

November 2017

Combining an Intuitive Art Workshop and Neuroscience Rituals to Make us Happy

Audrey Gran Weinberg
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences

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Recommended Citation

Gran Weinberg, Audrey (2017) "Combining an Intuitive Art Workshop and Neuroscience Rituals to Make us Happy," *The STEAM Journal*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 23. DOI: 10.5642/steam.20170301.23
Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/steam/vol3/iss1/23>

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STEAM is a bi-annual journal published by the Claremont Colleges Library | ISSN 2327-2074 | <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/steam>

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Abstract

One might wonder how intuitive art can connect to neuroscience and how this could be accomplished. In this descriptive article, research connecting art therapy and neuroscience has been collected and a workshop on Intuitive Painting has been described in detail. The connection was made by the author based on an article by Barker (2017), '4 Rituals to be more Happy,' who writes a popular science blog. The rituals: gratefulness, expressing negative emotions, decision making and human touch were combined with Dr. Pinkie Feinstein's method of Intuitive Painting in a small group setting. Although subjective, it would seem that at least for that moment in time, a small amount of happiness was achieved through combining art and science.

Keywords

intuition, art, painting, happiness, neuroscience, art therapy

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Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to Dr. Pinkie Feinstein who created the Intuitive Painting method which led the path to so many insights for me.

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Audrey Gran Weinberg

Workshops in Intuitive Painting, as I run them, can be seen as a combination of a fun art class and a self-development group. I use various techniques, all intended to reduce our inner critic to a low rumble and increase creative expression in and out of class. I enjoy combining methods I know work – from years of experience - with experimenting with the latest relevant ideas I come across, including those from Neuroscience.

As such, I came across Erik Barker’s article called, ‘New neuroscience reveals 4 rituals that will make you happy’ (2017). Barker based this article on that of Alex Korb, PhD, a postdoctoral neuroscience researcher at UCLA in the department of psychiatry, the workshop I created, based on Barker’s article, is described below.



Figure 1 - Gratefulness Drawings, Love, Pets, Child, Nature

While there are many components that all influence the wellbeing of participants in intuitive painting workshops, one reason this type of art expression does works is due to the fact that, according to Schore (2007), a stable emotional state requires integration of left and right hemispheres of the brain and McNamee (2003) describes the potential of art therapy exercises to accomplish this integration (Hass-Cohen, 2008). The positive stimulation that images can convey has also been long researched, (Malchiodi, 2003), leading to work in guided imagery, mindfulness and many other similar techniques. The pleasurable act of drawing can further help to combat any traumatic and stressful ‘memories’ that lay in repressed places deep in the limbic brain. Art making allows individuals to resolve past triggers and fears in the present, and is a powerful therapeutic medium (Hass-Cohen 2008).

In my workshops, a safe space is created where a small group of people come together and share inner feelings both out loud and in writing. The sharing and writing helps participants to access emotions which are often suppressed or denied in daily life. We have a confidentiality rule in the group, and while not defined as a therapy group, it sometimes feels that way. The participants respectfully allow one another the space to express how they are feeling at each meeting, even and especially when those feelings are less than positive. There is a striving towards authenticity, and problems and issues are not met with immediate solutions, but rather with compassion and understanding. Following sharing, emotions are expressed through the creation of art.

The following 4 rituals mentioned in Barker’s article were used as a basis for this workshop:

1. Expressing Gratitude
2. Labeling Negative Feelings
3. Making a Decision

4. Human Touch

Five paintings (drawings with soft pastels) were created – four corresponding to each one of the rituals from Barker’s article - and a fifth dealing with future goals. We began with a short sharing or mindfulness activity to bring everyone fully into the here and now. Each person picked an OH-card (metaphoric cards with artistic images on them) – and shared how that image connected to how they were feeling. While these cards are sometimes picked blind, (and this works just as well), on this day, I had the participants chose the card specifically, in order to create a conscious link between the ‘thinking’ frontal cortex with the more primitive ‘emotional’ limbic brain. Sharing the chosen card allows the participant to name their emotions and also to create a trusting bond with the other group members.

Next, each person was asked to write three things they felt grateful for, in their journal. The practice of gratefulness is a way of focusing our energy on the half full glass. There is always a half empty glass, lurking somewhere in our conscious or subconscious (or guilt, shame and worry, which apparently activate our brain’s reward system, according to Barker, 2017); Dr. Carl Jung (1951) called this the ‘shadow self,’ so doing this exercise of gratefulness, right after naming how you feel, – (whether positive or negative feelings come up), is a practical way to get your neurons to vote “yes” towards positivity. The more you are grateful, and the more this is practiced, the more positive you will become; neuroplasticity theories talk about how repetition strengthens neural pathways.

The drawings were then created, each within a very short time frame – 5 to 10 minutes – with the rule being that the entire black paper had to be covered with pastels by the end of the time period. The students have become familiar with this Intuitive Painting technique, in which the structure of the exercise gives them freedom to be creative without ‘thinking’ about it very much,

quieting the inner critic. This allows the right brain freedom from the constrictions of the left brain (Feinstein, 2017).

The idea of using soft pastels to further creativity, and clear ‘emotional blocks’ comes from Dr. Pinkie Feinstein, a psychiatrist from Israel who developed the course in Intuitive Painting, back in 1998, which he originally developed as a way to increase the well-being of cancer patients. Dr. Feinstein now uses this method to help people with a variety of mental problems. The first drawing was based on one of the gratefulness items from their list.

In the second drawing, participants labeled their negative feelings and drew a ‘bad feeling monster.’ Strong emotions may emerge and these can turn into laughter or tears. My intervention is only to contain and allow these feelings to be in the safe space of the group.



Figure 2 - After drawing the "monster picture," participants exhibit what seems to be relief.

The third picture involved the participants having to make a decision themselves about what to draw. As I often give quite specific instructions, this can be difficult. The first decision is – with which color will you start? Having a very short time constraint, and needing to fill the page with color helps overcome difficulties with this decision. All were able to accomplish the decision-making and draw a picture after a few short moments of indecision.



Figure 3 - Art has been created; life has been lived, in the moment.

The fourth picture began with a touch exercise. The group members held hands, felt the warmth of each other's hands and gave a squeeze. It was touching to see tears flow from a couple of people's eyes at this small gesture. The participants drew hands after this.

The final picture was up to the participants to decide – and I posed the question ‘which of these rituals will you incorporate more into your lives?’

Intuitive Art workshops, in the manner I teach them, are meant to bring people together, open their hearts, let feelings be expressed and eventually, let the inner critic rest, so creativity can be achieved. When we encourage creativity and allow all feelings to exist, rather than suppressing them, our brains can become more integrated and this leads to a reduction of trauma and stress. The activation of those creative neurons seems to help people to become active in other fields, such as work, relationships and so on, thus, people can, in a safe and guided environment, with small strokes of pastels on black paper, begin to lift out of negative spirals.

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