

# ART-BASED FACILITATOR INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW REPORT

Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services

October 28th - December 5th, 2022



## Session Facilitators:

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**Context** Between October 28th - December 5th, 2022, Christen Kong, HEAL project coordinator, and Oeishi Faruquzzaman, research fellow, conducted interviews with expressive art therapists and others involved in expressive arts therapy based programs. Informational interviews were used to inform the development of the HEAL Program. Interviews were 1 hour in length virtually on Zoom.

**Purpose** The purpose of these informational interviews is to gather the expertise and lived knowledge of practitioners working in expressive arts and domestic violence. The insights collected will directly inform the design and development of the HEAL 12-week program.

### Interview Questions

Below are the general questions used to gather insights on expressive arts therapy from experienced interviewees. Responses were examined using a thematic analysis approach.

- Introductions
- What is your role?
- What is your relevance to newcomer survivors of domestic violence?
- What is your role or connection with art based practices with clients?
- What framework and/or social work theories do you implement in the programs?
- What art modalities are used in the programs you have been a part of?
- Can you describe a typical session of this program?
- What were some best practices gleaned from the program?
- Where do you see points of growth or improvements?
- Was an evaluation implemented?
- What other organizations or art-based programs would you recommend for us?
- Do you have any reports or documents about your program that we can review and cite in our own program development and research?
- Is there 1-2 people you would recommend us being connected to that would support the HEAL Project?

### Interviewees

- *Alishau Diebold* - Part-time instructor and PhD Candidate, Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University
- *Bari Knopf* - Registered somatic movement therapist and expressive arts therapist, Ontario Expressive Arts Therapy Association
- *Maria Palma*
- *Briana Miller* - Facilitator, Gender-Based Violence Prevention Project at the YMCA Centre for Immigrant Program in Halifax.
- *Catherine Mellinger* - Certified Expressive Arts and Perinatal Mental Health Therapist
- *Jude Ibrahim* - Art Therapist and Refugee Centre MH Coordinator, Montreal Therapy Centre
- *Samantha Petrella* - Art Therapist, Couple and Family Therapy Montreal
- *Tania Iskiw* - Registered Psychotherapist and Art Therapist, YWCA

## THEMATIC ANALYSIS APPROACH

**Step 1: Finding Interviewees** Interviewees were identified through contact information gathered at the 5th Metropolis Identities Summit in Winnipeg, MB. Selection was based on four criteria: being a registered art therapist and/or expressive arts therapist; having experience working with newcomers and/or survivors of domestic violence; being a recipient of Public Health Agency funding; and having expertise in art-based program development.

**Step 2: Interviewing Process** Interviews were conducted using a set of predetermined questions, and permission was requested to record each session for transcription. Interviewees began by stating their name, affiliations, and experience in art therapy. Interviewers asked the guiding questions, and participants responded to the best of their ability and comfort.

**Step 3: Transcription Process** The interview recordings were reviewed and transcribed, with content categorized into areas such as program characteristics, program development, participant screening, program implementation, evaluation or reporting, and additional notes.

**Step 4: Analysis of Themes** The legend for the thematic analysis was developed by identifying similarities and differences across participant responses. Figure 2.2 presents the color-coded legend and highlights the key themes accordingly.

**FINDINGS** Insights from the interviews were organized into six main themes identified during the analysis. Each theme reflects areas of focus raised by multiple interviewees, offering overlapping perspectives and interconnected insights. The themes are as follows:

- Theme 1: Structure of the program arc and sessions
- Theme 2: Building a safe environment and trust
- Theme 3: Facilitating the program
- Theme 4: Navigating group expressive arts programs
- Theme 5: Intermodality as a key component of expressive arts therapy
- Theme 6: Importance of sharing information on additional services for survivors of domestic violence.

### ***Theme 1: Structure of the program arc and sessions***

- “Finding an arc for the sessions which still allows for client-responsive adaptation.” - C.M.
- “Core weekly activities - these help build consistency and expectation (trauma informed). Adjustments of some components every week to reflect the themes of the week.” - B.F.

One of the themes that emerged was the importance of both the overall program arc and the structure of individual sessions. Interviewees highlighted the value of consistent, recurring elements within each session, noting that predictability is a core trauma-informed practice. This can include opening and closing with the same question, incorporating core activities every time, or following a reliable session plan. In shaping the broader arc of the program, interviewees recommended varying the theme each session while maintaining a consistent structure or expressive arts modality. This approach enables participants to explore different topics while still benefiting from a predictable and supportive framework.

### ***Theme 2: Building a safe environment and trust***

- “Relationship building is essential - trust will not be immediate.” - C.M.
- “Being mindful that people will be in different stages of their healing process. They may also overextend themselves.” - B.M.

All interviewees highlighted the importance of creating a safe environment and building trust with participants. This foundation is essential, as individuals must feel secure before they can meaningfully explore their experiences, relationships, and emotions. Trauma-informed practice and non-judgment were consistently identified as core components of safety. Safety can be further supported through intake interviews that address personal boundaries, triggers, concerns, self-care strategies, and accessibility needs. Establishing strong facilitator–participant relationships was also noted as critical for enabling open engagement with difficult topics.

