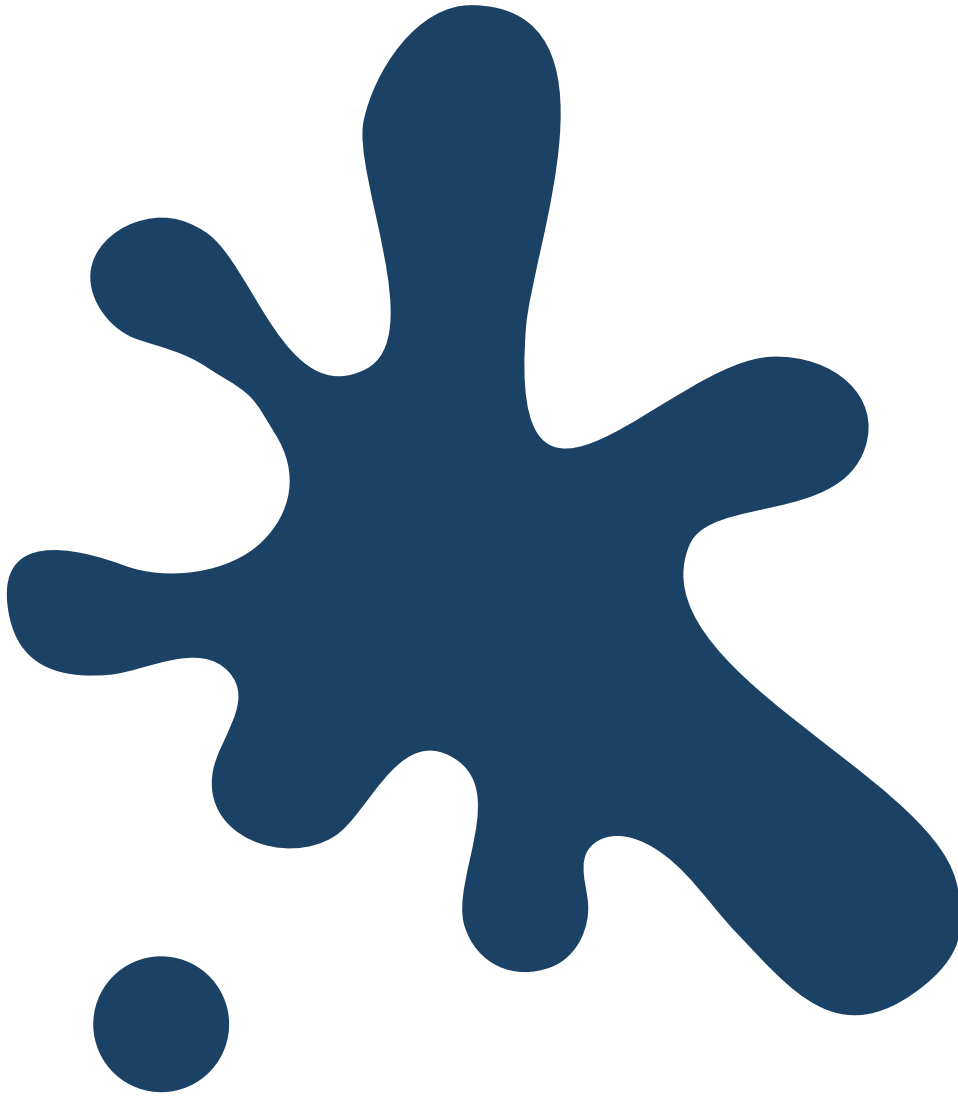




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Jordan River Foundation



From Silent Suffering to Inner Strength: When Art Replaces Pain with A Purpose!

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Introduction

The Expressive Art Program under Jordan River Foundation's Child Safety Program (CSP) provides a safe and supportive space for women and girls affected by gender-based violence (GBV) to begin healing and rebuilding their lives. Through creative expression, participants are able to process trauma, reduce emotional stress, and strengthen their sense of identity and self-worth. The program also builds practical skills, such as setting personal boundaries, managing stress, and increasing self-confidence. It offers not only emotional support, but also tools for long-term resilience and personal growth.

This report presents the impact of the program through the **Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology**, a qualitative approach led by the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) team. The MSC method captures real stories of transformation from participants, and these personal stories reflect how art has helped women cope with difficult experiences, improve emotional regulation, and develop healthier ways of interacting with others.

The stories featured in this report were collected from **20 women** who took part in expressive art sessions at the Queen Rania Family and Children Center (QR FCC), spanning different projects and years of implementation between 2019 and 2025. Their experiences show how expressive art can contribute to improved mental health, stronger relationships, and a renewed sense of hope. The MSC approach brings these changes to light in the participants' own words, offering valuable insights into the lasting impact of the program.

This report presents the findings of the MSC workshop, demonstrating how expressive art, when combined with participatory evaluation, can serve as both a healing process and a powerful tool for capturing impact.

Methodology

This report adopted a qualitative method to assess the program's sustainability and impact. The evaluation aimed to extract lessons learned and formulate actionable recommendations to enhance project planning and implementation while addressing any concerns or interests that could affect the quality of the prevention service.

Data Collection Tools: Qualitative Data Collection: MSC Technique

The MSC approach was selected for its participatory nature and its ability to capture meaningful personal transformations directly from participants. By allowing women to share their stories in their own way and on their own terms, the method created a safe and supportive environment for self-expression, while also giving them ownership of their experiences. This approach not only focused on verbal storytelling but also considered body language as an indicator of emotional release and comfort, particularly as participants shared their stories in front of groups.

The core goal of the MSC workshop is to establish a supportive environment where participants can openly express their emotions and experiences. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of the staff, this will be achieved, enabling each participant to fully embrace their journey of change.

The implementation of the MSC included the following steps:

Step 1: Identifying Domains of Change

Step 2: Selecting Participants

Step 3: Story Collection and Group Sharing

Step 4: Analysis and Classification

Step 1: Identifying Domains of Change

The main domains of change were identified based on insights gathered from facilitators who observed participants throughout the art therapy sessions. These domains serve as qualitative indicators for tracking the impact of the MSC stories. Participants in the art therapy sessions were often survivors of violence, whether inflicted by family members or the broader community, experiencing abuse in both psychological and physical forms, frequently from a young age. The domains and sub-domains of change observed were highly interconnected, with progress in one area naturally contributing to change in another. Regardless of the nature of violence, its impacts are manifested primarily through emotional and behavioral consequences. Facilitators reported that emotional and behavioral changes often emerged simultaneously and were interlinked. Emotional expressions often unlocked behavioral shifts, and vice versa. For the MSC analysis, changes were classified under two main domains with relevant sub-domains, as outlined below:

Emotional (Psychological) Development: This domain includes internal transformations in how participants understand, process, and express their emotions, as well as their evolving self-perception. Sub-domains are:

- **Increasing self-confidence:** Participants reported that the art-making process allowed for emotional release, which led to increased self-confidence. By expressing themselves creatively, they began to value themselves more and gain a stronger sense of self-worth.
- **Overcoming fear and trauma:** Participants were able to confront and overcome past fears and emotional trauma.

Behavioral Development This domain reflects outward changes in how participants interact with others, manage responsibilities, and engage in daily life. Sub-domains are:

- **Improving Relationships:** Participants experienced strengthened family bonds and improved dynamics. Participants enhanced communication, particularly with children, spouses, and the community.
- **Practicing Self-Care:** Participants learned to prioritize their well-being and practice self-care.
- **Supporting Others:** Participants recognized the value of offering emotional and practical support to peers; this support created safe spaces where individuals felt understood and less isolated.
- **Emotional Regulation:** Participants developed healthier ways to respond to stress and interpersonal conflict, using communication and coping skills rather than avoidance or aggression.

Step 2: Selecting Participants

Participants in the MSC process were nominated based on facilitators and trainers' observations during the expressive art sessions. Women who have exhibited notable emotional or behavioral changes were identified as potential MSC storytellers. From this nominated group, women were invited to participate and were asked for their informed consent to share their stories. Consent is essential to ensure that participants feel safe, respected, and in control of their narratives. This selective and ethical approach aims to gain deeper insights into the program's personal and transformative impact, as seen through the lens of those most affected.

