

8901 WISCONSIN AVENUE, BLDG 51, BETHESDA, MD 20889
NICOE@MED.NAVY.MIL
www.nicoe.capmed.mil

The Healing Arts Program, one of the many complementary alternative modalities offered at the NICoE, uses art, creative writing and music as a means of therapy and expression for service members with comorbid traumatic brain injuries and psychological health conditions. Our art therapist has designed the program from the ground up, taking into account the needs and suggestions of the NICoE's service member population. By integrating art into the NICoE's continuum of care, this program helps provide each individual with new tools to mitigate trouble focusing, anxiety and racing thoughts, and it serves as a nonverbal outlet to help service members express themselves and process traumatic experiences from their past. The art therapist meets individually with every service member at least once during the NICoE program, holds weekly group sessions for each cohort, and often leads sessions for families as well.

Individual Art Therapy Sessions

- Features one-on-one appointments with an art therapist
- Therapist works with the service member to identify goals and determine if an art therapy modality (art, creative writing, music, etc.) may help meet those goals
- The service member, therapist and treatment team determine frequency of participation in one-on-one sessions
- The art studio, which features countless art and writing supplies, a piano, an electronic drum set, and multiple guitars, is a community space open to service members whenever group or individual therapy are not in session

Why art therapy?

Trauma survivors often have a difficult time verbalizing their traumatic experience due to a shutdown in the speech area (Broca's) of the brain. Art is a non-verbal modality that accesses different areas of the brain, allowing them to express themselves in a new way. Many service members find that their art becomes an extension of themselves and their thoughts. Once these individuals use language to describe their creations, the brain begins to reintegrate the Broca's area and the service member is better able to process what they experienced.

Four Week Group Art Therapy Curriculum

- **Week One – MaskMaking:** When service members first arrive at the NICoE, they are often processing emotions and experiences from their past, as well as discovering who they are going to become as they move forward. Designing a mask allows the service members to symbolize their identities and feelings through art-making. The group format allows for service members to begin opening up to each other about their experiences.
- **Week Two – Expressive Writing:** Service members take part in an expressive writing session led by a combat veteran writer. First, they are invited to "write for themselves" about something important to them, and then are given the option to shred, keep or share their work. The writing provides an additional creative outlet for service members to express themselves, create a sense of community, increase self-esteem and develop a coping skill that may be used after discharge.
- **Week Three – Montage Painting:** Service members are invited to symbolically layer parts of their selves and their experiences—past, present and future—into a single montage painting. Service members collage any materials they desire onto a blank canvas and process their growth in the program.
- **Week Four – Post Cards:** During the commencement session, the service members have the opportunity to create a post card that will be sent to a former NICoE graduate. This allows the service member to write something that they feel would be beneficial to hear a couple months after leaving the program. They get to send their experiences, hopes and tools forward in this final project, and can opt to receive their own postcard after they leave.