

Year III: MILESTONE REPORT

Implementation & Data Analysis

Continued Implementation

Last year, we successfully implemented Phase 1 of the HEAL programs for Arabic, Bengali, and Farsi-speaking newcomer groups. This resulted in valuable insights and learnings from both participants and facilitation teams. Following this, we launched Phase 2, introducing the remaining HEAL programs. **On June 8, 2024**, we hosted the Tigrinya-speaking program in partnership with Art + Health, a grassroots agency. The program featured Buna coffee ceremonies, rooftop garden sessions, and the sharing of cultural traditions and customs.



Photo: Buna ceremony set-up for the HEAL program.

We learned that culturally adapted psychoeducation effectively conveyed mental health concepts in ways that resonated with participants. Being in nature emerged as a key element for healing, self-regulation, and co-regulation, highlighting the importance of nature- and art-based practices. These practices can be effectively integrated into settlement and healthcare contexts. We witnessed how coffee can bring people together, creating a safe space for participants to share stories of loss, hope, and the future.

"The effects of abuse are devastating and far-reaching. Domestic violence speaks many languages, has many colours and lives in many different communities."
- Sandra Pupatello



Photo: HEAL Participant showcasing collective painting.

On July 23, 2024, we hosted the LGBTQ+ program with Sherbourne Health. This group highlighted the healing power of collective participation. For many, it was their first time engaging in various art activities. In contrast, for others, the program reignited their passion for using creative expression to explore their emotions and current life journeys. The group's diversity offered a unique opportunity to share cultural music, food, experiences, and upbringings. Together, they continue to look beyond their pasts, co-creating a vision for mental well-being.



Photo: HEAL Program participants engaging in visual arts and movement activity outdoors.

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Our final HEAL program concluded on December 20, 2024, in partnership with the Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic. The shelter group, small but mighty, sparked important discussions about the cycle of trauma and violence while highlighting the intergenerational cultural impacts on both themselves and their children. Participants were eager to learn about human rights and gain insight from the Women’s Assaulted Helpline as an additional support resource. They reported finding value in learning about self-compassion as a foundational belief for helping others and caring for themselves..

The HEAL team is increasingly witnessing the power and added value of team-based approaches. Expressive Art Therapists play a meaningful and crucial role as part of the healthcare and settlement team.

“I have been connecting more with my family, my mom, my children, and my siblings. I feel more trusting of them now. Before I felt under pressure, but after the program, I have a lot of friends who I speak to and share.” -HEAL Participant

Table 1.

HEAL Subgroup	Tigrinya	LGBTQ+	Shelter
Total Participants	6	11	3
Average Sessions Attended	7	8	7
Number of Implementing Staff	5	4	4
Number of Guest Speakers	0	2	2

Staying Connected

Participants have stayed connected well beyond the end of the programs. In the 3- and 6-month feedback surveys, many expressed the need for the HEAL Program to continue, especially the mental health-focused sessions. Approximately, 20-25 HEAL participants are now attending Access Alliance Newcomer Mental Wellbeing programs, which continue to use art to support mental health and wellness.



Photo: HEAL Program participants completing a paper weaving activity at a community arts program at Access Alliance.

Social prescribing initiatives, visits to museums, galleries, community art events, and City of Toronto cultural gatherings, are helping maintain social wellness. Participants are exploring diverse spaces across Toronto for play, creativity, and relaxation, and many have invited friends and family, strengthening their social connections. These are a few ways the HEAL Project is strategically implementing sustainability efforts.

“I realized I have a lot of past trauma that has been coming up and it is impacting the way I interact with my children. I want to learn more about trauma and how to deal with it.” - HEAL Participant

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Research Updates

We published our first article, "Implementation Research with Expressive Arts Therapy (EAT) to Support the Newcomer Survivors of Gender-based Domestic Violence (GBDV) in Toronto (2024)." [Read Research snapshot](#). Stay tuned for more knowledge sharing!

Shruthi Thomas led the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected from facilitators and participants. Peer researchers and participants were invited to validate the data collected to uphold the foundations of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). Findings and lessons learned informed upcoming knowledge mobilization products and initiatives.



Photo: HEAL Program sculptures representing strengths as a collective installation.

Learn it, Lead it!

Some HEAL participants have become "Art Assistant Volunteers," supporting programs like Nesting Grounds and Newcomer Wellbeing. Walking alongside participants on their journey from learning to leading has been a joy. Creativity and imagination play a vital role in restoring a sense of identity, possibility, and self-connection, especially for those silenced by abuse (Malchiodi, 2020).



Photo: HEAL Participant colouring with an acrylic marker on the collective paintings.

Witnessing HEAL participants actively take on leadership roles in their communities strongly indicates the success of long-term mental well-being support and capacity building (Malchiodi, C. A. (2020). Trauma and expressive arts therapy: Brain, body, and imagination in the healing process (The Guilford Press.)

Overall, YEAR III We express gratitude to HEAL partnerships who have supported the project in centering participants during each phase. Implementation and data analysis has been successful. We are eager to delve into the data and discover new insights. In phase III, we look forward to more co-creation and increasing arts integration within settlement, healthcare, and GBDV sectors.

More information, contact research@accessalliance.ca