Although masks are ubiquitous to art therapy, when we were recently asked to run several mask-making workshops we realized that we were both conflicted about what they actually represent. Are they meant to hide or protect some aspect of ourselves? Do they reflect what we show to the world and obscure our “true” selves? Or do they help us uncover and discover parts of ourselves? Finally we decided that, as art therapists who operate from a positive psychology perspective, we would use masks to highlight and celebrate some aspects that showcase strengths.

For example, in a recent workshop, Rebecca had a client decorate a mask that was devoted to the theme “What I keep from myself.” Her client said that, “It’s not so much about what I present to the world. I feel like I am authentic and people ‘get me.’ It’s more about my sense that I feel like I don’t know myself.” She chose a mask in the shape of a butterfly and delicately decorated it with soft pastels in purple and yellow hues which she said “looked like a sunset.” She was surprised at how visually pleasing it was and realized that it represented a sense of beauty and gentleness which she tended to minimize in herself.

When Gioia uses mask-making with people in recovery, she suggests that they explore the strength of courage the will that they have to draw upon to get clean and sober. Courage, which come from the French word coeur for “heart,” can be defined as the willingness to accomplish goals in the face of internal or external resistance. Gioia gives her clients a list of different qualities, found in Character Strengths and Virtues by Peterson and...
Seligman (2004), that are associated with courage and has them choose one that particularly resonates. This list includes bravery, which we commonly associate with courage, and involves doing what needs to be done despite fear. This might encompass physical valor, but may also refer to facing a serious illness, resisting peer pressure, or standing up for what is right. Persistence is a quality that means finishing what we are trying to accomplish despite obstacles or discouragement, taking care of business, and persevering in the face of boredom, difficulty, and the temptation to do something easier. Integrity is another aspect of courage that involves authenticity, honesty, sincerity, being true to ourselves, and practicing what we preach. Interestingly, Peterson and Seligman (2004) also include vitality as one of the strengths associated with courage. Vitality manifests as zest, feeling alive, having “joie de vivre,” energy that is both available to the self and visible to others, and a sense of physical well-being and vigor.

Although many of Gioia’s clients don’t identify with bravery when they think of courage, they do connect with persistence and grit in the face of adversity, and with the renewed vitality that they are experiencing in recovery. Rebecca’s client showed courage by addressing the disparity between her internal sense of herself and what the outside world sees in her. Although she initially struggled with connecting to positive aspects of herself, she immediately gained new insight when she saw the beauty and grace in her butterfly mask.

Positive psychology suggests that we focus as much on building what’s strong as we do on fixing what’s wrong, especially because doing so can be extremely effective in alleviating suffering and, most importantly, increasing wellbeing. Not surprisingly, we have found that art therapy is particularly well suited to this goal. Art therapy naturally highlights strengths, induces flow, and promotes feelings of mastery and accomplishment. In addition, it promotes empathy and builds social relationships. It gives us the opportunity to examine our lives in novel ways that can shift perception and encourages fresh and empowering insight. Art therapy is inherently strengths-based because it employs the power of human creativity to reduce distress and increase happiness and wellbeing.

Here are some strengths-related themes to consider:

- Celebrating a strength: 1) that you want to acknowledge and cultivate in yourself; 2) that honors a person that you admire; 3) that you see in your community.
- Creating a visual representation of a character strength that you most identify with, such as courage, kindness, wisdom, curiosity, appreciation of beauty, or humor.
- Reflecting on strengths that have gotten you through tough times.
- Identifying and exploring your core values, what matters to you most, and how those relate to your strengths. We usually provide a long list of different values to jump-start this process.
- Envisioning what it would look like if you experienced some relief from your challenges, if your situation was resolved, or if there was a shift for the better (a variation of the *Miracle Question* from the Solution-Focused model).
- Recognizing the things that have gone well and evaluating what it was about you or the situation that made you able to appreciate it.

For more on art therapy from a positive psychology perspective, what we call Positive Art Therapy, see:


If you are interested in learning more about a positive psychology perspective, we explore the topic more fully in a chapter in Rubin’s upcoming latest edition of her classic *Approaches to Art Therapy* and we are writing a book on the topic that is scheduled to come out in late 2016.

We would love to hear how you might be practicing art therapy from a strengths-based or positive psychology lens. Feel free to contact us through the [American Art Therapy Association](https://www.aatf.org) or via our Facebook page and website, [Creative Wellbeing Workshops](https://www.creativewellbeingworkshops.com).

Positively yours, Rebecca and Gioia.