



## Book review

# Art therapy in response to natural disasters, mass violence, and crises, edited by Joseph Scarce

with a foreword by Wayne Ramirez

Jessica Kingsley, 2022

ISBN: 978 1 78775 406 5

eISBN: 1 78775 407 2

Reviewed by Özlem Güler

## Introduction

Wayne Ramirez, a recognised leader of art therapy development in America, sets the scene with a foreword that reveals his lived experience as a two-time hurricane survivor and art therapist. He describes his first meeting with Joseph Scarce, establishing Scarce's heartfelt drive to make a difference.

In his introduction, Scarce describes his early experiences using art therapy in disaster work. It led him to question many aspects of how art therapists and art therapy, as a response to disaster, might be supported to provide meaningful assistance in diverse settings. He felt moved to produce this book to offer a guide for interested practitioners - and it certainly does guide.

Scarce has invited many professionals in the field to share their experiences and the list of contributors is impressive. Their diverse backgrounds include creative arts therapy, social work, visual arts, research, education, psychology and more. The authors spotlight many projects responding to natural and human-caused disasters. Countries covered include Australia, Belgium, Chile, Haiti, Japan, Lebanon, Mexico, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Singapore, and the USA. You will read about the disaster events, the affected communities, proposed programs, how support was mobilised, interventions, participant feedback, as well as personal reflections from authors, students, survivors and volunteers.

The book is divided into 16 chapters across four sections. Generally, each chapter is dedicated to a different disaster event and the sections consider the contexts of mental health, trauma, ethics and self-care; loss of home and community; mass violence and community healing; and collaborative projects incorporating expressive arts therapies.

The book contains diverse and richly detailed information, including backgrounds, evidence-based approaches, logistics, timelines, interventions, program outlines and many recommendations. Here, I aim to provide a brief overview. I read the Kindle version where page numbers are changeable across different devices according to their screen size and orientation, so I have provided chapter numbers as references.

*Safety note:* Although written respectfully and sensitively, the reader may find some contents confronting and/or distressing. Please practice self-care as needed.

## Part 1: Chapters 1 to 3

In chapter 1, Amanda Sanders, Maria Rollins and Jill Charney describe the impact of Hurricane Harvey in Houston in 2017. Beginning with personal recollections, they then examine definitions of disaster and propose redefining it to include impacts on mental health and wellbeing, in addition to “quantifiable measures” (Scarce, 2022, ch.1). The authors discuss trauma-informed, arts-based treatment models and explain the SPARK program, which was designed to support resilience in disaster-affected children.

In chapter 2, Ronald Lay discusses a collaborative project across Japan, Singapore and the United States. It was developed in two phases for communities affected by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami leading to the Fukushima nuclear accident in Japan. Phase one was based in Japan and phase two was an international retreat in Singapore for Japanese children. Lay asks many critical questions like, “How can art therapy contribute to the larger efforts of responding to natural disasters in a systematic, methodical, and ethics-driven manner?” (Scarce, 2022, ch.2). He breaks it down further with ten ethical questions and includes reflections from art therapy trainees.

In chapter 3, several authors reflect on the impacts of Covid-19 and the role of self-care. Joseph Scarce’s story of a homeless man who is an artist, along with a discussion of Joseph’s art-making practice, highlight art-making as a strategy for getting through a crisis. Eliah

Khalaf reflects on ‘Nostos’ (Ancient Greek for ‘homecoming’), the upheaval of shifting to online work, and a young girl in out-of-home care finding her own sense of ‘home’; Alicia Ballestas discusses balancing self-care with the complexities of pivoting to telehealth-style service in a school context; Devora Weinapple shares the challenging adaptations required of her and her students at the outset of the pandemic, describes painting rocks for the community, and explains how she stays mindfully grateful; Jess Linton writes about working with adolescents in alternative ways and reconnecting through nature; and Cynthia Wilson offers her thoughts on creative self-care as she adapted to working from home with her family, connecting to something ‘other’ as a source of hope, and using Facebook to engage the community in making art for a local nursing home.

## Part 2: Chapters 4 to 10

This section demonstrates how art therapy has been used to support communities to safely express grief and begin collectively processing the impacts of catastrophic events. In chapter 4, Geri Hurlbut and Gaelynn P. Wolf Bordonaro describe the Arts for Haiti project that took place after the earthquake of 2010. Chapter 5 takes the reader to Chile as Daniela Gloger Betancourt and Eduardo Torres describe their development of an art therapy intervention model first used in southern Chile after the 2010 earthquake and tsunami. Later, the program was adapted and shared in 2015 for flood-affected farmers and farm workers in the north.

Chapters 6 and 7 cover the devastating fires in California in 2018 and Australia in 2019–2020, respectively. In California, Katrina Bobo, Cynthia Wilson, Robin Valicenti and Devora Weinapple write about multi-level collaborations and community connections across the state. Between distributing donations and a trauma-informed selection of art materials, the authors candidly reflect on their experiences and conclude by offering the reader advice for disaster response work.

From Australia, Carla van Laar describes her personal bond to the native landscape and the history of bushfires. By adapting Psychological First Aid principles to art therapy, van Laar created and offered evidence-based professional development for creative arts therapists to utilise in their own communities. Art Therapy First Aid also raised funds for bushfire recovery through fee donations.

