



Meet Fatima

Fatima is a 27 year old woman from Afghanistan. She has been living in Canada for less than 5 years. Fatima is working a full-time job, unrelated to her field of study, to support herself and 3 other people living in a rental unit. She continues to face anxiety due to her past traumas, which is impacting her emotional well-being as well as her children's. With all of these factors she feels helpless in her current situation. In Afghanistan, she had finished a University degree in Chemistry. She is currently working full-time and has many time constraints limiting her from caring for herself.

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Impacts on Mental Well-Being

Trauma from conflict and forced migration

Fatima experiences many forms of trauma from experiencing civil unrest in Afghanistan, including exposure to violence and forced displacement. These unresolved traumas contribute to persistent anxiety and emotional distress, affecting both her personal well-being and her capacity as a mother.

Loss of professional identity and underemployment

Fatima, a Chemistry graduate, is employed in a role outside her field, leaving her feeling undervalued, stagnant, and disheartened about her future prospects

Social isolation and lack of community connection

Since arriving in Canada, Fatima has faced challenges in making meaningful connections, particularly with those who share the same culture and language. She often feels lonely, helpless, and emotional exhaustion.

Being a caregiver and financial responsibilities

As the primary provider for her family, Fatima balances full-time work with caregiving responsibilities at home. This ongoing pressure leaves her physically and emotionally drained, preventing her from addressing her mental health needs.

2 Contributors to Healing and Mental Well-Being

Culturally safe, trauma-informed mental health care

Fatima requires ongoing, trauma-informed mental health support in her first language to facilitate healing. Access to a safe and sensitive environment would enable her to process trauma, manage anxiety, and build resilience for both herself and her children.

Relief from caregiving and financial pressure through wraparound supports

Fatima requires coordinated support in her roles as caregiver and sole provider, including access to financial assistance, food security and stable housing. Addressing these basic needs can reduce stress and help her to prioritize her needs.

Opportunities for connection and belonging

To mitigate isolation, Fatima would benefit from access to peer support groups and culturally relevant community programs. These connections could help her feel understood, supported, and less alone being around others with similar experiences.

Support to reclaim her professional identity

Fatima requires support such as bridging programs or credential recognition to re-enter the science field. Returning to her profession would enhance her financial stability and restore her sense of professional identity.

“My opinion about a healthy relationship has changed, I must take more care of my mental health. Respect, trust, mutual understanding is a needed.”

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Integrating Expressive Arts to Improve Mental Health & Well-Being

“I really enjoyed painting, which felt like a bridge to our future lives. It allowed us to visualize our dreams and goals for a healthy and peaceful life.”

Processing trauma and anxiety through art

At an Expressive Arts Program, Fatima used painting and role-play to express emotions linked to past trauma and anxiety. She also engaged in movement activities to reconnect with her body and alleviate tension associated with caregiving stress.

Finding empowerment amid caregiving pressures

Engaging in clay sculpting helped her to externalize her perspective on safety. This hands-on activity provided a respite from her demanding life and fostered a sense of child-like self again.

Cultural reconnection to reduce isolation

Participating in storytelling circles and creating Afghan-inspired artwork helped Fatima reconnect with her cultural identity. These creative practices alleviated her loneliness and fostered a sense of belonging as a newcomer.

Building social support through shared art

Collaborative painting and group art-making fostered a sense of connection and solidarity. By sharing her stories and symbols, Fatima felt acknowledged, supported, and less isolated in her resettlement journey.



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Sustainable Change, Looking Forwards...

Improved emotional regulation and reduced anxiety

Fatima now practices deep breathing and mindfulness techniques to manage anxiety, resulting in fewer panic episodes and improved emotional regulation. She also engages in art-making at home as a calming strategy during stressful moments. She even teaches her children.

Expanded social network and community engagement

Fatima has developed close relationships with three women from the program, meeting weekly for support and cultural exchange. This peer network has reduced her isolation and encouraged greater participation in community activities.

Active steps toward professional and educational goals

With support from a settlement worker, Fatima enrolled in a bridging course to update her Chemistry credentials and connected with a mentor in her field. She has also begun exploring part-time virtual educational opportunities compatible with her caregiving responsibilities.

Clearer personal boundaries and healthier relationships

Fatima has effectively applied boundary-setting techniques to decline unreasonable demands, reducing her emotional overload and fostering more respectful, balanced communication within her family.

“I learned to say no and stop. I didn't know about these words at all. I would accept everything that others told me. But not anymore”

