

## **Engaging Ethical Decision Making In Art Therapy Practice**

### **Abstract**

Although increasingly associated with professional protection from liability, at their core ethical principles are meant to guide professionals in their work, describe minimal standards of practice and promote critical reflection. While all professional associations have their own ethical codes, what they have in common are basic pillars related to upholding autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice and fidelity (Welfel, 1998). Knowing how to best practice these ideals in the regular course of art therapy can be confusing and uncertain. Unlike other mental health professionals, art therapists must constantly determine where art making and images factor into ethical practice. Whereas an art therapist uncertain of client disclosure can gain help from consulting the literature of allied health professions, there is little interdisciplinary understanding of selecting art materials, managing studio, interpreting images, storing art and exhibiting art. Although we can take cues from related professions and the art world, ultimately we are left to make our decisions that strive towards the goals and expectations of our professional discipline.

For these reasons, the American Art Therapy Association provides members with the “Ethical Principles for Art Therapists” to help navigate best practices. While meant to be generic enough in order to cover a range of circumstances, even these interpretations of the ethical pillars can be difficult to navigate in unique and individual situations. While art therapists have offered examples of how to further interpret ethics (Moon, 2006), individual art therapists are often on their own to determine ethical conduct in ambiguous situations. Adopting a positive approach to ethics (Hinz, 2011), art therapists can make use of ethical principles to guide practice, enhance therapeutic relationships and maintain a constant state of reflection geared towards increased professional practice. In so doing we see how ethics help us “negotiate the basic tension between who we are and who we ought to be” (Kapitan, 2011, p. 151) in order to define our professional identity through right action. Such a stance can also reinforce the full range of competence required for ethical practice that bridges secure theories and skills with self-knowledge and critical analysis (Pope & Vasquez, 2011). Rather than look for recipes of practice, art therapists can strive towards adopting strategies for thinking, deducing and acting ethically in all situations. Through learning a protocol for making ethical decisions and critically

consulting the ethical principles, art therapists are well positioned to manage and navigate a range of challenging encounters.

In this course, participants will have the opportunity to learn, share and discuss the ethical principles related specifically to art making. Through sharing cases, engaging in art making, and participating in discussion, participants will be able to identify the multiple ethical principles involved in specific situations and how to best determine ethical courses of action.

### **References**

- Hinz, L. D. (2011). Embracing excellence: A positive approach to ethical decision making. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association, 28*(4), 185-188.
- Kapitan, L. (2011). "But is it ethical?" articulating an art therapy ethos. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association, 28*(4), 150-151.
- Moon, B. L. (2006) *Ethical issues in art therapy* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Pope, K. S. & Vasquez, M. J. T. (2011). *Ethics in psychotherapy and counseling: A practical guide* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.
- Welfel, E. R. (1998). *Ethics in counseling and psychotherapy: Standards, research, and emerging issues*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.