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## Art Therapist Shimali Perera

Entertainment Interviews

Shimali Perera (née Goonetilleke,) AThR is a graduate of Art Therapy from Goldsmith's College, University of London and a Registered Art Psychotherapist of ANZATA (Australian and New Zealand Arts Therapy Association). She received her Bachelor of Science in Psychology from the Missouri University of Science and Technology (USA). As an Art Psychotherapist her experience is with children who have experienced trauma due to physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect, and adults who have misused substances, and as well as those experiencing depression. Shimali has also conducted talks and art therapy experiential workshops for counsellors, professionals in the corporate sector, teachers, children, and the public in both Sri Lanka and overseas.



## **What made you foray into the field of art therapy?**

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It's a long story; It's a field I had not heard about at all. While I was doing my Bachelor's in Psychology, I opted to do a 3-month internship. I was searching for a proper placement that would meet my internship requirements. I explored many options, visited many places, but nothing really worked for me. My final option was to sit in prayer and wait, and that is exactly what I did. As I waited, I had a thought that dropped into my mind one day, which was 'creative therapy'. I didn't know of the existence of any such field, but as I continued to wait I remembered the name of a friend who had many contacts. Cutting the story short, I came across a lady who was known to my friend and was a counsellor working with art and had explored areas such as Art Therapy. I began to have a liking into the field, which is when I began to look at Art Therapy and started to explore how to study further in this field. I believe that we all have a purpose in our short span of life here on earth, and I know for sure that this is what I was meant to do.

## **This is a heavily female dominated industry. Would you say it is simply a stereotype, or is there some truth to it?**

This is not something I have really thought about and maybe it is the case in the Asian region. However, many of the world-renowned psychologists are men. I have had classmates and lecturers that were men. Hence, I would say it is a stereotype.

### **What is the most challenging aspect of your profession?**

The most challenging aspect of being an Art Therapist in Sri Lanka is constantly having to come across misuse of the field of 'Art therapy' by people who may not really have the qualification. For that very reason, I have chosen to call myself an 'Art Psychotherapist' to draw the distinction. We are only a handful in the country, and it would take us time to form a body that would really safeguard and preserve the ethics of the field. However, until then I think the responsibility lies with the public to always check the qualifications of those who claim to be 'Art Therapists'.

### **What in your opinion are the skills and qualifications required for this line of work?**

To call oneself an Art Therapist, the minimum requirement is a Master's degree in Art Therapy with a minimum of 800 hours of supervised clinical training. Further, there are Art Therapy associations around the world, that would then provide registration as well as an appropriate title that can be used after one's name, such as AThR, which means Art Therapist Registered. Once registration is obtained you will also be guided by a code of ethics.

As for skills, I would say it is important to be a good listener, observer, and to know when to speak and when not to speak. These are all skills that will improve with time, as they say 'practice makes you perfect'. But most often, our clients want to be heard and this may not just happen through words, but it can be through non-verbal communication such as body language or in my line of work it would also be artwork. Art, is a vehicle of communication through which our clients express their emotions by means of symbols and metaphors. The ability to really understand what is going on in the artwork of your client is a skill you develop during your clinical training. Hence, once again I am stressing on the importance of having the qualification, simply because it can be dangerous and anti-therapeutic if not done properly.

## **What is the biggest misconception about art therapists?**

The biggest misconception is comparing an Art Therapy session with a regular art class. There is a lot more that goes on in an art therapy session that is different from a normal art class. In an art therapy session, we do not look at the end product, but pay more attention to the process of art making – thoughts and feelings that the client experiences while making art. Therefore, it is not a requirement to have prior knowledge in art or skills in art. Further, we Art Therapists do not interpret the artwork of clients, but we reflect on the image together with them and explore the meaning behind their images.

## **What do you do during your downtime? How do you de-stress?**

I am quite involved in church activities that keep me going alongside my work, but also running a house and cooking keep me busy. As for de-stressing, there are many things I do from eating chocolates and biscuits to spending more time in prayer when I feel really drained out and overwhelmed. I believe that this time of prayer really empowers me, strengthens, and increases my ability to understand and relate to my clients. Further, I am grateful for having a supportive family that will really encourage me in the work I do, especially in moments where my work gets challenging.

## **Who are your role models?**

My biggest role model is my father, who by profession is a General Surgeon who has served this country effortlessly in many ways. Since I was a child I have seen the love, care, and concern he has put into looking after and providing the best of treatment to his patients. There were times he put his life at risk, to give out his best, especially during the war. He has taught me that you become human not by the wealth, possessions, and recognition that you receive, but by reaching out to those who need it the most even if it means to go the extra mile, which he showed by instances where he operated on his patients for free because they were not able to afford the costs involved.

## **What advice would you give others hoping to one day become Art Therapists?**

My advice to future students of Art Therapy is to 'Trust the Process'. This is the first thing we were taught as students, even when we didn't understand or know where we were heading. Yes, the journey is hard and very challenging, but don't give up. One day when you look back it will be worth the ride!