Step 3: Story Collection and Group Sharing

The MEL team introduced the concept of MSC to the women, explaining the key questions their stories need to address:

- How did you find out about the training, and what motivated you to join?
- What immediate changes did you experience during the training?
- What was the final impact on you after completing the activity?

The 20 participants were grouped at tables, each participant shared her story within the group, which was then written down exactly as told in their own words. After sharing, each group voted on the most significant story, resulting in 4 stories being selected. A second round of voting was held among the stories to determine the most significant overall, which is highlighted as the key story of change from the expressive art activity.

Step 4: Analysis and Classification

The strongest stories were analyzed and classified according to the domains of change, emotional, and behavioral development. This structured and participatory process ensured that the MSC approach captured authentic stories of change, providing a clear understanding of the program's impact and areas for further development.

Findings and Analysis

This section presents an in-depth examination of the data collected during the evaluation, offering insights into the outcomes and effectiveness of the Art activities.

A total of 20 stories were analyzed, focusing on two primary areas of change: Emotional (psychological) and Behavioral development. Many stories touched on multiple domains, highlighting the program's wide-reaching impact.

The Expressive Art Program enabled women to experience emotional healing, improve interpersonal relationships, and develop healthier behaviors, leading to personal growth and stronger family dynamics.

Main Domain of Change	Sub-domain
Emotional (Psychological) Change	Increasing self-confidence: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Women reported that the art-making process allowed for emotional release, which led to increased self-confidence.- By expressing themselves creatively, they began to value themselves more and gain a stronger sense of self-worth.
	Overcoming fear and trauma: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Women were able to confront and overcome past fears and emotional trauma.
Behavioral Change	Improving relationships: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Women experienced strengthened family bonds and improved dynamics.- Women enhanced communication, particularly with children, spouses, and the community.
	Practicing self-care: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Women learned to prioritize their well-being and practice self-care.

Each story could be subjected to more than one domain of change:

All MSC participants were women who experienced various personal and social challenges that affected their emotional well-being and family dynamics. Some of them were also survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). Through the program, they were able to develop healthier coping strategies, improve communication, and enhance their self-awareness and relationships. The domains and sub-domains of change identified through the process were interconnected, each leading naturally to the next. Regardless of the type of violence experienced, its effects were a combination of emotional and behavioral consequences.

The table below breaks down each story into specific sub-domains of emotional and behavioral change, providing direct quotes that highlight the transformation experienced by the participants:

Change	Sub- Domain of Change	Number of Stories	Percentage out of the total stories
Emotional	1. Increasing self-confidence	12	60%
	2. Overcoming fear and trauma	12	60%
Behavioral	1. Improving relationships	18	90%
	2. Practicing self-care	16	80%

Among all the stories shared, the women **chose Azezia's story and Amal's story* as the most significant.** **Azezia's** journey captured the deepest transformation, as she moved from years of silent suffering and self-blame to discovering her inner strength and voice. Married at fourteen, burdened with blame for her children's struggles, and silenced by tradition, Azezia carried guilt and pain for most of her life. Through art therapy, she began to express her emotions, set boundaries, and reject the belief that she had failed as a mother. **Amal**, a 38-year-old widow and mother of four, discovered through art therapy that true strength does not come from constant sacrifice to please others, but from setting boundaries, protecting her well-being, and creating a healthier home for her children. Her transformation brought lasting changes not only for herself but also for her family, who began practicing new habits of mindfulness, communication, and togetherness.

* stories #1 and #11

Matrix of Changes

Story #	Emotional Change		Behavioral Change		Key Quote
	Increasing self-confidence	Overcoming fear and trauma	Improving relationships	Practicing self-care	
1	✓	✓	✓	✓	“There is no such thing as a failing mother, every mother does what she can.” ... “I thought life was black and white, but I discovered life is like the four seasons.”
2	✓		✓	✓	“I lost Eman, but through the sessions I found her again.”
3			✓	✓	“For the first time, my children said: Mom, how did you do all this alone? You really work so hard.”
4		✓	✓	✓	“The paper and the pen let me express myself more than words ever could.” ... “I felt like I was experiencing a fresh morning in Syria at the center.”
5			✓	✓	“I found myself.” ... “I learned how to say no.”
6	✓	✓	✓	✓	“I am not living, but I want to start living.” ... “I realized I deserve space, peace, and dignity.”
7	✓		✓		“No is not just a word, it is a right.” ... “For the first time, I was at peace with myself.”
8		✓	✓	✓	“I started saying no... and without guilt.” ... “This hour is mine, just for me.”
9			✓	✓	“I used to think a mother must sacrifice everything, but now I know if I am not well, I cannot be well for my children.”
10				✓	“Today I see myself as a completely different person, changed 180 degrees.”

Story #	Emotional Change		Behavioral Change		Key Quote
	Increasing self-confidence	Overcoming fear and trauma	Improving relationships	Practicing self-care	
11	✓	✓	✓		“Pleasing people is an unattainable goal... what matters is my comfort, my health, and my children.”
12			✓	✓	“The session was like a lamp lighting up a dark room.”
13	✓	✓	✓	✓	“The first feeling I had was like I was asleep and finally woke up.”
14	✓	✓	✓	✓	“The training taught me to cleanse my heart... I started living today with gratitude to God.”
15	✓		✓		“The storage room exercise taught me that anything inside me I don’t want, I must let out.”
16	✓	✓	✓	✓	“Patience and determination carry us forward.”
17	✓	✓			“The name I once thought was a burden is now my greatest inheritance.”
18	✓	✓	✓	✓	“Art therapy gave me back my voice after years of silence.”
19		✓	✓	✓	“Art therapy was, first of all, for me, for myself.”
20	✓	✓	✓	✓	“ I feel I have transformed 180 degrees, from a timid, silent girl to a woman who knows her worth, loves herself, and lives on her own terms.”

60% reported increased self-confidence

60% overcame fear or processed trauma

90% improved family and friends relationships

80% reported practicing self-care

The next pages include the 20 Stories in participants’ words...

Story #1:

From Silent Suffering to Inner Strength!

My name is Aziza, I am forty-seven years old, and my participation in the art therapy program has been a turning point in my life. The sessions were not just about painting or drawing they became a safe space that helped me rediscover my voice and rebuild my sense of self-worth.

At first, I joined out of curiosity and encouragement from my neighbors, never imagining how much it would change me. I had been living in isolation, burdened by guilt and constant blame from my family for everything that went wrong with my children. But through the sessions, I found a place where I could speak freely, and finally feel heard.

With each round of participation, the sessions became a source of psychological and social support. When my children went missing, the group surrounded me with empathy and prayers, reminding me that I was not alone. When they were found safe, I realized these women had become my true community. I came to the session and, with tears in my eyes, asked the facilitator and the other women to pray for my children, and they all supported me deeply.

Looking back, I realize how much I changed over these sessions. Before, I struggled to accept the reality we were living: the pain of displacement, the trauma of war, and the suffering of my children. One of my sons had sustained a severe injury.

For years, we traveled from country to country seeking treatment, undergoing surgeries that always failed. Worse, I was surrounded by people who blamed me.

They said I had failed as a mother, that my choices had caused my son's injury, my children's departure. And I believed them for a long time. I was married at the age of fourteen. I never learned to express myself.

I was expected to stay silent, to endure. But through art therapy, I began to reconnect with my emotions. I began to speak. I learned how to say no to people, to pressure, to guilt. I also realized that there is no such thing as a failing mother, and every mother does what she can.

I no longer believe I am the cause of everything that went wrong. I've learned to accept that my son's injury was not my fault, and even if he does lose his leg one day, I will still love him and stand by him. I've also made peace with the idea that my children may one day marry and leave me, but that doesn't mean they'll stop loving me. The bond we share will remain.

