

HEAL Project Findings: Themes



Collaborative Data Collection

The HEAL Project used a mixed-methods approach to data collection led by trained peer researchers and research fellows. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were grounded in community-based participatory research principles and designed to be trauma- and violence-informed, as well as culturally responsive. Multiple participatory methods were used to center participants' lived experiences and perspectives.

Data sources included focus group gatherings, facilitator reflections, partner feedback, and follow-up discussions conducted at pre-program, in-program, and post-program stages. These culturally tailored methods supported participants in sharing experiences related to healing, self-expression, and connection, while also capturing insights into program delivery and implementation contexts.

Facilitator reflections and partner feedback further enriched the evaluation by documenting observed changes, group dynamics, and organizational conditions that supported effective expressive arts programming. Together, these approaches ensured the evaluation reflected diverse perspectives and meaningful experiences across multiple implementation groups.

Data Analysis & Community Validation

Qualitative data analysis was guided by trauma- and violence-informed principles and the Health Promotion Model, allowing findings to be examined across individual, community, and systems levels. Data from focus groups, facilitator reflections, partner feedback, and follow-up discussions were reviewed to identify recurring patterns and themes related to emotional well-being, self-expression, coping strategies, knowledge, confidence, and empowerment. Analysis emphasized participants' narratives and observed changes over time, prioritizing lived experience as a central source of evidence.

Findings were interpreted through a culturally responsive lens that acknowledged the impacts of trauma, migration, and systemic barriers on participants' experiences. Integrating perspectives from participants, facilitators, and community partners strengthened the analysis by situating individual experiences within broader organizational and community contexts. This qualitative approach generated actionable insights to inform adaptation, scaling, and implementation of culturally safe expressive arts interventions in diverse community settings.

Read more about HEAL themes and quotes at the bottom of each page.

Short Term

Participant and organizational changes during program implementation.

- Effective and empowering Program Experience for self-determination
- Expressive Art Activities Improve Mental Health
- Knowledge Gained as Domestic Violence Survivors
- Personal Growth
- Program Participant Retention

Medium & Long Term

Participant and organizational changes during program implementation

- Sense of Belonging and Community Engagement
- Access to Interdisciplinary Art Programming
- Continued Empowerment to Invest in Self
- Expressive Arts as a Tool for Personal Growth
- Broadening Trusted Support Systems
- Implementation of Knowledge Gained
- Peer-Engaged Co-Design Approach

Expressive Arts Activities Improve Mental Health



Participating in expressive art activities fosters emotional well-being, enhances self-expression, and is an effective coping mechanisms, leading to mental health benefits for participants.

Which modalities of EAT can improve health and wellbeing of GBDV survivors?

The use of expressive art activities to improve mental health underscores the powerful role that creative expression plays in supporting emotional well-being. Participants who engaged in these activities reported notable mental health benefits, including reduced stress, enhanced emotional expression, and improved coping skills. Expressive arts provided a safe and constructive outlet for survivors to process complex emotions, fostering a sense of control and empowerment in managing their mental health.

This theme highlights the value of multimodal expressive arts, particularly for individuals who have experienced trauma. By facilitating non-verbal communication and emotional release, these activities support psychological healing and resilience.

Insight:

- Expressive art activities improve mental health by serving as a therapeutic tool for GBDV survivors.
- Creative expression provides participants with a safe, non-threatening outlet for emotional release.
- Art activities help participants process difficult emotions.
- Engagement in expressive arts contributes to improved emotional well-being.
- Participants experienced increased feelings of self-worth.
- Expressive art supports better emotional regulation, a key aspect of mental health recovery.
- Providing opportunities for emotional expression is essential in therapeutic settings.
- Healing through expressive arts extends beyond traditional talk therapy.
- Expressive art empowers participants to reconnect with their inner selves.
- Creative activities help build resilience among survivors.
- Incorporating expressive art into therapeutic interventions can enhance mental health outcomes.
- Expressive arts serve as a valuable complementary modality to other healing practices.

“When I experience negative energy, I disengage and go to a place where I enjoy nature, which helps me release my emotions and regain my balance.”

Personal Growth



Participants enhance their self-awareness, build self-efficacy, and cultivate self-compassion, leading to personal empowerment, improved self-acceptance, and continuous growth.

