



The American Art Therapy Association Ethics Committee provides this series of “best practice” papers as non-binding guidelines to help art therapists interpret and apply the *Ethical Principles for Art Therapists*.

Addressing Race and Racial Trauma

“7.2 Art therapists take reasonable steps to ensure that they are sensitive to differences that exist among cultures. They strive in their attempts to learn about the belief systems of people in any given cultural group in order to provide culturally relevant interventions and treatment.

7.3 Art therapists are aware of their own values and beliefs and how these may affect cross-cultural therapy interventions.

7.4 Art therapists obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability.”

AATA’s Ethical Principles and Guidelines have delineated the importance of providing treatment that includes sensitivity to cultural issues, including oppression experienced from racism. Art therapists must seek to understand these issues from the perspectives of their clients, while recognizing the impact of power, privilege, and oppression on the therapeutic dynamic. Art therapists have an ethical obligation to advocate for their clients when they experience injustice. In order to do so, art therapists must actively explore personal and professional experiences that may contribute to implicit race-related biases.

Our clients – and most particularly black, indigenous, and people of color – will likely experience myriad reactions and emotions to racially motivated injustices. It is crucial to acknowledge that these responses stem from historic and systemic race-based traumatic stress, and we must stand beside our clients to support them with authenticity, transparency, and zero tolerance for racist attitudes and behavior. The outrage experienced by our clients is certainly valid and can be an agent of transformation.

We can align with our clients by initiating these tough conversations and when we take action. More than ever, it is imperative that art therapists actively demonstrate openness and willingness to support our clients and one another as we collectively investigate these issues. Additionally, clients may be open to unpacking their race-related biases in session; these explorations should also be supported, nurtured, and utilized as opportunities to strengthen the therapeutic relationship.

It is essential that art therapists seek culturally sensitive education and supervision on issues around race and racial trauma so that we reduce the risk of re-traumatization and do not burden our clients of color to become our teachers in areas involving racial trauma. Through further education and supervision we enhance our understanding of the role that racial trauma plays in our world, to better serve our clients, and support healing in our communities.

Resources:

Breaking the Chains of Racial Trauma in Therapy AATA Blog Series (2020)

Art Therapy Multicultural / Diversity Competencies (2011)