

How to Choose an Art Therapy Training Program (Without Getting Caught in the Hype)

By Isabelle Cunningham

If you're feeling drawn to a career in art therapy, you're not alone. More and more people are feeling the call to do meaningful, heart-centred work that helps others heal — while also offering flexibility, creativity, and purpose.



But once you start researching *how* to train as an art therapist, things can get confusing very quickly.

- University degrees.
- Master's programs.
- Low-cost short courses.
- Online certificates promising big outcomes in just a few months.

So how do you know what's genuinely right — and what's not?

Let's break it down.

Do You Have to Go to University to Become an Art Therapist?

The short answer: **no**.

In Australia (and New Zealand), art therapy is **not government regulated**, which means you are *not* legally required to complete a university degree or a Master's program to practise.

That said, this does **not** mean "anything goes."

To practise legally, ethically and professionally, you must:

- Be able to obtain **professional insurance**
- Demonstrate that you've completed an **industry-accredited training program**

- Be able to show, in the event of a claim, that your training was appropriate, thorough, and aligned with industry standards

Many people assume university is the only legitimate path — but in reality, there are excellent industry-accredited programs outside the university system that focus on *practical skills, real-world application, and client safety*.

The Rise of Low-Cost Short Courses (And the Hard Truth)

There are now countless low-cost, short art therapy courses available — some lasting only a few weeks or months.

Let's be very clear:

You cannot become a competent, safe, ethical art therapist in three months.

Art therapy is not just about making art.

It involves:

- Working with emotions, trauma, stress, grief, and vulnerability
- Holding space safely for other human beings
- Understanding boundaries, ethics, and scope of practice
- Knowing what *not* to do, as much as what to do

Short courses can be a lovely **introduction** or personal development experience — but they are *not* sufficient professional training on their own.

If a course does not prepare you to:

- Work in a trauma-informed way
- Apply professional level counselling skills
- Use art processes safely and intentionally
- Meet insurance requirements

... then it should not be marketed as professional practitioner training.

Conventional vs Holistic Art Therapy: What's the Difference?

This is an important distinction that often isn't explained clearly.

Conventional (Clinical) Models

Conventional therapy models often involve:

- Diagnosis
- Treatment plans
- Pathology-based frameworks
- Practitioner-led interpretations

These approaches absolutely have their place — particularly in medical or clinical settings.

Holistic Art Therapy

Holistic art therapy works from a very different philosophy.

It is:

- **Client-centred**
- **Empowering, not pathologizing**
- Focused on strengths, meaning, and self-discovery
- Free from diagnosis, labels, or prescriptions

Rather than “fixing” clients, holistic therapy supports people to:

- Access their own inner wisdom
- Develop insight through creative processes
- Build self-awareness, resilience, and emotional regulation

Importantly, holistic therapy is *not* unstructured or unproven.

It uses:

- Evidence-informed practices
- Trauma-aware frameworks
- Grounded counselling skills
- Creative tools that support nervous system regulation and emotional integration

Why Trauma-Informed Training Is Non-Negotiable

This is one of the most critical aspects of choosing a training program.

Even if you don't plan to work specifically with trauma — **trauma will still show up.**

Clients bring their whole lives into the room.

A reputable art therapy training program must teach you:

- Trauma-informed counselling skills
- Ethical boundaries and scope of practice
- How to recognise when a client needs referral
- How to avoid harm, re-traumatisation, or emotional overwhelm

Being a “worthy practitioner” means knowing your limits and having a deep toolkit of safe, adaptable resources.

What to Look for in an Art Therapy Training Program

When choosing a course, ask yourself:

- Is it **industry accredited?**
- Will I be eligible for **professional insurance** upon completion?
- Does it include **counselling and communication skills**, not just art activities?
- Is it **trauma-informed?**
- Does it provide a **library of tools, processes, and frameworks?**
- Is there **ongoing support**, supervision, and guidance?

If the answer to these is unclear — keep looking.

A Pathway Designed for Real-World Practice

Our **Master Practitioner of Holistic Art Therapy** was created specifically for people who want:

- A **legitimate, industry-accredited qualification**
- Deep, practical skills (not just theory)
- A holistic, client-centred approach
- The flexibility of **fully online study**
- **High levels of support**, guidance, and mentorship

The course is **award-winning**, internationally recognised, and designed to prepare you to practise safely, ethically, and confidently.

You won't be rushed. You won't be under-trained. And you won't be left guessing whether you're "qualified enough."

Enrolments are now open, and we warmly welcome students who feel called to do this work with integrity, depth, and heart.

If you're ready to choose a path that truly honours both you *and* your future clients, this may be the right next step for you.

Choosing an art therapy training program isn't about the quickest or cheapest option — it's about choosing a pathway that allows you to do powerful and positive work, safely, confidently, and sustainably.

With love

Isabelle

