



Meet Dembe

Dembe is a 29-year-old from Uganda who has been living in Canada for two years, supporting themselves and their two children. Currently staying with a friend while searching for work, they hope to find housing in a safe and inclusive neighborhood where they can establish stability. Navigating strained family relationships and limited resources for queer asylum seekers has made accessing support especially challenging, but Dembe remains hopeful as they work toward a more permanent and secure future.

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Impacts on Mental Well-Being

Lack of inclusive spaces to foster growth Dembe has experienced difficulty connecting with counselors due to differences in identity and has encountered systemic exclusion when accessing most mental health services. Additionally, the lack of follow-up contributes further to feelings of abandonment.

Stress from interpersonal relationships Dembe has been trying to maintain a relationship with their family, but finds it challenging. Conversations with family members often bring up triggering and upsetting topics about their identity, causing her significant feelings of shame, guilt, and stress.

Financial instability and food insecurity Dembe has struggled to meet their daily needs due to ongoing challenges in securing employment. Navigating the job market has been especially difficult, creating significant stress as they work to support two young children.

2 Contributors to Healing and Mental Well-Being

Trauma-informed and inclusive services for queer individuals

Inclusive services tailored for queer newcomers, including access to a counselor with whom Dembe can personally relate, are an important factor in supporting her well-being.

Strategies to address stress from interpersonal relationships

Dembe requires access to programs and services designed to reduce stress and foster positive interpersonal connections. Trauma-informed programs that teach boundary-setting and effective communication can help improve their relationships with their family. Staying connected with their family is an important value.

Accessible financial and housing resources suited for

intersectional identities As a queer individual and survivor of domestic violence seeking asylum, Dembe requires services that are sensitive to their experiences and capable of providing appropriate support.

Housing services that address their safety concerns while considering her intersectional identity are essential for stability. Additionally, access to job-training programs is important to help alleviate financial stress and support their independence.

“Learning from others who experienced similar trauma and abuse has helped my healing journey.”

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Integrating Expressive Arts to Improve Mental Health & Well-Being

“Arts does not judge me. There is no right or wrong. Learning about the arts taught me how my mind react to different situations and how to manage them.”

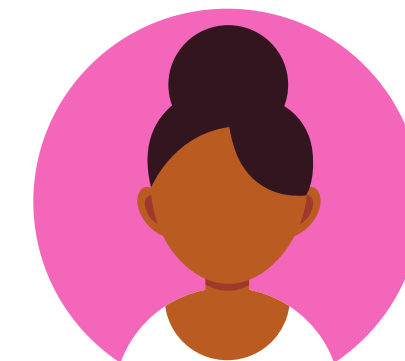
Emotional release and grounding

Dembe found emotional relief through movement-based art forms, such as dancing. It helped them feel grounded and release both emotional and physical tension.

Engaging in visual expressive arts (e.g. watercolour and collage), rather than storytelling, allowed Dembe to convey emotions and experiences that were difficult to articulate verbally.

Mutual understanding and interpersonal connections

Sharing creative work instead of personal stories helped bridge gaps among participants from diverse backgrounds, fostering an environment of mutual understanding. Artworks also provided a safe platform to speak about their identities in metaphors that resonated with them. Individual to collective art making helped to mitigate attention on Dembe increasing their sense of belonging within a larger community.



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Sustainable Change, Looking Forwards...

Empowerment in knowledge of rights

Dembe has gained a stronger understanding of their rights in Canada during a session workshop. Especially on queer communities being at great risk of domestic violence. Dembe benefited from practical knowledge on how to navigate legal protections and access support services. This increased awareness has boosted their confidence in seeking employment and navigating the city.

Hopefulness in accessing long-term services

With support from a social workers that was referred to from an expressive arts program, Dembe was able to access additional mental health services, including therapy and coaching. They were hesitant prior to the program. Having experienced self and co-regulation techniques, it sparked their interest to learn more and engage with a professional.

Improvement in quality of interpersonal relationships

Dembe has developed greater forgiveness, understanding, and conflict-management skills, leading to improved communication with both family and friends. Learning about self-compassion assisted with taking care of themselves as a techniques for improving friendships in their life.

“I see myself more positively. I am working on my confidence and self esteem but I know it will take time, but now I have a glimpse of what a healthy life will look like.”