Today, I am a different person. I've learned to express my emotions, to say "no" to pressure and guilt, and to approach pain with awareness and strength. I no longer see myself as a failing mother but as a resilient woman doing her best. I've learned to accept life as it is, and to find peace within myself.

The program helped me move from anger and self-blame to acceptance and inner peace. I now see that life isn't simply black or white it's like the four seasons, each one necessary for the other to exist.

Story #2: Finding Myself Again!

My name is Eman, and my journey began when a neighbor told me about a nearby center offering art therapy sessions. She attended regularly and often spoke about how valuable the experience was for her. I had never heard of such programs before, let alone imagine myself taking part in one. But her words stirred something inside me. There was a quiet longing I hadn't acknowledged until that moment, and I found myself thinking: "Why not? Maybe this could be a way to change how I feel."

At the time, I had been living in emotional isolation. I had withdrawn from people, closed myself off inside my home, and fell into a repetitive, lifeless routine. Every day felt the same, and my emotional state was deteriorating. I felt suffocated, trapped in a life that offered no space for me to breathe. I needed something different, a space to simply exist as myself. That's when I decided to take the first step and enroll in the training.

From the very beginning, I felt a shift. I had always been quick-tempered and reactive, but through the sessions, I began responding to situations with more calm and balance. My emotional blowups decreased, and this change began to ripple into my home. My relationships with my husband and children softened. I could feel the difference in the energy around me, and the biggest transformation was within me.

Before the training, I didn't know who I was anymore. I often said, "I lost Eman." But through the sessions, I began to realize that Eman hadn't been lost; she had simply been buried under years of responsibilities and silence. She deserved time. She deserved space. I even started treating myself like a friend. I would say, jokingly, "I took myself out to a restaurant today," and I meant it. I began dedicating time each week just for me: watching sports videos, planning to exercise, and doing things I would have never considered before. Giving myself time during the day once felt impossible. Now, it feels necessary.

For years, I had lived with the mindset that my role in life was limited to being a wife, a mother, and a caregiver. Even in the smallest things, I had neglected myself. When my children brought home something they enjoyed, sweets or snacks, they never thought to save me a piece. That wasn't their fault. I had always said, "You eat first, and if something's left, give it to me." I even felt guilty eating what they left behind.

After the training, that changed. I began buying myself small treats and tucking them away in my closet. I would enjoy them quietly, without guilt. I realized I had the right to experience joy, just like everyone else in my family.

The transformation extended beyond me. My children started to respond to the support and encouragement I was giving them. They became more independent, solving their own problems without relying on me for every answer. I introduced a new way of communicating at home, what I called assertive kindness. I told them, "I matter, and others matter too." I wanted them to understand that respecting yourself doesn't mean disregarding others, it means honoring everyone, including yourself.

One day, one of my sons bought a new pair of shoes. His brother wanted to wear them, but he refused. Instead of treating it as a conflict, I used the moment to teach: "Real love is built on respect. We share, but we also honor boundaries."

Over time, I started seeing more kindness and cooperation between my children. Then one day, they surprised me: "We want to join the center too," they said. "We want to refresh our minds and learn how to deal with people better."

That moment was everything!

Story #3:

The Garden of My Peace!

My name is Fatima, and my journey with the center began through my daughter, who had previously taken part in one of its activities. Through her, I met Ms. Khawla, who told me about the art therapy training program. The idea immediately appealed to me. Deep inside, I felt a strong desire to sign up, not only to learn something new but also to change the cycle of my life, which had been revolving endlessly around household chores: washing, cleaning, and countless other duties. I was tired of being trapped in this routine. I longed for time to breathe, for myself, and for the chance to learn from others.

From the very first sessions, I felt something shift. I had always been tense and nervous, carrying the constant weight of responsibilities on my shoulders and forgetting myself in the process. But slowly, I began to feel the pressure ease. I learned how to release the tension I had been holding inside and how to control my reactions instead of letting anger take over.

One of the most important changes I made was to distribute household tasks among my children instead of carrying the entire burden alone. For the first time, I saw how this change affected our home. My youngest daughter, who used to obey every request from her siblings without hesitation, began to speak up for herself with confidence: "Do it yourselves; don't you have hands?" I remember one day, as we were all cleaning together, she turned to me and said in amazement, "Mom, how did you do all this alone? You really work so hard." On another occasion, before her birthday, she told her father, "Let's order food. We don't want to tire Mom by making her cook herself." These small moments filled me with relief and gratitude. I finally felt seen.

Before the training, I used to bottle up my emotions until they exploded. My stress often turned into shouting, and at times, I even hit my children. This hurt them deeply, pushing them away from me and into their phones, just to escape the tension at home.

After the training, everything started to change. I practiced breathing exercises and meditation, replacing my anger with creativity. I began holding small sessions with my children where we drew, shared stories, and talked openly about our feelings. These simple moments filled our home with warmth and calm.

Even my relationship with my husband grew stronger. I learned how to express myself clearly and connect with him in a closer way. I also began dedicating time to myself and my daughters, going on outings, walking together, or spending time at the pool. These moments became precious memories we now carry together.

I also created a personal refuge in our garden. I started spending time there, arranging and decorating it, practicing my breathing exercises, and simply enjoying the peace it gave me. It became my sanctuary, a space just for me, where I could relieve stress and recharge.

Looking back, I see how much my life has changed. I learned to care for myself, manage my emotions, and build stronger bonds with my family. I no longer feel invisible in my own home; I feel present, calm, and loved.

Through art therapy, I discovered that caring for myself does not take away from caring for others. On the contrary, it has given me the strength to nurture them even more. My story is proof that small changes, sharing responsibilities, practicing mindfulness, and allowing ourselves joy can ripple outward, transforming not only our own lives but also the lives of those we love.

Story #4:

The Paper and the Pen!

My name is Fidaa, and I am forty-eight years old. I first learned about the center through social media. What motivated me to join the training was my desire to leave the house and escape from the repetitive daily routine. At first, I was hesitant. I thought it would consume too much of my time, leaving my husband unhappy that I wasn't cooking or taking care of the house. I also didn't understand the point of art therapy. I wondered: What's the use of painting? How could it possibly help me? And deep inside, I worried people might judge me for simply attending.

Before the training, I had been struggling with depression. At times, I felt such heaviness that I could barely breathe. I would push my children away when they tried to talk to me. I even told my husband more than once that I wanted a divorce, that I didn't want him or the children anymore. My home felt filled with irritability, tension, and silence.

But when I began attending the sessions, something changed. The paper and the pen gave me a new voice. They allowed me to express myself in ways words never could. Hearing the stories of other participants made my own struggles feel lighter, and I found myself replacing irritability with laughter. Each session felt like a fresh morning in Syria, warm, hopeful, and alive.

Slowly, I began to breathe again. I practiced the "smelling the rose" exercise and breathing techniques that eased my chest and calmed my mind. Even when I came to the sessions tired from insomnia, I felt a wave of relief just by being there. The happiness I found kept me coming back, eager to release what weighed me down.

The change inside me spread to my family. My children once said, "Mom, your anger has made us hate the idea of marriage." But now, they see me laughing, calmer, and kinder. They gather around me for coffee, and we share stories, laughter, and meaningful conversations. Even my relationship with my husband improved. I learned how to communicate, share moments he enjoys, and connect with him again. Truly, a mother's change affects the whole household.

Looking back, this training gave me more than I ever expected. It helped me overcome depression, manage irritability, and create harmony at home. Through art and breathing, I learned to release what was inside me and rediscovered joy. Today, I feel not only alive but present, breathing again, and living again.

Story #5:

Breathing Again...

My name is Montaha, and I am forty years old. My journey with training began when my neighbor, who had previously experienced art therapy, encouraged me to join. She knew how short-tempered I was and how my irritability had worsened over time with the growing pressures of life, managing the household, caring for my children, and supporting my husband. She kept encouraging me gently but persistently, until I finally agreed.

What pushed me most was the change I saw in her after her training; she had become more self-aware and kinder to herself in a way I had never seen before. I wanted that, too. I longed for change, for freedom from frustration, tension, and emotional extremes.

