

HEAL Project Theory of Change

The HEAL Project—Hubs of Expressive Arts for Life, funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), is an innovative initiative implemented from April 2022 to March 2026. The project aims to evaluate the effectiveness of an expressive arts-based intervention designed to improve the mental health and overall wellness of newcomer women survivors of domestic violence. The Theory of Change outlines a clear and structured pathway showing how the expressive arts intervention can lead to positive and lasting outcomes. It emphasizes capacity building, community engagement, and ongoing evaluation as critical factors in achieving sustainable impact.

Social Issue: Preventing & Addressing Family Violence

Family violence, specifically among newcomer women and girls, is an unprecedented experience that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Gender-based domestic violence (GBDV) is a form of domestic violence (DV) that involves deliberate harm committed against an individual based on their gender identity, including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse (Cotter & Savage, 2019).

Newcomer women survivors of GBDV face unique challenges, including a lack of awareness of their rights. The Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative (CDHPI) identified newcomer-specific barriers such as:

- Being unaware of their rights
- Reluctance to report domestic violence to the police
- Difficulty accessing culturally sensitive resources after disclosure
- Isolation within families or communities
- Multiple barriers to accessing services

Preventing gender-based domestic violence involves:

- Creating safe spaces for survivors to heal and share their experiences
- Believing survivors when they report or disclose abuse
- Building capacity among service providers and organizations
- Mitigating social isolation by engaging communities against GBDV
- Strengthening community bonds for survivors and those at risk
- Interrupting sexist and discriminatory language
- Breaking the cycle of abuse and collaborating to address structural violence

Content informed by Bridges to Safety Course, 2025

What are the Change Mechanisms?

Develop a co-designed, mixed-method, community-based participatory action research project using expressive arts therapy to improve the mental health and wellbeing of newcomer women survivors of GBDV. Expressive Arts Therapy (EAT) is the purposeful use of movement, music, image-making, performance, writing, play, and imagination in healthcare, psychotherapy, and wellness (Malchiodi, 2020).

Change Objectives:

1. **Pilot a 12-session Expressive Arts Program** to improve the physical, mental, social, and spiritual wellbeing of six diverse groups of newcomer survivors of GBDV. Subgroups include Arabic, Bengali, Farsi, Tigrinya speakers, 2SLGBTQ+ participants, and individuals with shelter experience.
2. **Culturally tailor art mediums, tools, and processes** to meet the unique needs of newcomer participants. Using feedback from participants and facilitators, recalibrate tools, processes, and guidelines to adapt the program for other newcomer populations with trauma experiences related to violence.
3. **Conduct co-creation using a community-based participatory research approach** to design a mixed-methods evaluation to investigate the efficacy of the intervention. Measurement indicators include mental health, psychosocial benefits, and increased awareness of support resources and services.
4. **Mobilize new evidence from project findings** to disseminate among service providers, partner organizations, relevant sector leaders, and funders.

What is the Impact of the Arts Using a Health Promotion Model?

MACRO: SYSTEMS & POLICY

Building Healthy Public Policy

- Strengthens intersectoral healthcare between settlement, mental health and arts sectors
- Contributes evidence to the gender-based violence community of practice
- Increase peer-reviewed research on expressive arts interventions for trauma healing among newcomer communities
- Encourage organizational policies to include gender-based violence education and training
- Expand expressive arts therapies as an effective and viable approach

MESO: ORGANIZATIONAL & COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING

Community action and reorient healthcare services

- Increase equity-informed planning/evaluation for programs/services
- Service provider training to better support intersectional needs
- Increased knowledge of expressive art therapies for improving newcomer family health
- Strengthen interdisciplinary team to include art based therapists and facilitators
- Empower communities to embrace expressive arts therapies
- Acknowledge and promote expressive arts as an evidence-based practice

MICRO: INDIVIDUAL & INTERPERSONAL

Creating supportive environments & developing personal skills

- Improvement of mental wellbeing, and safe space to share experiences
- Enhance community connections by reducing social isolation
- Gain knowledge of rights and available supports
- Promote personal autonomy and self-efficacy
- Develop personal skills that support self-growth
- Increase the options available for individuals to exercise more control over their life

