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YWCA's Breakthrough Program Helps Women Heal Through the Transformative Power of Art

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Emily Hostland is a Program Worker with YWCA Breakthrough program, [Healing Through The Arts](#). The program offers groups for women healing from the effects of abuse and violence. Breakthrough was established after it was identified that women living with the effects of violence and abuse were at risk of poverty, isolation and repeating the cycle of abuse. Through the program, women can discover ways to heal from trauma, experience empowerment, find their self-worth, build confidence and restore safety through creating art in a safe, non-judgmental and supportive community environment.

“We work with women who have experienced any form of violence, at any time in their life,” explains Hostland. “We use the arts, mindfulness and body-based awareness practices to support women in their healing.”

We chatted with Hostland this week to find out more.

SDTC: What is your role within this program?

EH: I am a Program Worker for the Breakthrough program. I co-facilitate three out of the four groups, as well as connect with women over the phone who are interested in our program. I am trained as an Expressive Arts Therapist, and I have worked in different capacities in responding to trauma, mental health and social justice in our communities. All of our program workers have been trained in art therapy. We aim to work from a trauma-informed, anti-oppressive, participant-centered, and resource-based approach to best support and continually learn from the women we work with.

What is one moment that really stands out to you?

We have many women who come to us saying they feel unsafe, they don't have self-worth and they struggle with hope. Sometimes dealing with the effects of violence can be an overwhelming and constant task. It can make leaving the house or doing daily activities extremely challenging. I am amazed by how many women overcome these challenges and reach out and join our program.

At the beginning of the program, some women share that they are not able to talk in front of the group or that they don't know how to make art or they feel triggered so they can't connect to their body. I get to witness transformations. I see how women surprise themselves—they discover their creativity, use their voice, create meaningful images, share their wisdom and even dance. I witness women discover that they have the power to heal themselves. These realizations bring self-worth, hope and resiliency. They are deepened by being witnessed and being in a community. The beauty and power that comes from women connecting, witnessing and supporting each other is profound. So each day stands out to me. I am amazed by the women I get to meet. I can see their strength so clearly and I am so excited when they realize their power.

Why does art have such a transformative power when it comes to working through trauma?

And that's just it: art is transformation, transforming materials and your body to create something new. As you shape and create, you witness and experience its transformation and therefore it's transforming you too.

Even creating something that you don't like brings an opportunity to sit with things in your life that you don't like. The arts allow you to access those teachings on an experiential level. By confronting what comes up in the art, you can learn about yourself and how to heal yourself. Art helps people get in touch with those healing practices.

One of the effects of trauma is that people continue to feel unsafe in their lives. Their bodies have learned to be hyper vigilant in protecting themselves, which is critical when they are experiencing violence. But bodies sometimes continue to make that same assessment, that they are unsafe, even when they are safe. The good thing is people can retrain their brains to come back to a present moment and assess their safety. If they are in fact safe, they can relax instead of going into fight, flight or freeze mode.

The arts support that process in reconnecting to the body, to that present moment, in making an assessment about that moment rather than a past experience to determine whether they are safe and whether it is okay to relax. As people continue to practice, their brain actually rewires itself so they don't go into fight, flight or freeze mode as often. Women in our groups are able to learn this on an experiential level and practice this process through the arts. It is a way they learn to find safety in their bodies, connect to the present and find enjoyment in creating art.

And that's another thing: enjoyment. Art can bring all the emotions to healing, not just anger and sadness, but also joy and laughter. The power of creating art and singing and dancing is transformative because it reconnects us to enjoyment and meaning in our lives.

What do you want us to know about this program?

I want you to know about the power and courage of the women who come to our program. I want you to be inspired by them. I want you to be inspired to use your voice in speaking out against violence against women. We all have a role to play in creating safe and healthy communities.

I am saddened by how many phone calls we receive, how many women have experienced violence, and how many women have not been believed and supported. I want us to become better at understanding how trauma and violence impacts people. Sometimes these women are described as struggling. And it is true but not because of their lack of capacities. I see these women as strong warriors who are reaching out for support despite all the challenges they face, despite the lack of free services available to them. Trauma is not only experienced because of the act of violence but also from not being heard and supported after these traumatic experiences.

If we want to help, is there any way we can get involved?

I want people to help by speaking out against violence against women. If you know someone who may be experiencing violence, listen to them, don't judge them and ask how you can support them. I want you to value and advocate for policies and programs that support women who experience violence. Go to the [YWCA Toronto](#) and [YWCA Canada](#) websites for more information on how you can take action.

There are four breakthrough groups per week (three in central Toronto and one in Scarborough) during the day from Monday to Thursday, three times per year (fall, winter and spring). The program is free and childcare is available. Anyone interested in joining the program can give them a call at 416-487-7151.

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