From the very first moments of the training, I felt its impact. I realized that many of the things that had made me angry or anxious were not worth the energy I spent on them. My temper had stolen so many beautiful moments from my life. Through the sessions, I began to understand my emotions and learned how to calm myself without force. I also learned how to better relate to my children and husband. Communication with my husband used to be nearly impossible, we were both short-tempered and always clashing. But with the exercises I practiced, things changed. I began to listen more, to understand their problems with calmness and awareness, instead of reacting with anger.

Another transformation was in how I saw myself. Before the training, I constantly neglected myself. I never dared to say “no” to anyone and always placed myself last, after the children, my husband, their studies, their meals, the house.

I had forgotten my own importance. But through the training, I learned to value myself again. I began to confidently say “no” when needed, and more importantly, I began to say “yes” to myself. I found myself again. The training gave me a new outlook on life, one that made me eager and excited to attend each session.

Among the practices that helped me most were the breathing exercises and the “smelling the rose” exercise. These simple yet powerful techniques became my tools for releasing stress, calming my mind, and nurturing peace within.

Looking back, I see that the training did more than just help me manage my temper, it changed the way I live. I learned to value myself, to meet my family and challenges with calmness, and to find joy in the small moments rather than letting stress consume me. I realized that true change begins from within, and that by caring for myself, I am able to care for others better.

Today, I feel more balanced, more aware, and more at peace than ever before. This journey reminded me that it is never too late to find yourself, to grow, and to embrace life with a lighter heart.

Story #6:

Learning to Breathe, Learning to Live!

My name is Sanaa, and I am from Syria. I got married and came to Jordan, but the truth is, my story began long before that—back when I was still in Syria. My mother became very ill, and due to a medical error, she was left paralyzed. At that time, I was a university student, but I dropped out to stay home, care for her, and support my siblings, since I was the eldest. I felt the entire weight of the family had fallen on my shoulders.

I carried constant guilt, believing that because my siblings were young, I had to act as their second mother. Even when I got married, I didn't feel joy. On the contrary, I felt like I was betraying my responsibility. My emotions were so complicated that I even blamed my husband in my heart, thinking I had abandoned my family to marry him. Guilt became the companion of my life.

Not long after my marriage, the war broke out. I fled to Jordan, while my family remained in Syria. I lived in safety, but my heart was imprisoned. Every day I was consumed by guilt, feeling that I had abandoned them when they needed me most.

Then I heard about the art therapy training. It was the first time I felt that something could be just for me. My daughter's teacher told me about a session, and I decided to attend. I was a stranger in this country, I had no friends, no work, no community. But I felt maybe this would be a place where I could begin to be myself.

From the very first session, my wounds opened. I cried, I shared, I drew, and I breathed. Truly, I had forgotten what it felt like to breathe with ease. Breathing used to hurt me, giving me headaches, but now I began taking deep breaths and feeling alive again.

I had always carried guilt, blaming myself for everything. When my mother passed away, I thought I would drown in regret. I cried day and night. But during that time, the training helped me express myself and sort through my emotions. I realized not everything was my fault. I began to set boundaries. Even with my husband, I learned to say no. I allowed myself time of my own, made my own choices, and even bought something for myself without needing to justify it.

My daughters also began to learn from me. Before, they were quiet, unable to voice their opinions. Now, they express themselves. They can say "I don't want this" and know they have space to release what they feel.

Even my relationship with my neighbors changed. I began choosing who I allowed into my life and distanced myself from negative people, even if it meant losing relationships. I started telling myself: I deserve to rest. I gave myself time for tea, for walks, for simply living.

The training taught me simple things, but they changed me from the inside. I learned to breathe, to speak, to express myself, and to know that I am not alone. I am a human being, and I deserve space, peace, and dignity.

Now, five years later, I still remember the sessions every time I feel pressure. I return to the breathing, to the drawing, and to the sentence I told myself the first time I entered: "I'm not living, but I want to start living."

Story #7:

Peace in Saying No!

My name is Manal. The pressures in my life built up just before the last holidays. My son's wedding was approaching, and at the same time, my daughter had important exams. Everything came at once. I felt crushed, physically and emotionally.

On top of that, my daughter's engagement was to someone outside the country, and people around me began talking: "How could you agree to that? Don't you have anyone here?" Criticism came from everywhere, relatives, acquaintances, even people I loved. I felt suffocated.

Then, by chance, a friend from the neighborhood told me about the sessions. At that moment, I felt it was exactly what I needed. I longed to breathe, to rest, to release everything I was carrying inside.

Before, I never knew how to say no. Even when I was overwhelmed, tired, or hurt, I stayed silent and went along. But after the sessions, I began to speak. I began to say no, not as rejection, but as a right.

One moment stands out: my sister-in-law said something that upset me. For the first time, I looked at her and said, "No." Calmly, but firmly. When I went home, I felt relieved. Even if she wasn't happy, I was. For the first time, I was at peace with myself.

I wish my daughter could have joined the sessions too. She was under so much pressure, but her personality makes it hard for her to share openly. Still, when I showed her the drawing I had made, I told her: "See what we created? I wish you had been there with me." I could see that she wanted to be part of it, and I hope next time she will.

One of the most powerful changes for me was the day I cooked a meal I loved, for myself. Before, I only ever cooked what everyone else wanted, never thinking of my own tastes. But this time, I chose my own flavors, my own dish, my own joy. It felt like a victory.

The sessions were not just about drawing. They were a place to breathe, to confront, to rest, and to change. I learned that my time belongs to me, that saying no does not reduce my love for others—on the contrary, it protects me and proves that I have finally begun to love myself.

Story #8: A Cup of Coffee.. Just for Me!

My name is Rawaa.

I am someone who grows attached easily, who loves deeply. I was very close to my sister, she was truly my soulmate. We shared everything: calls, outings, late-night conversations. Even when we weren't together, we spoke before going to bed. Then suddenly, she moved to another country. She was there, and I was here.

What hurt me even more was my friendship with someone I trusted completely for ten years. She was in every part of my life, we laughed, shared secrets, and spent endless hours together. I never doubted her. But one day I discovered she had been speaking badly about me behind my back, even turning people away from me. At first, I couldn't believe it. But when incidents piled up, the truth broke me. It felt like the ground had collapsed under my feet. For months I couldn't sleep, asking myself: "How could she? After ten years? Why?"

The pain grew sharper when I learned she was planning to travel without even telling me. I cried endlessly, confused and lost, with nowhere to release the heaviness inside me. I felt like a black cloud had settled in my chest.

I already knew the center, since I had volunteered there for years. But when I joined the art therapy sessions, something shifted. It felt different. For the first time, I could breathe again, open up, and pour out the weight I had been carrying.

I've always been the one to help others, even sharing my experiences on social media so people could benefit. But I rarely found someone to truly listen to me. In those sessions, I felt heard. It was like being held in a genuine embrace.

Losing a ten-year friendship in a single moment left me shattered. She left without even saying goodbye. I pretended I had forgotten, but I hadn't. Her words kept replaying in my head. I kept blaming myself: "Maybe I was the problem. Maybe I wasn't enough."

But through the sessions, I began to heal. I discovered that I was not alone. When I drew, when I breathed, when I spoke, I felt myself coming back.

I began setting boundaries with people. If someone said something I didn't like, I responded politely, changed the subject, and refused to be drawn into negativity. My daughter once noticed and asked, "Mama, how did you change the conversation like that?" I told her, "Because I don't want to argue. It's not worth it." She laughed and understood.

Most importantly, I learned to give myself time. If I don't carve out time for myself, no one will. I now have my coffee hour, my sacred time. Even if the world feels chaotic, that hour belongs to me.

Today, I still carry pain, but I know how to live with it. I know how to say no, how to say I need time for myself, without guilt. I've learned that people sometimes drift away, sometimes hurt us, but the most important thing is staying close to myself.

Before, I would run and exhaust myself helping everyone, even at the cost of my own well-being. Now, I have an hour just for me—my coffee, my quiet, my prayers, my imagination. I say to myself: "This hour is mine, no one else's." And now, I choose who to let into my life, and who to walk away from. I carry a new strength—not because I no longer feel pain, but because I've learned how to protect myself.