What changes do we expect and measure to participants attitudes, knowledge, and practices during and after completing the HEAL Program?

Personal growth reflects the transformation in participants' attitudes, behaviors, and self-perceptions throughout the course of the program. By enhancing self-awareness, strengthening self-efficacy, and fostering self-compassion, participants reported feeling more empowered to take ownership of their personal development. These internal shifts contributed to greater self-acceptance and a stronger commitment to ongoing growth, indicating meaningful and measurable changes in both mindset and behavior. The program's emphasis on personal growth provided a solid foundation for participants to integrate these changes into their everyday lives, supporting positive and lasting outcomes well beyond the program's completion.

Insight:

- Participants experienced personal growth that reflected a profound transformation in how they viewed themselves and their capabilities.
- Many participants reported increased self-awareness, helping them better understand their emotions, behaviors, and personal triggers.
- Greater self-awareness supported the development of self-compassion, contributing to resilience and emotional well-being.
- Participants described increased self-efficacy, including greater confidence in their ability to manage challenges and achieve personal goals.
- The findings highlight the long-term benefits of the HEAL Program's focus on personal growth, with impacts extending into participants' everyday lives.
- Ongoing development of self-efficacy and self-compassion supports sustained, meaningful change and reinforces the program's effectiveness in empowering individuals to thrive.

"I've started to feel stronger and more capable. I have new skills, more faith in myself, and feel more comfortable and confident than before."

Effective and Empowering Program Experience of Self-Determination



The program created a nurturing and safe environment that promoted emotional well-being, personal growth, and meaningful connections, enabling participants to feel supported, reflective, and empowered in their healing journey.

What changes do we expect and measure in participants' attitudes, knowledge, and practices during and after completing the HEAL Program?

An effective and empowering program experience plays a critical role in fostering a supportive environment where participants feel emotionally secure and encouraged in their personal growth. The safe and nurturing atmosphere created by the program provided optimal conditions for self-reflection, enabling participants to process their experiences and take active control of their healing journey.

This sense of empowerment marked a pivotal shift, positively influencing participants' attitudes toward their well-being and strengthening their confidence in managing their own healing. As a result, the program had a significant impact on participants' understanding of self-care and personal development. Many reported increased confidence in applying these skills both during the program and in their lives afterward.

Insight:

- An empowering focus on self-determination reflects a transformative shift in participants' attitudes and practices.
- A nurturing environment supported emotional well-being and personal growth.
- Participants developed a stronger sense of agency over their healing process.
- Many participants felt more confident in setting personal goals.
- Participants took more active steps toward achieving their goals.
- Changes reflected a clear shift in both mindset and practical behaviors.
- Empowerment within a supportive and safe environment emerged as a key driver of change.
- This environment fostered self-awareness and tangible improvements in daily life practices.
- For the HEAL Program, maintaining a space that encourages reflection and growth is essential.
- Such spaces are central to fostering sustained behavioral change.
- Participant empowerment can serve as a foundational measure of program success.
- Ongoing commitment to self-care practices indicates long-term, sustainable changes in attitudes and behaviors.

"Painting the peace bird made me emotional and helped me express my feelings. It reminded me that even when peace feels out of reach, believing in it is empowering."

Knowledge Gained as Domestic Violence Survivor



Domestic violence survivors gain essential knowledge on mental health, support services, stress management, and healthy relationships, empowering them to improve their well-being and build stronger social connections

How does expressive arts address newcomer domestic violence?

The knowledge gained through the experience of surviving domestic violence highlights the essential role of expressive arts in educating participants on critical topics such as mental health, available support services, stress management, and healthy relationships. By engaging in expressive arts activities, survivors acquired valuable knowledge that not only enhanced their personal well-being but also equipped them with practical tools to support their healing journeys. This knowledge empowered participants to make informed decisions regarding their mental health and interpersonal relationships, fostering personal growth and strengthening social connections.

The program's integration of educational content within an expressive arts framework provided a strong foundation for resilience. It effectively addressed the baseline needs for empowerment and informed decision-making, both of which are vital for recovery from domestic violence.

