

Reflections: Shirah Vollmer, MD '86 (RES '90, FEL '91)



Dr. Shirah Vollmer teaching at Loyola Marymount University.

Photo: Courtesy of Dr. Shirah Vollmer

Shirah Vollmer, MD '86 (RES '90, FEL '91), is a psychoanalyst and a board-certified child and adult psychiatrist. She has been a faculty member at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA and is a faculty member of the New Center for Psychoanalysis, the Los Angeles Institute and Society for Psychoanalytic Studies and Loyola Marymount University (LMU). She also is an instructor at UCLA Extension, where she teaches continuing-education courses to psychologists, social workers and family therapists. She serves on the mental-health advisory board of the Venice Family Clinic and has a private practice as a child, adolescent and adult psychiatrist and psychoanalyst.

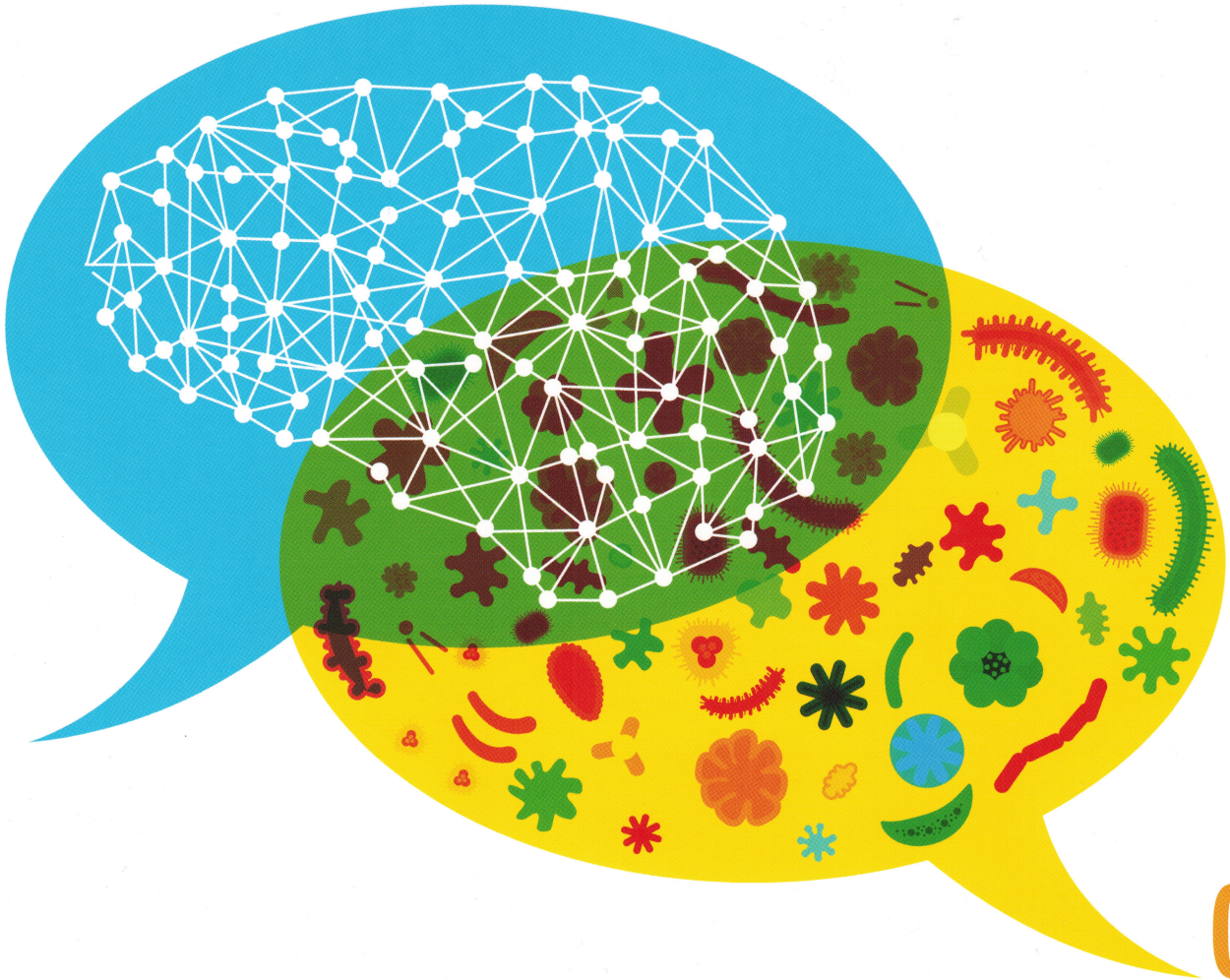
I have spent most of my adult life learning at UCLA. It started when I was a freshman and has continued through 25 years of teaching UCLA family-medicine residents about biobehavioral aspects of primary care. I have come to find that my experience is broad and deep, enabling me to share with my students a perspective that they value tremendously. Many are not familiar with developmental disabilities and the nuances of autism, for

example, and they may mistake children with anxiety as having autism. Clarifying the differences is critical to the well-being of the child and his or her family. Without all of my rotations in community settings, the Veterans Health Administration and in private and tertiary-care hospitals, I could not offer the understanding of how populations can differ, not just in economic opportunities, but also in mental-health issues. How do I express gratitude for this training? I teach. I pay it forward.

The Marital and Family Therapy Department at LMU offers students a program that leads to a Master of Arts degree in marital and family therapy with specialized training in clinical art therapy. Students are trained to integrate their visual-art backgrounds with psychotherapeutic skills as they work with a variety of clients, including children, adolescents, adults and families. The training fully prepares students to become practicing marital and family therapists committed to utilizing art processes in their work as psychotherapists. Some of these patients are on medication, or need to be on medication, so the students also need to understand which patients to refer for psychotropic medication and how to communicate with the prescribing physician about the impact of the medication on the art, therapy and mental apparatus of the patient. That is where I enter in the curriculum. It is my job to help them understand the armamentarium of drugs that we use to help people with their mental distress.

“Do psychotropics change the art?” I question my students as I teach them about psychopharmacology. “What about the clock test for dementia?” I ask, wondering if they can decipher how one’s brain deteriorates as evidenced by the deterioration in their clock drawing, a cognitive-screening instrument. It is my privilege to ask these questions of eager student artists, who want to coach artistic output in their patients in order to ameliorate the suffering they see in children, adolescents and adults, many of whom are underprivileged and have little access to mental-health interventions.

The students, endlessly interesting themselves, seek the inner world of their patients through an artistic expression, allowing a springboard to deeper exploration and mental healing. As a psychoanalyst, I would say that these therapists are bypassing the conscious and heading toward unconscious thought processes through artistic expression. They will learn that drugs can change the art, and art can change how the drugs are perceived. I am thrilled to be a part of their education.



GUT FEELING

Whether it's butterflies before a big meeting or an anxious rumbling that signals stress, our stomachs and our brains are in constant dialogue.