Story #9:

Remembering Myself, Finding My Worth!

My name is Salwa, and I first heard about art therapy training from one of my neighbors. She said to me: “Why don’t you register? They say there’s this new activity called art therapy.” Honestly, I didn’t understand what it was. I thought it was just some hobby. But I told myself, “Let me try, maybe I’ll find something that helps me.”

At that time, I was in a very difficult emotional state. There was constant pressure at home; problems, responsibilities that never seemed to end. I felt suffocated, with no one to confide in, no space of my own. So, I decided to go to the center. I didn’t expect much, but deep down, I knew I needed to talk.

From the very first session, something inside me opened. I felt the space was safe, filled with respect and people who truly listened without judgment. For the first time, I was able to talk about things I had never shared even with my family. If a family member had been in that room, I would have stayed silent. But there, I spoke, with tears in my eyes, and I felt relieved.

For years, I had carried my burdens alone. But after just a few sessions, I began to feel a change. I started to feel more confident that I could choose, that I could say no.

Can you imagine? For years, all I ever said was “yes, yes, I’ll do it,” even when I was sick or exhausted. Every responsibility, mine and others’, fell on my shoulders. But suddenly, I found myself saying: “No, that’s enough.”

My husband noticed. One day, he asked me to do something at a moment when I was too tired, and I told him honestly: “I can’t right now”. At first, it caused tension, but later he began to respect my words more. Clear boundaries started to form.

Even my relatives noticed the change. One woman who always expected me to be available when she calls was surprised when I told her, “I’m busy,” or “I don’t have time.” She stopped calling as much, but I felt lighter. I was no longer sacrificing myself just to please others.

Something else beautiful happened with my youngest daughter. She saw me drawing at home as a way to relax, so she picked up a pen and began drawing next to me. Before, she used to stay shut in her room, withdrawn. Now we have a little corner where we sit and draw together almost every day. We talk, we laugh, and we’ve grown closer again.

The small practices I learned made such a big difference, like the breathing exercises. Every time I do them, I feel relief. I even practice with my neighbor sometimes, reminding each other to breathe.

And after all these years, I finally cooked a meal just for me, not for my husband, not for my children, but for myself. My kids were surprised: “Mom, what are you doing?” I laughed and told them: “This one’s mine!”

Before, I never believed I had the right to say no. I never thought my body deserved rest. I believed a mother had to sacrifice everything. But now, I know that if I am not feeling well, I cannot do well for my children either.

Nearly a year after the training, my behaviors have changed completely. I no longer carry everything alone. If something can wait, I let it wait. If something is too heavy, I say so. I’ve learned that I can feel both emotionally and physically at peace.

Art therapy didn’t just make me better, it made me live again. It helped me remember the Salwa I had buried inside, the one I had forgotten long ago. And now she’s back, saying: “I am here, and I deserve this.”

Story #10:

Stronger With Every Breath

My name is Iman, and I first heard about art therapy training from my neighbor. It was the first time in my life that I had ever heard of something like this. I decided to go and join, and from the very first session, I felt a strange comfort, as if I had finally found a place that belonged to me, a place where I could truly breathe.

Before the training, I didn't even know how to breathe properly. Whenever I tried to take a deep breath, my chest would hurt, my head would ache, and I would feel suffocated. But little by little, through the exercises, my breathing became easier. I began to breathe deeply without pain, and for the first time, I felt relief.

My journey with the training wasn't easy. My husband resisted the idea of me going out, of taking time for myself. He wasn't used to seeing me step away from the house. But when he began to notice the changes in me, when I started saying "no", he was surprised, even confused. Yet he also saw that I had become stronger.

All my life, I had cared for everyone else and forgotten myself. If someone asked for something, I gave it, even if it was the last thing I had. I would sacrifice, borrow, or go without, just to meet others' needs. But now, things are different. I learned that I have the right to say "I can't" or "I'm not available." I began to make time for myself, for sitting quietly, for a cup of coffee, for rest.

It wasn't easy at first. Even my children were surprised. They asked, "Why is Mom buying things for herself?" But when they saw me more at ease, they also began to change. They started saying "no" when they needed to, expressing themselves, and even joining me in my moments of rest.

Not everyone in my family accepted the change. When I began to set boundaries, some people pulled away. Some were upset, others stopped speaking to me. But I felt peace inside. I no longer wanted to please others at the expense of myself.

Another beautiful part of the sessions was meeting new women. We began going out together, sharing our worries, supporting each other. Before, I didn't trust anyone; I was afraid of people. But here, I found supportive relationships, sisterhood, a real source of strength.

One of the most powerful changes was with my husband. Over time, he changed, too. He used to always question me: "Where are you going? Why are you leaving?" But now he understands that this time is mine. I no longer need to justify my need for space.

Today, I see myself as a completely different person, changed 180 degrees. I have discovered faith in myself, in my voice, in my boundaries. I say "I want" and "I don't want," and I have learned to be gentle with myself before trying to be gentle with everyone else.

Art therapy didn't just teach me how to draw. It taught me how to live, how to speak, and how to love myself.

Story #11:

Stronger for Myself, Stronger for My Children

I am Amal, 38 years old, the only parent to my children. I first heard about the program from one of the center's employees. At first, I wasn't interested. I had never liked drawing, and every time I tried, I told myself I was terrible at it. I would sometimes scribble a little at home with a pen, but I was convinced nothing I created would ever look good. When I heard about art therapy, I thought: What is that supposed to be? But when I attended the session, I realized that art therapy is not about the drawing itself; it's something much deeper.

The session helped me see how often we make mistakes in life just to please others, to follow customs and traditions, even when it comes at the expense of our health, our homes, or our children. Before the session, I was always afraid of upsetting people and went out of my way to please them. But afterwards, I began to say: No. Whoever is pleased will be pleased, and whoever is upset will be upset. What matters most is my health, my comfort, and my children.

I am a widow, both mother and father to my four children. My husband, may God have mercy on him, was arrested when my youngest daughter was still a baby in my arms; she never got to know her father. That period was the hardest of my life. They beat him in front of me and my children, threatening to arrest us all. We were displaced from our home and later returned, but he remained detained, and I knew nothing about him. My youngest daughter became very sick, and I had no resources to take her to the doctor or hospital. Despite everything, I told myself: I must raise my children properly, and I will be both their mother and father.

I dedicated myself to their upbringing. My eldest daughter began memorizing the Quran at the age of three, and by seventh grade, she had memorized more than half, competing at national levels. My son also completed the Quran, and my second daughter memorized 25 parts in high school. Thank God, all of them are on the right path, and I am proud of them.

Still, people's words cut deeply. Even those close to me said things I can never forget, like: "Hopefully the girl is dead or her father is arrested." Before the sessions, I carried those words heavily in my heart, even though I pretended to be strong in front of my children. But the training taught me that "pleasing people is an unattainable goal." I learned instead to focus on my own comfort, my mental health, and my children's well-being.

My children also changed as I changed. Together, we began practicing breathing exercises, managing anger, and setting boundaries with others. At home, we created new family time away from phones, where we sit together, talk, and share the details of our lives. Sometimes these sessions last two or even three hours, and they are filled with joy.

When I attended the training for the first time, I realized how much of my life had been spent playing the role of the strong one, always hiding my emotions. But there, I felt like a child again, allowed to feel, to express, even just through drawing or scribbling. I didn't have to suppress myself anymore.

Looking back, this program transformed me. I became calmer and stronger, more at peace with myself. I no longer worry about whether people are pleased or upset. What matters is that my children and I are comfortable, safe, and loved. The change in me was both emotional and behavioral, and its impact on my life, and on my children's lives, has been profound.

Story #12:

A Lamp in the Dark

My name is Fatima, I am forty years old, and this is not my first time with art therapy. I first joined five years ago. I am originally Moroccan, married for fourteen years, and I came to live in Jordan. Before marriage, my life was completely different. In my country, I was studying at university and working. I had my own salary, my independence, and my freedom. But after marriage, I felt as if I had entered a completely different world: a new culture, unfamiliar customs and traditions, a tribal system, and I was alone, without my family beside me. I felt like a blank sheet of paper, ready for anyone to write on.