Insight:

- Knowledge gained through expressive arts helped survivors understand their rights, available resources, and fundamentals of healthy relationships.
- Participants developed confidence in managing their own healing processes.
- Enhanced self-advocacy enabled survivors to seek appropriate help and support when needed.
- Integrating education into therapeutic practices empowers survivors and strengthens social connections and community integration.
- Learning about boundaries, stress management, and services better equips participants to rebuild their lives after trauma.
- Expressive arts serve dual roles: providing emotional expression and facilitating the acquisition of critical knowledge for recovery and thriving post-domestic violence.

"This program taught me that women have rights and a powerful voice. I also learned to express my emotions through colors and want to find ways to maintain lasting mental well-being."

Sense of Belonging and Community Engagement



Participants experiences of peer support in the program is a catalyst for a stronger sense of belonging, active community connections and deeper community engagement

What changes do we expect and measure to participants' attitudes, knowledge, and practices during and after completing the HEAL program?

This theme highlights how peer support within the program fosters stronger feelings of inclusion and connection among participants. A sense of belonging and active engagement with the community emerged as a significant outcome, with participants reporting that their involvement in the program helped cultivate meaningful relationships and deepen their ties to the community. This shift in social connection reflects a notable transformation in participants' attitudes and behaviors, as they moved from a state of isolation to active participation in supportive community networks—an essential component of long-term healing and integration

Insight:

- A sense of belonging and community engagement has a strong impact on participants' personal transformation.
- Peer support plays a crucial role in building trust and solidarity among participants.
- Engagement in communal activities strengthens feelings of support and connection.
- A sense of belonging is a foundational element of program success, not a secondary benefit.
- Programs should prioritize creating spaces that encourage community engagement.
- Peer support is essential for supporting long-term change.
- Community-based healing contributes to positive shifts in attitudes, knowledge, and practices.
- Future program adaptations should maintain a strong focus on fostering belonging and connection.
- Community engagement should remain a key area for program design and evaluation.

"In the group, we truly understood each other. Sharing stories and creating art together brought us closer, and it felt like we had become a family. The challenges and pain we all carried connected us, and by the end of the program, I felt a deep sense of unity and belonging."

Peer-Engaged Co-Design Approach



Participants valued being involved as co-creators or cultural consultants leading to increased active engagement and enhanced capacity building of transferable skills like communication, planning, and group facilitation

How can the successful program activities be scaled up and adapted to other communities?

The Peer-engaged co-design approach highlights the significant role participants played in co-creating and shaping the program. By involving participants as cultural consultants, the program fostered a sense of ownership and active engagement, which enhanced both their commitment and the overall effectiveness of the intervention. This approach not only deepened participants' connection to the program but also led to the development of transferable skills, such as communication, planning, and group facilitation. The approach and skills gained are essential for scaling and adapting the program to other communities, as they enable participants to take on leadership roles in the implementation and continuous improvement of the program.

Insight:

- Peer-engaged co-design was a transformative element, enhancing program success and sustainability.
- Participants felt empowered and gained skills in communication and group facilitation.
- Involving participants in design strengthens community engagement and builds capacity for future interventions.
- Culturally relevant and participatory frameworks are important for scaling programs across diverse communities.
- Transferable skills developed among participants provide a model for cultivating leadership and sustaining community-driven programs.

"Working with peers in this program gave me the courage to tackle things I had been afraid of. It reminded me of my own abilities and that progress is possible when we learn and create together."

Expressive Arts as a Tool for Personal Growth



Participants reported expressive arts helped increase self expression, adopt emotional regulation strategies and manage difficult emotions. Engaging in these practices assisted participants to prioritize their mental well-being, leading to a more positive outlook on life, greater self-efficacy, and sustained self care practices

Which modalities of EAT can improve health and wellbeing of GBDV survivors?

The use of expressive arts as a tool for personal growth highlights how expressive arts were intergral in supporting survivors of GBDV to improve their mental and emotional health. Participants reported that engaging with expressive arts allowed them to explore and articulate their emotions, develop emotional regulation strateiges, and mange difficult feelings. These practices not only facilitated personal growth but also helped participants prioritize their mental well-being. The theme demonstrates that expressive arts as a powerful tool that can foster a postive outlook on life, increase self-efficacy, and encourage sustainted self-care practices, all of which are critucal for improving health and well-being.

