

## Meet Miriam

Miriam is a 58 year old woman from Syria who has been living in Canada for 10 years. She is not currently working and supports herself and her daughter who goes to college. She often feels quite lonely; as though there is no one she can rely on for emotional support. She often feels as though she is at fault for the trauma she has experienced and feels as though she does not deserve to feel better. Her relationships with close family is negative and causes anxieties that are present throughout most of the day. Miriam also experiences chronic health issues that include heart disease.

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## Impacts on Mental Well-Being

**Stigma and negative perceptions about mental health** Negative perceptions of mental health make it difficult for Miriam to seek support for her trauma. She often blames herself, believing she should not be experiencing these emotions.

**Inability to access health services for chronic health issues** Miriam has chronic health conditions, including heart disease, and has struggled to access services that support both her physical and mental health needs.

**Lack of comfortable spaces to foster social connections** Miriam feels isolated and struggles to form social connections, as there are few spaces where she feels safe and comfortable engaging with others due to the rising of anti-immigrant sentiments.

**Maternal and financial guilt** Miriam is currently unemployed and feels she is unable to adequately support her daughter. This has negatively affected her mood. She also believes her daughter resents her for not being able to contribute to her college education.

## 2 Contributors to Healing and Mental Well-Being

**De-stigmatizing mental health resources newcomer women** Access to resources that challenge negative perceptions of mental health can help Miriam overcome self-blame, reduce judgement and stigma.

**Combined physical and mental health services** Miriam requires health services that integrate physical and mental health care. As someone with chronic conditions in both areas, she needs support that addresses the intersection of her physical and mental health needs.

**A welcoming space to create and maintain connections** A culturally sensitive and trauma-informed space could help alleviate Miriam's feelings of isolation while fostering the development of a supportive social network. Having clinics represent her culture and language can help with visibility.

**Family-based financial resources** Connecting with a case manager or financial assistant can help Miriam access financial resources, such as college grants for her daughter, which may reduce the financial burden on her family and ease the guilt she feels about not being able to fully support her daughter's education.

**“Through our drawings we had the chance to share and express our experiences and pain. This opened the door to our healing as a community.”**

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## Integrating Expressive Arts to Improve Mental Health & Well-Being

**“Connecting with nature has made me stronger. I have more faith in myself and feel more comfortable to handle life’s struggles.”**

### Stress and anxiety relief through art

Miriam engaged in tactile art modalities, including clay sculpting and drumming, to externalize stress and anxiety, providing relief. Working with clay evoked nostalgia and memories of Syria, offering her comfort and emotional grounding.

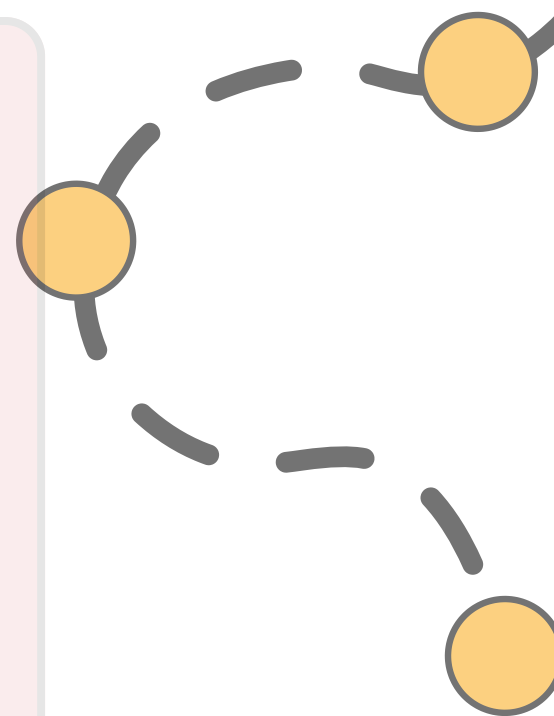
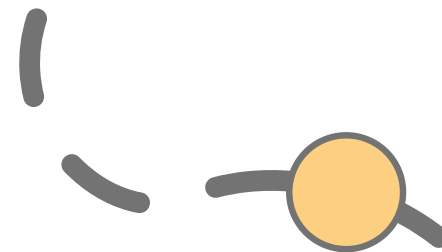
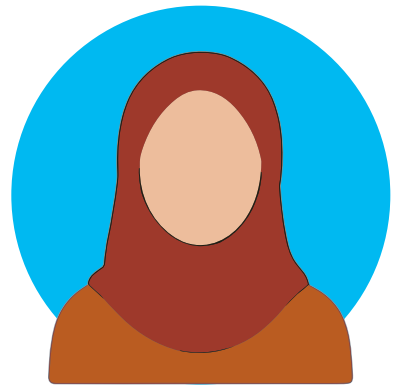
### Group-based activities foster belonging and connections

Miriam participated in group activities, such as singing and dancing, which helped her build social connections with other Arab women who shared her interests.

### Minimizing stigma surrounding mental health

The storytelling and sharing components of the expressive arts program helped Miriam feel understood and less isolated, as other women in the group had similar experiences.

This can reduce the shame associated with the mental health impact of her trauma and supported improvements in her well-being. Over time, Miriam became increasingly comfortable expressing her emotions during each session.



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## Sustainable Change, Looking Forwards...

### Comfort in creating new social connections

Miriam began participating in other community-based activities, finding the sense of community supportive of her personal growth and healing. Through the expressive arts program, she became more comfortable opening up and forming new connections. The HEAL program’s focus on reducing mental health stigma has helped her release shame when interacting with other members of the Syrian community.

### Continued access of economic and health services

The expressive arts program helped Miriam navigate services with confidence and a clear understanding of her rights. She accessed financial resources to support her daughter, reducing financial guilt, and gained knowledge of services addressing both her mental health and chronic physical health needs. The program also supported her in overcoming stigma related to mental health.

### Movement being used as a coping technique

Miriam has incorporated mindful stretches and breathing exercises into her daily routine to reduce stress and anxiety. Taught by the art therapist, these practices have effectively supported improvements in both her mental and physical health.

**“I am no longer hiding in the shadows of my past. Now I have the knowledge and skills I need to live a good life. I can imagine a new future and dream again.”**