Viva Lewes
The Mind Issue

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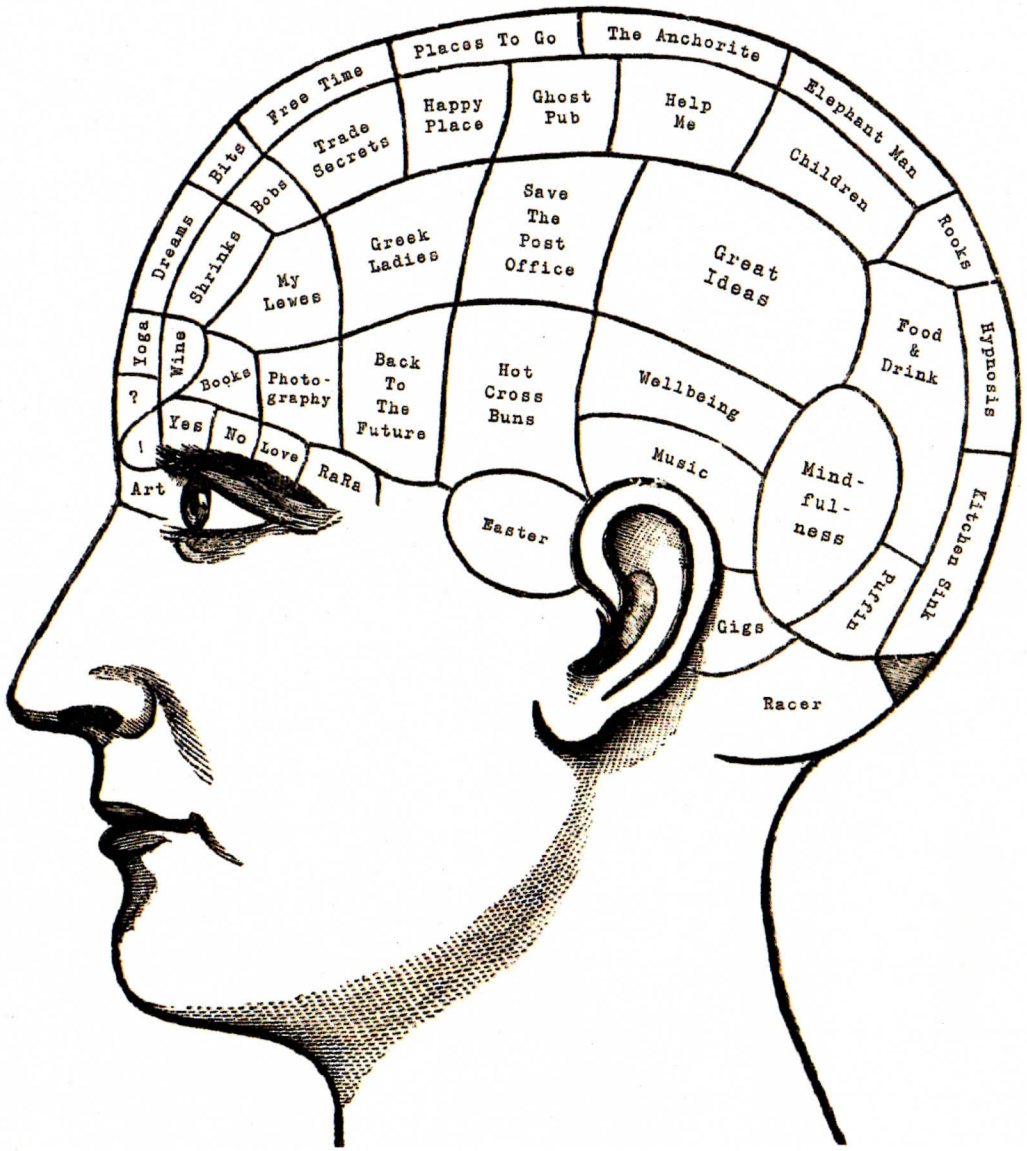

Photo by Rebecca Cunningham

Art therapy

Sarah Paget

Art therapy, I had imagined, would be painting first, therapy after. It turns out Sarah Paget's practice has a lot more to it than that.

Sarah is an Arts Psychotherapist, and has run her practice for about ten years, having trained at the Institute of Art in Therapy and Education in Islington. She had graduated in Fine Art and Painting at Central St Martin's, and has since been on "a journey of self-discovery through creativity." I meet her in her therapy room in the village of Berwick to get a taster of what she does.

"A lot of what we hold inside our bodies is non-verbal - the brain thinks in pictures as well as words," she says, adding that our brains have a "phenomenal capacity for self-healing" and drawing upon her own experience of what it's like to be on a shamanic journey to help others do the same. At the beginning of this journey, the person might visualise themself in a tunnel of some sort, come out into an opening: "It may be a desert or a jungle," she explains, "and generally there's a being there" (people often imagine animals, or angels). "It allows the person to see what's getting in the way, and shows them what they need to get out of that blockage."

During this stage of the session, Sarah uses other tools like sound or music to support the person through the process. "The Shaman drum, which I use and invite my clients to use, can give the steady feeling of a heartbeat. It gives them that sense of what it's like to be held and soothed." Her role is to facilitate a journey to self-healing, she explains. "When we have difficult feelings, we can feel that we're in a world of chaos and disintegration – I'm here to care for someone who's feeling like that."

Next comes the painting. The walls and floors of the room are covered in plastic sheeting. "It's set up to allow people to express themselves," Sarah says. "They're given permission to actually explore their feelings, and neither of us knows what's going to come up." The person can choose a sheet to work on and there's a huge selection of paints. "These are deliberately just cheap, hobby paints," she explains, to avoid any memories where the person's artwork has been judged or criticised.

Non-judgement is the key. As well as one-to-one therapy sessions, Sarah holds weekly groups with a focus on mindfulness. "We have thousands of negative thoughts a day," she says. "They do serve some purpose; negative feelings come from back when we used to live a very different way and we had to feel stress and anxiety so that we didn't get eaten by a lion. We just need to learn how to manage those thoughts." She hopes that eventually there will be no stigma attached to seeking therapy. "Life has so many different challenges – we all need people we can go to and say: 'I'm not coping with this'." *Rebecca Cunningham*

Taster sessions on Thurs 10th, 17th and Sun 20th. sarahpagetpsychotherapy.com