you. You can also find resources for mental health support at spotify.com/resources.

Zakiya Okay. It's time for the one thing.

Titi My one thing this week is an artist, and I find her art very therapeutic. It's very calming. And I send it to one of my sisters and she did not get it. She was like, What is wrong with you? And it's actually fiber art. So it's these moving stop motion felt and wool. And she creates these mini movies where she bake a cake or she'll make breakfast and it is just so detailed and the sounds are just so rich and nice. I can watch those videos for hours. You can find her on Instagram. Her Instagram name is [@AndreaAnimates](https://www.instagram.com/AndreaAnimates). What about you, Z? What's your one thing?

Zakiya There's an artists of visual artists whose work I found on Instagram and I just love it. It has a calming effect. It has elements that feel like biological in nature. So some things look like plants, some things look like if you were using T, M or M to look at small biological structures, I feel like I can see those types of patterns in the art. Her name is Linda Kato, and her art is amazing. And it has like a calming effect for me. That's it for Lab 064. Have you rethought your relationship with art? I know I rethought mind throughout this entire lap. Call us at 2025677028 and tell us what you thought. Or give us an idea for a lap you think we should do this semester. We really love hearing from you. That's 2025677028.

Titi And don't forget that there is so much more to dig into on our website. There'll be a cheat sheet for today's lab. Additional links and resources in the show notes. Plus, you can sign up for our newsletter. Check it out at dopelabspodcast.com. Special thanks to today's guest expert, Professor Juliet King.

Zakiya You can find or follow her on Twitter [@tertiaryprocess](https://twitter.com/tertiaryprocess) and read more of her work in her book Art Therapy, Trauma and Neuroscience, Theoretical and Practical Perspectives.

Titi You can find us on Twitter and Instagram [@DopeLabsPodcast](https://twitter.com/DopeLabsPodcast).

Zakiya And Titi's on Twitter and Instagram @dr_tsho.

Titi You can find Zakiya on Twitter and Instagram @zsaidso. Dope Labs is a Spotify original production from MEGAOHM Media Group.

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