

Expressive Arts:

experiences of women living with and beyond breast cancer.

About Kairon: According to mythology, Kairon/Chiron was born to gods, wounded by them, healed, and instructed by these same gods to teach healing, music and prophecy to humans. Kairon became known as the 'wounded healer' because despite great accomplishments he suffered from a wound that would not heal. In order to overcome the pain of his own wounds, Kairon became the compassionate teacher of healing.

The Kairon Participatory Research Project: A community health promotion planning & assessment project to explore the role of expressive arts in the healing journey of women living with breast cancer in Niagara.

Co-Researchers: A collaborative comprised of women living beyond breast cancer (aka 'Thrivers') and individuals representing the Breast Cancer Research & Education Fund, Brock University's School of Fine and Performing Arts, Brock University's Department of Sociology, and Wellspring Niagara.

Women Living With Breast Cancer Informed Us That:

Overall, women repeatedly expressed concern over the lack of appropriate breast cancer support information, resources and programs. For some, limited access to services as a result of geographical distance posed a problem. Others reported they were simply unaware of available support. For many women, the experience of diagnosis and treatment remains a salient preoccupation, which gives us the sense that programs addressing the trauma of this aspect of living with breast cancer need to remain foregrounded in support-related services.

We facilitated four focus group interviews with 31 women from the Niagara Region. We asked women to think about the connection between the problems they encountered with existing support-related services and their experiences with expressive arts in their daily lives. Their stories and responses provided rich insights into their support needs and preferences, their previous experiences with expressive arts, the benefits they receive from participating in expressive arts activities, and the types of expressive arts programs they would like to access and how.

On the whole, many women we interviewed came to realize they had fairly well-developed experiences with expressive arts in their daily lives, as well as understandings of these benefits (see reverse page). This insight supported by the way in which women easily generated a substantive list of activities that could be understood to involve expressive qualities, ranging from macramé to singing in a choir or from water colour painting to creative cooking. In some cases women explained that their relationship with nature or physical activity involved expressive elements.

Women repeatedly suggested that expressive arts are an excellent outlet for creative self-discovery. Women also articulated ways of formalizing creative arts programs for the benefit of more women, and were interested in helping develop means by which women can make use of expressive arts even more fully and systematically in their healing journeys. The women understood these activities to be useful in dealing with the trauma of diagnosis and treatment as well as recovery, and therefore such activities have the potential to be an excellent supplement to existing community-based breast cancer support services in the Niagara Region.

Additionally, within the focus group setting, women eagerly revealed their own creative skills. The Kairon team recognized that these unexercised creative talents are a significant resource to be drawn upon in future community-based endeavors. The women interviewed possess a rich complement of artistic skills and abilities, have a desire to share with other women and compelled to support changes in the community of support services for women living with breast cancer.



Developing The Program

Based on a best practice review of community-based arts programs and in response to the needs, preferences and interests of Niagara women living with breast cancer, the Kairon Project team shaped creative experiential workshops to help generate individual and collective transformative experiences.

The heart of our programming was informed by participatory values. Workshops were:

- **Democratic** – they enabled and encouraged new understandings of participation
- **Equitable** – the workshop core processes acknowledged people's inherent equality
- **Liberating** – workshops provided the opportunity to explore pathways to freedom from oppressive conditions
- **Life-enhancing** – creativity enabled the expression of people's full human potential

A Sample Workshop: Theatre

- We began with the ideas of Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal who suggested that the people have the capacity to become active instead of simply passive and in so doing become the 'lead actors' of their own lives.
- We also worked from the assumption that 1) dialogue is the common, healthy dynamic between all people, 2) that all people desire and are capable of dialogue, 3) that when a dialogue becomes a

Creative Self-Discovery: Benefits Of Expressive Arts



Benefits Reported By Women:

1. Relieves Stress

“You have to (create things) or you will end up feeling sorry for yourself and drive yourself crazy. It stops you from thinking about death. ...So, you have to keep your mind busy. ...But creating helps you feel better.”

“When I was first diagnosed I got into knitting, and that was extremely soothing, because it just diverted my attention and I had to focus and I created a really beautiful piece. It's soothing, as well as stimulating.”