Insight:

- The use of expressive arts as a tool for personal growth demonstrates strong therapeutic benefits for GBDV survivors.
- Participants reported significant improvements in their ability to express emotions.
- Expressive arts supported the adoption of healthier coping mechanisms for managing distress.
- These changes indicate that expressive arts foster emotional resilience and personal growth.
- Participants developed stronger self-care practices.
- A more positive outlook on life reflected broader, long-term mental well-being benefits.
- Expressive arts contribute to improved emotional regulation.
- Incorporating expressive arts into interventions offers a valuable approach to promoting mental health for GBDV survivors.
- Future programs should integrate expressive arts to enhance emotional healing.
- Expressive arts can empower survivors throughout their recovery journeys

"The expressive arts have helped me grow as a person. I feel more confident and compassionate toward myself, and I am learning to prioritize my mental health. This makes me feel stronger in who I am and gives me hope that things will work out."

Access to Interdisciplinary Art Programming



Participants recognize that interdisciplinary, multigenerational art programs support family well-being, and expanding access to such programs can strengthen community well-being.

Which modalities of EAT can improve health and well-being of GBDV survivors?

The access to Interdisciplinary Art Programming emphasizes the role that diverse, multigenerational art programs play in supporting the well-being of survivors—not only on an individual level but also within their families and communities. Participants reported that engaging in interdisciplinary art practices contributed to their healing while also strengthening connections with loved ones, offering a holistic and relational approach to health and recovery.

Expanding access to these programs significantly enhances the potential for improving family and community well-being. This theme suggests that interdisciplinary art programs are a valuable form of Expressive Arts Therapy (EAT), supporting gender-based domestic violence (GBDV) survivors in rebuilding relationships, promoting emotional healing, and fostering a sense of collective resilience.

Insight:

- Access to interdisciplinary art programming provides multifaceted healing benefits for GBDV survivors.
- Combining multiple artistic modalities addresses a wide range of emotional and psychological needs.
- Art forms such as visual and performance arts support diverse modes of expression.
- Interdisciplinary programming creates opportunities for family and community engagement.
- These programs support both individual healing and collective well-being.
- Interdisciplinary and multigenerational art initiatives help strengthen family relationships.
- Such programming enhances community support networks.
- Expanding access can foster broader systems of care.
- Interdisciplinary art programs are an effective strategy for improving overall health and well-being.
- Future interventions should scale these programs to reach more communities.

"Since joining the program I have been connecting more with my family and feel more trusting of them. I also made friends I can share with and support. I wish my family could participate too because the arts activities would benefit them and strengthen our relationships."

Continued Empowerment to Invest in Self



Positive change in participant attitudes and behaviours led to sustained improvements in mental well-being and a greater ability to seek and accept help.

What changes do we expect and measure to participants' attitudes, knowledge, and practices during and after completing the HEAL Program?

The Implementation of Knowledge Gained theme highlights how the HEAL Program facilitated meaningful shifts in participants' perspectives. Through the knowledge they acquired, participants reported increased self-autonomy, healthier relationships, and a more positive outlook on life. These changes reflect tangible developments in both attitudes and behaviors, demonstrating that the knowledge gained was effectively translated into practical, real-life outcomes. This theme underscores how the learning process within the program contributed to sustained personal growth and transformation, positively influencing participants' daily actions and relationships.

Insight:

- The implementation of gained knowledge highlights the transformative role of education and self-awareness in trauma recovery.
- Participants reported that new knowledge helped them adopt healthier coping strategies. Healthier coping strategies contributed to improved relationships.
- Providing tools to understand and apply concepts about personal well-being can lead to lasting behavioral and emotional change.
- Future programs should focus not only on imparting knowledge but also on building skills and confidence to apply it.
- Participants should be given opportunities to practice and internalize new knowledge. Participants experienced a greater sense of control over their lives.
- Practice and reinforcement support sustained positive change and long-term growth.

"I learned techniques to care for myself, like deep breathing, drawing, and listening to music when I feel stressed. These practices help me feel happy, refreshed, and calm. I am applying them in my daily life and it has made a real difference."