Over the years, problems began to pile up, and the pressures became unbearable. We lived in a family house, where guests came and went from morning until evening. I would welcome them, serve them, attend to everyone, until I no longer felt I existed. I had no value except as someone who served others. Everyone around me became used to this, and I lost myself in the process.

Then came the session, “like a lamp lighting up a dark room.”

I realized I was carrying responsibilities that were never mine to carry, except for raising my children. My husband and his family would come every day, and I felt it was my duty to serve them endlessly. But through the sessions, I learned to set boundaries and say: “This is not my role.”

From that moment, I made the first true decision of my life: I stopped receiving people without appointments. I reduced hospitality and began serving only coffee, not because I lacked resources, but because I was tired. My husband would come home from work and not find me or the children, because we were always tied up with guests. I knew things had to change.

After another session, we made a bigger decision: to move out of the family home and rent a place of our own. It was difficult and took time, but for me, it was a major achievement, a turning point.

The most important thing art therapy taught me is to stop problems at the beginning, before they grow and repeat for years. If there is a problem, I should not stay silent; I must find a solution from the start.

In the last session, I came to an even deeper realization: my main problem was not other people, it was within me. I had been allowing others to pressure me. Once I became aware of this, I grew stronger. I began to say “no” and defend my rights, even with my husband. I stopped staying silent and giving in.

Today, after all these experiences, I feel calmer, more aware, and stronger. I want to continue attending art therapy sessions because they made a real difference in my life and in my children’s lives.

But I also know there is still work to do. On the outside, I look strong, and everyone sees it. But inside, I still feel fear. My next goal is to free myself from that fear completely, and I am sure that with art therapy, I can overcome it.

Story #13:

Waking Up to Life Again

My name is Nahla, and I am forty-five years old. I first heard about the sessions through a friend. I decided to participate because I wanted to change myself. My life had become one endless routine, the same schedule every day, with no change or joy. I felt depressed and frustrated, stuck in a cycle where I didn't know what to do or how to act.

In Syria, during the war, we lived under siege. There were no outings, no social life. I avoided people because I had no energy to interact. My life was limited to cooking, housework, and caring for the children. There was nothing just for me, not even a single moment to breathe.

Back home, expressing emotions was considered "shameful." It was shameful to admit you were upset, shameful to say you were tired, even shameful to hug your daughter or say something kind to her. I suppressed everything inside me.

But when I attended the session here, the facilitator told me: "You need to express your emotions to your children. Hug them. Talk to them. Show them that you love them." At first, I thought: It's too late, my children are already grown. But then I realized age doesn't matter. I began speaking up when I was sad, when I loved them, or even when I was upset. I started focusing on expressing emotions, not only with my children, but also with my husband.

This small change made a huge difference. Before, my husband loved us but never showed it. I was the same. After the session, I realized life shouldn't pass without tenderness, a smile, a word, a hug. The results were clear and positive, thank God.

My children noticed right away. My daughter and son grew closer to me than ever before. My son even started coming to share details about his work and life. At first, they were surprised: "What's happening to you? Why are you different?"

Then they joked, "The center changed you. The Center changed you; now you love yourself, you love life, and you love us." And they were right.

Before, I would lose my temper, break things in the kitchen, and then feel guilty. Now, I have learned to control myself. The change was so real that, for the first time in twenty-seven years of marriage, my husband brought me a birthday cake. He and my daughter surprised me! That moment showed me that when I changed, they felt it too. I started to believe: I deserve respect.

I used to be easily affected by people's words. Any small comment would hurt me deeply. But now, if I know I'm right, I no longer let it bother me.

The first feeling I had when I began the session was like being asleep and finally waking up. For years, I had kept everything inside. This repression even caused me health problems; I developed alopecia, and doctors told me it was due to psychological stress. But through the sessions, I began to release those feelings and talk openly.

Now, I am very happy. I take advantage of every opportunity to attend the center. I even leave work or household tasks behind to participate, because I know how valuable it is. And I don't just come alone, I invite others too, telling them about the sessions and the benefits they can bring.

Art therapy taught me to live again, to wake up to life. And I don't want to go back to sleep.

Story #14:

Cleansing the Heart, Living with Gratitude

My name is Safaa. I first heard about the training through a Facebook group, and also from my daughter, who had participated before me. She used to come back from the sessions and tell me about the injustice and suffering she heard, about people who were improving just by taking the training. She was confused but intrigued, and I thought to myself: Let me also try and see what happens.

When I first joined, my mental state was at zero. I had no family, no relatives, and no friends here. I didn't like leaving the house, nor did I have anyone to confide in. I lived in loneliness and sadness, with my only concern being my children. I have three children who finished high school, but I couldn't send them to university because of our financial situation. My husband's work was unstable, and the entire household was filled with pressure and depression.

Through the art therapy sessions, I began to learn how to distinguish between negative and positive thoughts. I started appreciating the simplest things: my husband, my children, my home, even my health and eyesight. I began thanking God for what I have. Any time a negative thought came, I would stop and ask: Where did this come from? Is it a wrong way of thinking? If yes, I would push it away. As I told myself: "The training made me live today grateful to God Almighty; I have a husband, I have children, I have a home, I have my eyesight, I can walk beside them, praise be to God, Lord of the worlds."

The training also taught me "to cleanse the heart." I had carried so much pain from people who hurt me that I had lost trust in others for years. Slowly, I was able to let go of that burden.

My relationship with my children also changed. My youngest daughter, in first grade, used to come home crying. I asked her to draw what was bothering her, and she drew a boy pulling her hair and a girl taking her pencil. Through her drawings, I understood her feelings and helped her.

After that, she started expressing herself more, even writing notes like "Mama, I love you" with little hearts.

My ninth-grade son was also very angry and withdrawn. One day, I gave him a large piece of paper and asked him to draw, and I discovered he had a talent. From there, I realized his interest in technology and computers, and I encouraged him. Even my husband, who was often angry, joined us in drawing, and the atmosphere at home began to change completely.

For myself, I started to cherish meditation and breathing. In the mornings, I would sit on the balcony and practice. Soon, my children joined me, and we began to enjoy those quiet moments together.

My older daughter went through a very difficult time at school. She failed math and struggled with speech to the point that she thought about suicide. I supported her step by step, reminding her she was strong and not a failure. I helped her reach out to Helpline 110, and she also took art therapy. When the facilitator asked her to draw someone who supports her, she drew me, saying, "Mama, you are the one standing by me."

The training changed me from within. It taught me gratitude, taught me to focus on the positives, and gave me back my strength. Today, I take care of my health and my home, and I've become a role model for my children. I even began thinking about returning to continue my studies, learning sign language so I can better support my daughter, and opening a new path for myself.

Knowledge has no age limit!

Story #15:

Loving Myself!

I am Zeina, 39 years old. I first heard about the center and the training through a WhatsApp group. I registered because I was struggling with depression. I did not know how to express myself or share what I was feeling inside. I never knew how to say the word “no.” I did not know how to empower myself or recognize my own value. But after I attended the training, everything started to change. I began to express myself more freely, and for the first time, I was able to say “no” to the things I did not want.

The first immediate change I noticed was in how I interacted with my children. Before, I was isolated from life, always nervous, and I would take my anger out on them without listening to what they wanted or needed. I did not know how to spend time with them or build a relationship. But after the training, I began to enjoy sitting with my children, talking with them, and especially spending time with the younger ones. I even started taking them on trips to the park and buying them toys, things I had never done before.

Before the training, I didn't like to go out of the house at all. I isolated myself, always sitting alone. But after the sessions, I began to enjoy going out, even buying small things for myself like clothes and accessories, which made me feel that I loved myself more. I also used to avoid social occasions, never attending celebrations or sharing in family events. But after the training, I began to appreciate these moments, bringing gifts with me, and even finding lessons in the stories and situations shared by others.

