

# Healing with Creative Expression

**Jyoti Thomas**

Over the past three years Jyoti Thomas has been running Art Expression groups funded by the Salvation Army 'Karinya' in Ballarat, for women who have experienced domestic violence. She also runs a therapy group at the Community Health Centre in Daylesford and works with individuals. These groups have been such a journey of inspiration and discovery both for Jyoti as a therapist and for the women in the groups that she wanted to share some of that experience with *Quarterly* readers.

Creativity taps us into something deep within ourselves and opens a way of expressing ourselves and our experiences that words can't always convey. When we create, it is as though our life energy begins to flow again and this can bring enormous relief and fulfillment especially if it's been lying dormant or has been closed off for a long period of time.

The groups are comprised of up to eight participants with an age range of 24 – 70. Many women have come and gone over the past three years, staying for as long as they need to, as the groups are ongoing. Most are out of their abusive situations either recently or for years but still feel their experience negatively impacts on their lives and they want to improve that. I think the ongoing nature of the groups is vital as there is very little ongoing group support available and as it usually takes quite some time to recover from the effects of domestic violence.

Among other things, the experience of domestic violence is a process of wearing down a person's sense of self, therefore the focus in the groups has always been on rebuilding a strong self identity with a deepened self awareness.

The act of creating, in whatever form, is a way of accepting our experience, our pain, and doing something with it. Creativity is known to reduce stress, and serotonin – the chemical that alleviates feelings of depression – is also increased

during creative activity. Art making opens pathways to talking about difficult feelings but even if no verbal expression accompanies the process the actual creative act in itself is very healing and can bring deep personal insights. In a group situation there is the added benefit of connecting people with each other and I have seen enormous healing come from that alone.

Of course it is essential that the participants feel safe and for this reason there are certain guidelines put in place about respect for one's own and others' work, letting people speak uninterrupted and of course confidentiality, to name a few. The space needs to be one of safety, free of judgement, opening the way for self exploration.

The support the women get from listening to each others' stories and sharing of their creativity cannot be understated. When many of the women begin the groups they have no other place in which they can share openly and safely, and feel heard and supported in their journey of recovery from violence. The groups offer a good starting point to create new connections and reduce isolation.

The groups are process orientated and about emotional expression and learning a way to show in a visual form what our feelings and emotions look like and learning to trust in that process. It's like learning a new language, a visual language,

and the more clients tap into the flow of that creative energy the more their lives begin to flow again, often after years of being held in and stifled by a controlling partner. Most participants relax very quickly when they realise it doesn't matter at all what their images look like, it's more about what the images express and tell us about ourselves.

Initially we do simple exercises based around drawing out different emotions to get a feel for drawing in this way. Many people have not used art materials for a very long time and it has many surprises for them and self discoveries. Art is like medicine in this way and brings an infusion of fresh vitality into our lives.

We do quite a lot of body-focused work in the groups, by giving each participant a body outline to fill in showing all physical sensations in their body, for example stomach ache or sore knee, as well as emotional states like anxiety. Where is it held in the body? What does it look like?

The women really like doing this and it helps settle them into the group and centres them into themselves and what's happening for them physically and into making the emotional connection. It helps to bring them inwards and helps to leave behind the stresses of daily life for a while. Many of the women initially express feeling numb, which is a common recovery symptom of domestic violence so this exercise is very helpful in reconnecting them with their physical and emotional responses to things. It also tells me as the therapist, and the group, a lot about what is going on for them in the here and now.

Even the most withdrawn participants express a lot by doing these body pictures. After spending about half an hour on these exercises the women share with the group what they've drawn and what it represents. If they are finding it difficult or feel blocked or afraid while drawing, I encourage them to stick with the feelings they are having and to try and really connect with their

confusion or 'stuckness' and tap into the energy of the problem and draw their way through it. For example they may literally draw the confusion or disgust. This can be a fascinating process and ultimately a very freeing one for the participant. It is not uncommon to notice a real physical relaxing and letting go in the participant after completing and talking about their body drawings – often the whole mood will change once this exercise is complete.

Apart from the body work we have covered topics of anger, grief, empowerment; how to find emotional/spiritual nourishment within ourselves rather than always looking outside of ourselves; our life journeys; family of origin work; using connection to earth and nature symbolically to find inner strength and growth; symbols, mandalas, mask making and many others.

My personal focus is about helping women to find a strength and centredness within themselves which they can rely upon when it seems there is little else. This then leads on to making changes in our outer lives that are positive rather than repeating old patterns and opens us to making new, positive and life enhancing connections. It is my belief that it is not enough to just make outer changes. For deep level change we need this inner connection to something deeper within ourselves, and creativity in all its varied forms is often a vehicle for this to occur.

There have been wonderful stories of growth and change among the women who have come through the groups and it's always an inspiration working with these women and helping to facilitate their creative process.

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