Implementation of Knowledge Gained



Participants gained new knowledge leading to a change in perspective, increased self autonomy, healthier relationships, and a greater positivity towards life.

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Insight:

- The application of gained knowledge highlights the transformative role of education and self-awareness in trauma recovery.
- Participants reported that new knowledge supported the adoption of healthier coping strategies.
- Healthier coping strategies led to improved relationships.
- Participants experienced a greater sense of control over their lives.
- Providing tools to understand and apply concepts related to personal well-being can lead to lasting behavioral and emotional change.
- Future programs should focus on both imparting knowledge and building practical implementation skills.
- Developing participants' confidence to apply what they learn is essential.
- Opportunities to practice and internalize new knowledge help reinforce positive changes.
- Ongoing practice supports sustained growth and long-term outcomes.

"The program was really helpful because I faced many abusive situations in my family and community. I did not know my rights before, but now I understand my rights, even at work. I discuss and learn more about my rights in Canada with Bengali-speaking social workers to apply this knowledge in my daily life."

Broadening Trusted Support Systems



Increased awareness of support services and resources within the Domestic Violence, Healthcare, and Settlement sector and its services increased leads to greater confidence and trust in system navigation.

What changes do we expect and measure to participants' attitudes, knowledge, and practices during and after completing the HEAL Program?

The Broadening Trusted Support Systems theme highlights how the HEAL Program increased participants' awareness of available support services and resources across the domestic violence, healthcare, and settlement sectors. This increased awareness led to greater confidence and trust in navigating these systems. Participants reported a positive shift in their attitudes toward accessing external services, feeling more empowered to utilize the resources available to them. This growth in knowledge and self-assurance represents a significant step in participants' ability to independently engage with essential systems, supporting their long-term recovery and overall well-being.

Insight:

- Broadening trusted support systems influences participants' perceptions and behaviors related to system engagement.
- Increased awareness of available services enhances participants' confidence in seeking help.
- Knowledge of culture-specific and language-specific services was especially positively received.
- Information about legal and shelter support strengthened participants' sense of safety and options.
- Participants reported greater confidence engaging with healthcare and domestic violence support systems.
- Expanded service knowledge contributed to increased self-efficacy and personal agency.
- Effective programs should ensure participants are aware of the full range of available supports.
- Future program iterations should emphasize building service navigation skills.
- Service navigation skills enable participants to access supports independently and confidently.
- Cross-sector collaboration is essential to creating an accessible and supportive environment for survivors

"Many participants were surprised to learn that the Women's Assaulted Helpline (WAHL) could provide shelter referrals and other support. This helped them see that there are trusted resources they can turn to when they need help."

Participant Retention



Participants expressed that the activities were beneficial for their mental well-being and settlement needs, highlighting a strong desire for ongoing programming. They emphasized the value of continued support, connections to relevant resources, and the overall enjoyment and usefulness of the program, which contributed to their commitment and eagerness for sustained engagement.

How can the successful intervention be scaled up and adapted to other communities?

The Program Participant Retention theme highlights the importance of continued engagement and participation in sustaining the impact of the intervention. Participants expressed that the program activities were crucial for their mental well-being and settlement needs, emphasizing the value of ongoing programming. Their strong desire for continued support, access to relevant resources, and the overall enjoyment and usefulness of the program are key factors contributing to high retention rates. This theme illustrates that ensuring long-term participant engagement can be achieved through the factors mentioned. This is vital for scaling up the program and adapting it to other communities, as sustained participation is essential for the program's success and relevance across diverse contexts.

Insight:

- Participant retention is strongly influenced by consistent and meaningful support.
- Emotional support plays a key role in maintaining ongoing participant involvement.
- Access to practical resources contributes to sustained engagement.
- Programs that offer lasting, relevant value are more likely to retain participants over time.
- Successful scaling of interventions requires alignment with participants' ongoing needs.
- Future program adaptations should prioritize flexibility.
- Ensuring accessible resources supports long-term participation.
- Continual engagement strategies are essential for retention.
- Supporting both immediate and long-term needs encourages sustained involvement.
- Strong retention practices enable smoother program scaling across communities.

"Programs like this keep me engaged because they connect us to resources and guidance that truly help. Knowing what support is available and how to access it makes me want to continue participating and stay involved."