The biggest change I discovered in myself is that I started to love life and love myself more than before. I began to value myself, to build my self-confidence, and to feel proud of who I am. Among the exercises that helped me most were breathing techniques, “smelling the flower,” and especially the “junk room” exercise, which taught me that anything inside me that I don't want, I must let it out.

Zeina also shared during the MSC workshop that she is currently going through a very difficult situation. She was deeply affected by her son's failure in school, and as she began telling her story, she could not hold back her tears. The pain of this experience weighed heavily on her, and she admitted how much it had impacted her psychologically.

But something changed when she listened to the stories of the other women in the group. Hearing about the struggles and hardships they had endured helped her place her own difficulties in perspective. She began to feel that her burden, while painful, was lighter compared to the immense challenges faced by others.

This realization gave her a renewed sense of strength. By the end of the session, she expressed her desire to return and participate again in the training, hoping to continue improving her psychological state and to find healing after what happened with her son.

Story #16:

The Walls That Hold Me Up

My name is Maali, and I am forty-four years old. I had previously attended another activity at the center, and when I heard about the art therapy training, the name itself caught my attention. I felt curious to try it. Other courses I had joined focused mainly on how to deal with people around us, our children, family, neighbors, but this one felt different. It was about me. About my inner self, my spirit, my problems. It felt like psychological and spiritual treatment, and I believed it could help me face my challenges and open new ways of thinking.

In the beginning, I was afraid to talk about my own stories. In our Arab society, we are not used to speaking our secrets to anyone, not even, at times, to our spouses. But when I saw the other women share their stories, I felt encouraged. The most important thing I discovered was safety. When you feel safe, you can speak and express freely. With time, we became like family, even more than a family. I found myself sharing things I had never told even my parents.

Often, when my mother called me from the West Bank, I hid my feelings to avoid worrying her. But the truth is, I needed a place to release what was inside me. The training gave me that space.

One major change was gaining a deeper understanding of myself. I lived for 25 years in a very small house, only 40 square meters, with seven people, far from my family and under immense psychological pressure. But I insisted on change. I bought a piece of land, later sold it, and managed to secure a house. For me, that house was not just walls; it was support, stability, and dignity for my family.

My husband used to mock the art therapy sessions, asking me: "What does that even mean?" But I did not stop. I discussed with him calmly, and he became less harsh. I learned how to deal with him, how to give and take. I am stubborn, but in the right way, I admit when I am wrong, and I do not feel ashamed.

I am by nature a social person, but my husband was always cautious, telling me not to trust others or speak openly. This made me suppress a lot inside. But through the training, I learned to express myself freely, without fear. I felt relief in talking about my feelings and dreams. I also learned that I must always keep ambition, hope, and determination alive, even if people don't understand or say I am too old to think this way.

My only son, who faced difficulties in speech and understanding. Many told me he would not finish even fifth grade, but with patience and step-by-step teaching, today he is in tenth grade. I cried tears of joy. It was one of my proudest moments, and I share this with any women facing similar situation.

Life has also taken a toll on my health. I developed thyroid problems from stress, but I accepted my fate. I reminded myself daily to stay strong, to focus on my goals: educating my daughters, supporting my son, and securing a better home. I achieved much of this. Two of my daughters graduated, while the third is working and saving to continue her education.

Even with family problems and the disapproval of in-laws, I refused to change my personality. But I did not bend to break myself for others. I remained strong, saying the truth, and facing people without harming them.

Today, I look back at everything I have lived through and say: yes, life is hard, but patience and determination carry us forward. The training taught me to enhance myself honestly, to grow stronger, and to build a better life for myself and my children.

Story #17:

The Name That Became My Power

My name is Rasheeda, and I am the daughter of a man who used to be everything to our family. Two years ago, my father passed away, and with him went the shelter I had always known. Growing up, life always revolved around him. If I had a problem with a neighbor or something at home, I would go to him, tell him, and even if he didn't solve it, his presence made me feel defended. When he died, I lost that voice that used to protect me, and suddenly the six rooms of our house felt like a single prison.

After he passed away, I felt lost; my identity had always been tied to his name and to his protection. I remember thinking: Who will push me forward now? People's gossip, other people's judgments, and the fear of standing up for myself made me shrink back. I even came to resent my name, because everyone expected me to live up to it. I kept asking: how will I live without him? I was afraid I would lose my home, and that no one would have mercy on me.

My daughter's teacher suggested I go to the center. I went, unsure, expecting nothing. At first, I described myself as "a storage room full of things, but over the five days I stayed, everything began to change. I found people who truly listened. Each day lit a small flame inside me.

Little by little, I learned. I practiced saying what I needed and setting boundaries. The fear that used to suffocate me, the fear of people's words and of being stepped on, started to loosen. I began to turn that storage room of my life into a guest room: I would welcome people who value and reassure me, and I would keep away those who drain me. My name, the name I once resented for tying me to safety, became an inheritance of worth and resilience.

Now, when people come to me with problems, they leave feeling reassured. I may not have all the solutions, but I listen, and that is enough to help them breathe a little easier. My daughter told me, "Mama, you never failed us." Those words showed me I had given my children more than I thought I had. Saying "no" when needed became a way to empower myself rather than a source of guilt.

I still miss my father every day. I wish I could tell him: I missed you, I love you, and I finally understand what you gave me. But I also understand that loss can do one of two things: it either breaks you or it pushes you forward. For me, I am no longer imprisoned by fear. I face conflicts directly instead of waiting for someone else to intervene. I protect my space, and I do not allow others to step on me.

The Art therapy training was the spark that woke me up; it reminded me I can carry on. Problems will come and go, but I refuse to stay cornered by fear. If the sessions were daily, I would go every single day. I felt heard, and that healed me. Today, I walk my path with more courage. The name I once thought was a burden is now my greatest inheritance, and I am learning to live by it.

Story #18:

Finding My Voice!

I have been married for twenty-five years. From the very first day, I lived in my in-laws' house, and my life became full of beatings, humiliation, and mistreatment by my husband. I stayed silent and lived in fear, with no strength to face life. In that silence, I wronged myself, and I wronged my children.

We lived as if we were servants in that house, held accountable even for the food we ate. My children were treated unfairly, and everything that happened to them I carried as guilt. I felt it was my fault because I stayed silent and wasn't strong enough to confront. I feared my husband's reactions, feared that if he hit me and I responded, things would only get worse. I never told my family; I didn't want to burden them.

The situation continued for years. When my eldest son turned 11, he started working, and soon, both of my sons left school to support me. They worked and paid the rent. By then, I had three sons and two daughters, and even though I stood by them, my husband continued to hit and insult me.

The pressure eventually broke me. I suffered a stroke because I kept all the pain inside, always laughing in front of people while broken within. Even after we left my in-laws' house, they would not leave me in peace. My children began to support me, but inside I was still filled with fear and weakness.

My every thought was about my children. I tried to confront, but always pulled back, afraid of what might happen to them if I stood up to their father. I sacrificed myself completely for their sake. Thank God, they loved me, stood by me, and supported me.

When I started coming to the center, I discovered something I had long forgotten: myself. I realized I had lost my self-esteem and never gave myself any time. My husband's control had silenced me, but through what I learned, I began to say "no" and confront with strength. My children and my home are everything, but I finally understood: I am the most important. If I collapse, no one can be there for them.

I am 43 now. My father's death affected me deeply; he was my whole world. My mother is blind, and I didn't want to add to her pain, so I hid my struggles. When my father died, no one stood by me except my children. That was when I decided: all my love and sacrifice must go to them, because they truly deserve it. My older children's education was affected because they had to work, but they grew into men who support me and treat me with tenderness.

The stress and worry left their marks. I developed diabetes after the stroke. My mother-in-law even mocked my mother's blindness. For years, I went to their house from morning until night like a servant. But today, I refuse. I have finally set boundaries.

When I first enrolled in art therapy, I thought it was just about drawing. But when the facilitator asked us to do a breathing exercise, I felt a wave of relief. For the first time, I could express what was inside me. What I needed most was not advice, but someone to listen, truly listen with love.