Many insights within this theme reflected interviewees’ distinct styles and experiences. Examples included normalizing and validating feelings such as fear to signal emotional safety; using the first session to co-create group culture, norms, and language; and adopting practices such as closed groups or participant anonymity to help foster a sense of safety.

### ***Theme 3: Facilitating the program***

- “It is important to figure out how an expressive arts therapist fits into the Access Alliance team helping an individual. We can ask ourselves what role they play and how they are integrated into the team?” - C.M.

Program facilitators lead sessions while cultivating safe group environments and responding to participants’ needs and preferences. Ensuring adequate staffing is critical to meeting the needs of the group, which typically requires more than one facilitator. Examples include pairing an expressive arts therapist with a co-facilitator (e.g., student or intern), a crisis worker, a children’s mental health worker, or a psychiatrist familiar with the participants’ demographics. Multiple interviewees emphasized that supporting staff help manage triggers and provide individual attention without disrupting the session flow. Facilitator support can also include involving them in program planning and research discussions, as well as offering mental health resources to sustain their well-being.

#### ***Theme 4: Navigating group expressive arts programs***

- “Be mindful of cultural differences, group dynamics, and potential microaggressions when working in multicultural settings.” - B.M.
- “We must be mindful that participants will be at different points in their healing journeys. When living with the impacts of trauma, triggers can come with a lot of fear and can group into a lot of things, like disassociation, and panic attacks.” - T.I.
- “Actively acknowledge the difficulties of settlement.” - B.M.

Group programs offer unique benefits but also present specific challenges. Facilitators must manage multiple participants, cultivate a safe environment, and navigate complex group dynamics. Additional challenges can arise when participants share similar traumatic experiences, as one person’s account may trigger another. Setting boundaries early—such as asking participants to avoid graphic details—or focusing on thematic discussions rather than individual events can help maintain safety. Cultural and religious diversity may also lead to conflicts or microaggressions. One strategy suggested by interviewees is to anchor responses in Canadian law, providing a neutral and consistent framework for discussion.

#### ***Theme 5: Intermodality as a key component of expressive arts therapy***

- “Almost all expressive arts programs involve an intermodality feature. Intentional weaving through modalities.” - B.K. & M.P.
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- “Storytelling as a strong connective modality: emphasizing that not everyone in the room needs to understand what is being said. It can give newcomer women a space to freely speak in languages they are more comfortable with, or to practice English.” - CM

Multiple interviewees emphasized intermodality as a key component of expressive arts therapy. Intermodality involves intentionally moving between different modalities—for example, beginning with visual art and using it as a prompt for movement. Visual modalities can serve as an accessible entry point to movement, which participants may find more challenging. Transition objects, such as yoga balls or scarves, can also facilitate this process. Another approach highlighted was mixed media, combining illustration, quilting, fabric work, and other modalities. Exploring textures and layers in this way can evoke memories of family and home, supporting deeper engagement and expression.

#### ***Theme 6: Importance of sharing information on additional services for survivors of domestic violence.***

- “Rooting conversation in laws can help navigate possible debates on the basis of religion or culture.” - B.M.
- “De-mystifying norms in Canada and cultural differences (ie. intentions of child services, appropriate reactions to certain situations such as social service interaction, social services available).” - B.M.

No single program can provide comprehensive support, so connecting participants with additional accessible services is essential for promoting well-being. Interviewees described offering referrals, sharing contacts for other programs, and providing information on settlement, social, and child services. They also help participants navigate Canadian norms and cultural differences, supporting smoother adjustment to life in Canada.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Predictability and Grounding** Trauma-informed practice emphasizes the importance of predictability and grounding. A program structure that is consistent and easy to follow supports comfort and safety for participants, making it particularly relevant for the HEAL program's target population.

**Individual Comfort Interviews** Conducting individual interviews to understand each participant's comfort and safety preferences is essential. While all participants are survivors of domestic violence, experiences vary. These interviews should be conducted prior to the program to guide development and can be adapted as periodic check-ins to ensure ongoing support.

**Experienced Facilitators** Certified facilitators are crucial for program delivery and research. A model pairing a certified therapist with an intern or research coordinator ensures safety, comfort, and efficiency. Facilitators with experience working with domestic violence survivors and newcomer populations will be particularly effective.

**Intermodality and Variability** Different art modalities support distinct therapeutic mechanisms, and participants may engage differently with each. Offering a variety of modalities and incorporating variability in activities within each modality allows participants to fully engage in the program.

**Accessibility Resources** The HEAL program serves an intersectional population, including newcomers and survivors of domestic violence. Providing resources to navigate the city, access the program, and support potential transitions from survivor to victim ensures participants can fully benefit from the program.

These recommendations are drawn from thematic analysis of informational interviews and will guide the development of the HEAL 12-week program. Contact: [arts@accessalliance.ca](mailto:arts@accessalliance.ca)