2. Invites Us To See Beauty In Life

“You need to see beauty everywhere. I started my chemo in January, but I'd still drag my butt out for a walk... I needed to be outside where there was something beautiful in life. I had to look at something that was perfect.”

“When I was out walking I found the most beautiful spot in Fort Erie. You can collect rocks, you can collect shells. As Native women, our role with water is key, it's our responsibility to look after the water... Going to the water, listening to the drum, all those things are very healing. Like sharing like this. I think that a lot of that expressive stuff should be incorporated into breast cancer support. You need connections to people and beauty.”

3. Strengthen One's Connection To Life

“I find that art is totally engrossing. I start drawing and it really moves my thoughts totally away. It's not that art is going to make you better. But once you get drawing and analysing, the process brings you peace, because it brings you to the present moment, not projecting to the past and future. And there are very few things in our lives that help us be fully alive, present and connected.”

“This probably sounds corny, but I can feel connectedness, that's what it is with the arts. Maybe it's about making us look at things differently... Maybe it's being a little bit more calm, less anal, slowing down.”

4. Induces A Meditative Quality

“I like to work with my hands, like when I do my quilts. I made over 50 and I want to make more. It is a good therapy. It's relaxing. I think of nothing else, and it keeps your hands and mind busy.”

5. Outlet For Coping With Anxiety And Fears

“In your regular daily life, after you have surgery, that's an expressive art in itself. Just that you exist in what you do, how you learn to carry yourself and get to know your new body.”

“I found the journaling to be very therapeutic. I'm not normally a writer, but I get inspiration and write down my thoughts and feelings and experiences basically for me and my family. So, that's therapeutic, it frees me... Since doing that I don't fear death, because I looked it right in the eye and knew I would be OK... Dealing with the issue and writing is what has freed me from the fear I feel. Putting it down on paper was really good for me.”

6. Builds Mental and Physical Resilience

“In terms of art therapy, dancing and moving your sick body gives you the strength to live life. I can also definitely relate to exercise, because I have noticed that everything changes for me. My whole emotional landscape changes. As long as my body is moving I'm good.”

“I write journals. That's the one way that I keep myself sane.”

7. Transports Oneself To Another Time And Place

“The chant is so powerful. It's got to be an art because it resonates in your body. It speaks to your cells. It's amazing. It transports you to another place.”

When I play the piano I lose myself, and that helps.”

monologue, oppression can ensue, and 4) theatre is an extraordinary tool for transforming monologue into dialogue.

- Women engaged in exploratory movement exercises done both as individuals & as a group to experience the potential of the freedom in their own bodies.
- They pursued activities that allowed them to connect gesture with emotion.
- We engaged in Boal's Forum theatre exercises in which challenging moments in one's life are recreated with a vision of 'playing them out' differently. The objective is to discover, via means of theatrical improvisation, new outcomes for situations in which an individual has become disempowered.
- Our debriefing discussions focused on our abilities to use the way we move, the way we stand, the way we use our voices as creative tools that can generate more vitality, generosity, solidarity, and strength.
- Women worked together in a playful and supportive context to reach creative solutions designed to deal with various challenges faced by those living with breast cancer.
- And thus, in this 'rehearsal for change' the women explored the confidence necessary to do so with conviction.

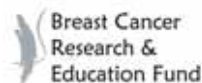
8. Cultivates Gratitude

“Breast cancer is a lifelong thing you can't just cure. You can't think, 'Oh, I'm going to get well.' It's your whole life. You have to change your way of living. Be positive and do that using meditation, creation, and relaxation. I found I feel much better since I've been thinking positively.”

“Arts build up your confidence, to say another encouraging word to another person that can bring joy and comfort for you too. They keep our morale up so you're not feeling so down. They help you to get out of yourself. All these things are the benefits of art activities.”

9. Satisfaction From Initiating And Producing Work

“You get a sense of satisfaction of doing something. I've created this with my own hands, no matter how well it turned out. ...I can feel good about myself, and the big breast cancer isn't staring me in the face quite so much.”



For a copy of the complete report please call 905-687-3333

To learn more contact: Breast Cancer Research & Education Fund, 366 St. Paul Street, St. Catharines, ON L2R 3N2
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