The way the facilitator looked at me, with empathy and without judgment, reminded me that I was not invisible. That look, that sense of being seen and heard, was more important than a thousand words. It permitted me to exist again, to believe that my story mattered.

Story #19:

Journey of hope with pain

My name is Ibtisam, and I am sixty-two years old. My story, as I always describe it, is a journey of hope with pain

The hardest chapter of my life began with leaving Syria. I was once trapped under the rubble with my husband and children. By God's mercy, we survived with only minor injuries. When we finally reached Jordan, I was overwhelmed with fear. I still remember arriving at the border and seeing soldiers carrying weapons. Terrified, I cried: "I want to go back to Syria, I don't want to stay." One of the soldiers gently held my hand and said, "Hajja, we are here to protect you, don't be afraid." His words gave me strength and reassurance.

Before the war, I had been a teacher in Syria. My life was stable, normal, and good. But here, I had to start from nothing. My husband's health deteriorated, and his psychological state grew worse. My children needed to go to school, so I worked wherever I could: cleaning, dishwashing, and food production. Later, I found the center, where I organized an exhibition of drawings and handicrafts and began making educational tools. When that ended, I became director of a Qur'anic educational center, working long hours, often from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m., for twelve exhausting years.

Outwardly, I was a successful woman, but inside my home, things were breaking. I would come home late to find my children asleep. I noticed that I was giving warmth, hugs, and care to the children at the center more than to my own. It tore at me.

Ms. Basma kept inviting me to attend activities, but I always said I was too busy. One day, she called again: "There is an art therapy training, would you like to attend?" At first, I thought art therapy was just drawing or clay, so I told myself I'd attend only to learn something new for my students. I wasn't thinking about myself at all. I was always giving to others.

But from the very first session, I realized the training was for me. It was as if I had been living in a dark room, and suddenly a light was switched on. My life had become nothing but work, work, work, and quick house chores. I had no close friends, no time for sisters or visits. Art therapy gave me back the hope I had been waiting for.

I realized what I really want. I made the difficult decision to leave my job. At first, it wasn't easy; staying home felt heavy, and I struggled to adjust. But slowly, I began to enjoy visits, conversations, and simply sitting with people. My mental state calmed. My husband's health improved when I was more present at home. My children, thank God, grew up well: my daughter graduated from Tawjihi and is now at university, and my sons built their own lives. After 13 years of hardship, we had made it through.

What surprised me most was that people outside never knew the battles I had fought. I was giving women's lectures about life, while I myself was exhausted and not applying what I preached. Only through art therapy did I begin to truly see myself.

Now, I am a grandmother. When my grandchildren call me "Teta" and sit by my side, I feel a deep sense of value. The first day I attended art therapy, I thought I was only there to collect tools for others. But I discovered that art therapy was, first and foremost, for me. Only then could I share it with my family, my home, and others. I even encouraged my daughter to join, and when she did, she told me: "Mama, I really feel better now."

Art therapy reminded me that giving is important, but so is caring for yourself. And in doing so, I found balance, peace, and a new kind of strength to carry me forward in this long journey of hope with pain.

Story #20:

From Silence to Self-Worth

My name is Mira, and I am thirty-two years old. My childhood was not a happy one. I was extremely shy and lacked self-confidence. People used to call me “the silent one” because I rarely spoke, and this made me feel invisible and unimportant. Over time, I realized that my mother had narcissistic traits, and this shaped me deeply. After marriage, I discovered that my husband was very similar, and the two of them often stood against me together.

My teenage years were not much better. I had an innocent relationship with someone I really liked, and both families approved of, even my father and his father supported it. But my mother suddenly ended it and rejected every suitor for three years. One day, without my say, I found myself engaged to my cousin at the age of fifteen. I had been deprived of friends, outings, and even watching television, and suddenly I was carrying adult responsibilities with someone eight years older than me.

The first years of my marriage were extremely difficult. While still studying for Tawjihi, I became pregnant. My husband would send me to his family’s house, keeping me up late at night, and I couldn’t study. Yet, somehow, I passed, without opening a single book. On the day of my results, I discovered I was pregnant and could not even celebrate my success. My second semester was filled with pressure because my husband fell ill. Even when I succeeded, there was no joy, only tears.

Years of stress and sadness began to affect my health. I developed an ulcer and a lump on my gallbladder. My husband did not believe me and accused me of exaggerating. I even asked the doctor to show him the lump after surgery so he would finally trust me. I lived many years without support from either my family or my husband. When I thought about divorce, my mother confronted me with cruel words: “You won’t come back to our house. Either you come for a visit, or I’ll see you in your shroud, or you return a widow. Otherwise, don’t come.” That sentence crushed me. It forced me to endure a painful life in silence.

When I moved near the center, I heard about art therapy. At my first session, I was shy and silent, believing no one would listen or care. Even in school, when I knew the answer, I would never raise my hand. In 2019, we were asked to draw something important in our lives. I chose my name, even though I hated it. I painted it in blue and yellow, with a pink flower. For the first time, I felt my name was special. That simple act helped me release negative energy and begin, slowly, to love myself.

In later sessions, I became more confident. I spoke up, I shared, I answered. I learned to say “no” and to assert myself respectfully: “I’m important, and you’re important. But if there’s a choice between me being upset or you being upset, let it be. I will not carry it anymore.” I stopped blaming myself, avoided unnecessary conflicts, and began to prioritize my own peace of mind.

I also began applying what I learned with my children. I encouraged them to draw, to express themselves, and to set their own boundaries. With my son, whom I used to spoil, I shifted to balancing kindness with firmness, and he began respecting me more.

The change in me shocked everyone. I became strong, vocal, and protective of my rights. My husband, instead of dismissing me, began to fear losing me. When he saw my strength, he held onto me more tightly. For the first time in my life, I began exercising, doing things I love, and even buying things just for myself.

Today, I feel I have transformed 180 degrees, from a timid, silent girl to a woman who knows her worth, loves herself, and lives on her own terms. Art therapy helped me discover who I am and gave me the courage to rebuild my confidence and my life.

Conclusion

The Expressive Art Program has proven to be a transformative experience for the women and girls who participated. Through the Most Significant Change (MSC) approach, participants were able to share deeply personal stories of healing, growth, and transformation. The program not only facilitated emotional release and recovery from trauma but also instilled greater self-confidence, resilience, and stronger interpersonal relationships.

The findings clearly indicate that the program successfully impacted two main domains of change: emotional (psychological) and behavioral development. In the emotional domain, participants reported increased self-confidence and the ability to overcome fear and trauma. This newfound confidence empowered many to break free from societal pressures and embrace self-worth. In the behavioral domain, participants observed significant improvements in their relationships with family members, particularly with their children and spouses, and learned to prioritize self-care. A striking realization from the stories is that the transformation experienced by the participants did not stop at their own personal growth. The emotional and behavioral changes they underwent began to ripple outward, positively impacting their families, households, and communities. As participants healed and gained confidence, they nurtured healthier relationships with those around them, fostering better communication and creating more harmonious home environments. Their stories reflect how personal healing through art has the power to initiate a broader social change, as their growth inspired and influenced their children, spouses, and even neighbors.

A common thread across all stories was the realization that healing starts from within. The participants embraced the power of art to confront long-held pain, express emotions they hadn't been able to vocalize, and, ultimately, create a more positive and empowered version of themselves. The transformation didn't stop at emotional or behavioral changes; these women now carry a renewed sense of purpose and strength, enabling them to face life's challenges with resilience and optimism. As their confidence grew, so did their ability to support and uplift others in their lives, extending the program's impact to their broader social circles.

The Expressive Art Program not only provided a therapeutic space for healing but also offered tools for lasting change, allowing participants to reclaim their lives, relationships, and identities. **Some participants had attended the program two or three years ago, yet they continue to experience its positive impact in their lives today.** As they continue their journeys, their stories stand as powerful testaments to the potential for personal growth and empowerment through art and emotional expression, extending their positive impact to the wider community.