Chapters 8 and 9 describe responses to hurricanes. Puerto Rican art therapists Maricel Ocasio-Figueroa and Anaïs Lugo-Axtmann both write about Hurricanes Irma and Maria, which struck less than two weeks apart in 2017. The authors include a first-hand description of living through the disaster and the Stars of HOPE (SOH) project. In chapter 9, Stephanie Wray describes her work in SOH and responding to the devastation of Hurricane Michael in 2018 in the Florida Panhandle. She elaborates on the many steps involved in building a plan; from supporting multiple school classrooms, contending with barriers and budgeting, to addressing media and coordinating the community participants to paint and hang the wooden stars. Chapter 10 focuses on Syrian refugees in Lebanon and asylum seekers in Belgium.

Authors Mercedes B. ter Maat, Natacha Pirotte and Soraya Obeid discuss separate art therapy programs spanning two, ten and twelve weeks in duration, respectively.

### Part 3: Chapters 11 to 13

Chapters 11 to 13 look at art therapy as a support for communities after mass violence. Dianne Tennyson Vincent, Barbara Feldman Naderi and Leigh Abb Lichty write about the tragic church shooting in 2015 of nine African-Americans, which took place at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, USA. Importantly, Desiree Frasier's voice is included here, as a Black art therapist. In chapter 12, Raquel Farrell-Kirk outlines the Marjory Stone Douglas Shooting in Parkland, Florida in 2018, and describes a drop-in art therapy studio set up at a nearby art museum, which consequently expanded into further programs. Chapter 13, authored by Joseph Scarce, brings the reader to where he began disaster response work - in the wake of the Pulse nightclub shooting in 2016, in Orlando, Florida, which was known as a safe place for the LGBTQIA community. Scarce describes the development of the Art from the Heart artwork template that was used all over the USA in recognition and support of the LGBTQIA community. He elaborates further on art therapy support programs and offers his reflections.

### Part 4: Chapters 14 to 16

This section brings expressive arts therapy into the mix through collaborative disaster response programs. In chapter 14, Allicia Ballestas, Jessica Asch, Lisa Tricomi and Bree Gordon describe Camp Shine, a six-week summer program for youth impacted by the shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Jessica Asch writes about drama therapy and clinical peer supervision; Bree Gordon presents her approach in the project as a music therapist; and Alicia Bellestas describes art therapy interventions. In chapter 15, Kelvin A. Ramirez, Mitchell Kossak and Joe Mageary collectively write about asylum seekers on the US-Mexico border and their group, 'Voces Arts and Healing'. The authors relate arts and trauma specifically to using arts to balance the nervous system and go into detail about their work with adults and children using singing and music, among other art forms.

Chapter 16, by Maria Regina A. Alfonso and Maria Johanna Pia G. Ortiz-Luis, puts forward the potential of creativity and art-making as a way forward through crisis; in this instance, after Typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippines in 2013. The authors describe a unique musical collaboration and exchange between four visiting classical musicians from the Juilliard School (New York) and traditional elder Tagbanua musicians. Alfonso and Ortiz-Luis explain how they worked through their organisations, MAGIS and Cartwheel, to develop a long-term community program with the Indigenous Tagbanua community.

## Conclusion

Although barely touching the surface, I have attempted to provide a glimpse of this important book. It is both humbling and heartening to practitioners working at this moment and in the future. There are certainly excellent books on trauma available to us, however, having a book written for the field of creative therapies is a valuable resource, especially in a global and cross-cultural context.

I expected a traditional textbook with distinct chapter headings, such as assessment, disaster types, collaboration, funding, seeking support, templates for action steps in crises and evaluations. What I found instead were structured reflections by practitioners who found themselves pulled by empathy and deep hearts, and who responded to disasters using an ethical and reflective stance. I now understand why, in this book, they are calling for a structured response to be formed and ready to implement when needed. I begin wondering, 'What if we had art therapy disaster training the way global emergency relief organisations have disaster intervention training?' From van Laar's Art Therapy First Aid to longer-term programs, we have a foundation here on which to potentially build.

While reading this book, I have been able to look up the respective program websites online and learn further about them. What stands out for me are the key themes of restoring and unifying humanity. The value of this book is not only that it provides a guide to things to consider but that it presents a model of ethics, humility and cultural respect towards survivors, which is evident in every chapter. Scarce has provided a great testimony to the depth of hearts and minds of creative arts therapists instigating arts-based community action and healing. To read the book is to look into the inside story, the honest recounting of, and reflection on, how things actually started for these programs.

## Reference

Scarce, J. (2022). *Art therapy in response to natural disasters, mass violence, and crises*. Jessica Kingsley. Retrieved September 11, 2022, from <https://read.amazon.com.au/?asin=B0997VBQV2>

**Published:** October 2022

**Issue:** Vol.17, No.2

**Word count:** 1787

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Based in Australia, Özlem's early tertiary education was in Fine Arts and later, Community Welfare, which led her to gain a Bachelor of Social Work. After working in the fields of youth support, aged care, homelessness and domestic violence, she studied the Masters in Therapeutic Arts Practice at MIECAT in order to support people through creativity. She is a practicing artist and community-based creative arts therapist working in rural regional Australia. Özlem works with individuals, groups and organisations and runs a studio on the Far South Coast of NSW, Australia. She holds memberships with ANZACATA, AASW (Australian Association of Social Workers) and NAVA (National Association for the Visual Arts). Currently, Özlem is working with bushfire-affected communities.



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