

Dream Jobs: Art therapist

By Hailee Romain, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.09.18

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Image 1. Lydia Byun is an art therapist. She helps children and teens understand and share what they are feeling through talking and creating art. Photo courtesy of Lydia Byun.

Lydia Byun is a creative arts therapist in New York City. She specializes in working with children and teenagers. She spends most days at elementary, middle and high schools, where she offers students individual and group therapy sessions.

Can you describe your role as an art therapist?

A therapist is someone who helps clients change or adapt in a positive way. This might mean helping them understand their thoughts or adjust their behaviors. Therapy is a safe space where people can talk to someone without worrying about being judged.

As an art therapist, I combine talk therapy with creative methods such as painting or drawing. These activities can help people process and express their emotions and ideas.

I work full-time for a community mental health agency. The agency places therapists in schools in low-income areas. Many people in these areas would not otherwise be able to pay for therapy sessions.

I see 20 to 25 kids per week. I also started running school therapy groups that have three to six kids in them. These groups focus on situations such as coping with anxiety and respecting others.

Why might someone need to see a therapist?

People go to therapy for lots of reasons. They might be grieving over a loved one who's passed away, or be dealing with troubles at home or school.

Some of our patients may have a mental illness. Mental illnesses are disorders that affect someone's mood, thoughts and behavior. Anxiety and depression are two examples. I see lots of kids who are dealing with depression or anxiety. I also see kids who have ADHD, or attention deficit disorder.

What is a typical art therapy session like?

Each session is 45 minutes long. What happens completely depends on the client. I have many different art forms available to use. They include painting, drawing, sculpting, decorating masks, writing and collage.

As they're making art they can talk, of course, but they might just need to be creating for a while. Art can be helpful and soothing to the client. The way they interact with the materials tells me a lot. They might be making sure everything looks perfect and trying hard to color within the lines. Or maybe they don't care about that at all and it's all over the place. These observations help me understand what that person is going through and what their needs are.

Why do you think art therapy is beneficial?

I think art therapy is really helpful, especially for kids. They might not have the words to be able to express themselves. Art therapy is also fun. It creates a safe environment for them. I also think art helps develop a sense of pride and self-confidence in ways that just talking can't always do.

What do you like most about your job?

I love working with kids and teenagers because I think they're really interesting people! I also like that I'm working with people who really need help. They might not be able to see a therapist otherwise.

What are some of the challenges of being a therapist?

The most difficult thing is dealing with emergencies. I'm often the first person that patients go to if they're having a big problem. When that happens, it's my job to remain calm. Then we talk through the situation and figure out what's going to happen next.

When did you decide that you wanted to be an art therapist?

It's all I've wanted to do since I was 16. I began working with a therapist in high school to learn how to cope better with my own anger and sadness. That therapist introduced me to art therapy, and I really liked the idea of using art to help people.



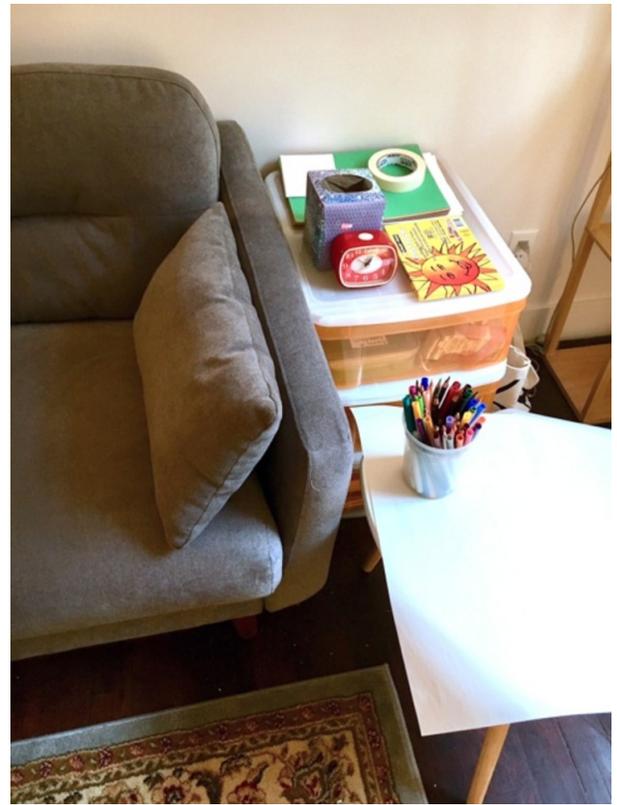
I chose a college that had a fine arts program. I majored in painting and minored in psychology, the study of how people think and behave. Then, I went to graduate school specifically to study art therapy.

What are some important qualities of a good art therapist?

First, you have to be very patient. Second, you have to really want to help people. And third, you have to be okay with not making a lot of money! It also helps to have a good support system of friends and family. For therapists, it is important to separate your work life from your home life. You can't take your work home with you or else it's going to feel too overwhelming. It's good to practice self-care and have hobbies outside of work that you enjoy.

What is the most rewarding part of your job?

The most rewarding part of my job is when the young people I work with say how much therapy has helped them. Parents and school staff also tell me about positive changes they see in the young people I work with. That feels really good.



Quiz

1 Read the paragraph from the article.

I love working with kids and teenagers because I think they're really interesting people! I also like that I'm working with people who really need help. They might not be able to see a therapist otherwise.

How does this paragraph support the MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) It highlights how many students Byun helps as an art therapist.
- (B) It explains why being an art therapist is a dream job for Byun.
- (C) It describes what an art therapy session with Byun is like.
- (D) It shows what first motivated Byun to study art therapy.

2 Which sentence from the article BEST supports the article's CENTRAL idea?

- (A) As an art therapist, I combine talk therapy with creative methods such as painting or drawing.
- (B) Many people in these areas would not otherwise be able to pay for therapy sessions.
- (C) I also started running school therapy groups that have three to six kids in them.
- (D) Mental illnesses are disorders that affect someone's mood, thoughts and behavior.

3 Read the section "Why do you think art therapy is beneficial?" According to this section, how does art therapy help kids?

- (A) It gives students the confidence to express their thoughts using words.
- (B) It helps students identify their feelings and develop a sense of humor about them.
- (C) It allows students to share their feelings without having to talk about them.
- (D) It provides students with an opportunity to get out of class and do something fun.

4 What effect did art therapy have on some of Byun's patients?

- (A) It helped them do better in school and at home.
- (B) It helped them get into good art and psychology colleges.
- (C) It helped them talk more openly about their feelings.
- (D) It helped them get jobs working with young people.