

Expressive Art

A case study in art, mental health and community

Abu Dhabi · May to October 2025 · Arouj Mufti

At a glance

Measure	Result	Basis
Unique participants	43	Pre and post questionnaires combined
Sessions delivered	12	Two cohorts of six weekly sessions
Post-session responses	108	Returned questionnaires
Felt emotionally safe	90%	Rated 4 or 5 out of 5
Felt more grounded or calm	76%	Rated 4 or 5 out of 5
Session supported wellbeing	76%	Rated 4 or 5 out of 5
Overall mean rating	4.15 / 5	All six items, all responses
Returned for 3 or more sessions	18 participants	Attendance across the series

A NOTE ON THESE FIGURES *These come from questionnaires actually returned, not from an attendance register. Real attendance was higher, so every number here is a floor rather than a ceiling.*

What the programme was

Expressive Art was a six-week programme for women in Abu Dhabi, run twice during 2025: a first cohort from May to June, and a second from September to October. Each week had its own theme, its own technique and its own quiet intention. The aim was never to teach painting. It was to give difficult feeling somewhere to go.

Most participants were women in midlife. Many had not made anything creative since school. Several arrived carrying a great deal — stress, low mood, grief, the accumulated load of caring for other people — and the programme was designed on the understanding that the making itself, rather than the finished object, is what does the work.

How a session ran

Every session followed the same shape, so that the structure itself became something to rely on:

1. A theme and a line to hold it. Session five, on stitching, opened with: every stitch is a breath, each pause a choice.
2. An intention for the hour — pause, be mindful and present, honour the quiet.
3. The technique, introduced simply and without pressure to do it correctly.
4. Making, with conversation allowed but never required.
5. Sharing and connecting at the end, for those who wanted it.
6. A short post-session questionnaire.

Techniques varied week to week — free mark-making, intuitive colour, collage, watercolour, paper stitching, layered mixed media — but the underlying principle stayed constant: slow the hands, and the mind follows.

How the effect was measured

Two instruments were used, both anonymised by participant ID.

A pre-workshop questionnaire, completed before the first session, covering sixteen statements about emotional wellbeing, self-expression, coping and creative confidence, each rated one to five. Thirty-three were returned.

A post-session questionnaire, completed at the end of every session, with six rated statements and three open questions about what came up, what shifted, and what the session helped release. One hundred and eight were returned.

WHY THIS MATTERS *Very few community art programmes collect structured before-and-after data at all. Doing so across two cohorts, with consistent instruments and anonymised IDs, is closer to small-scale practice-based research than to ordinary workshop feedback.*

Who arrived, and how

The pre-workshop responses show a group under real strain. Sixty-one per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they often felt overwhelmed by their emotions. Forty-five per cent reported experiencing low mood or anxiety regularly. Thirty-nine per cent said they found it hard to express how they felt.

Asked what they hoped to gain, participants wrote plainly:

“A space to be creative and to start painting again for pleasure.”

— Participant, pre-workshop

“Learning new skills to spend my time and doing things for myself.”

— Participant, pre-workshop

“How to use art to regulate emotions, doing similar sessions with my children to help them too.”

— Participant, pre-workshop

What happened

1. The room felt safe

The single strongest result. Across 108 responses, ninety per cent rated emotional safety at four or five out of five, with a mean of 4.55. For a group in which a majority arrived feeling emotionally overwhelmed, and many had not made art in decades, that number is the foundation everything else rests on.

2. People left calmer than they arrived

Seventy-six per cent reported feeling more grounded or calm after a session, and the same proportion said the session had supported their mental wellbeing. The word that recurs most often across all 108 free-text responses is simply calm.

“It let me focus on the present moment, like a form of creative meditation.”

— Participant 101, session 3

“Allowing my thoughts to flow instead of just working in an organised, structured way.”

— Participant 106, session 1

3. Something got released

The open questions asked what participants felt able to let go of. The answers were often more direct than expected.

“Letting out my emotions on paper. The anger and darkness inside me. Felt calm and at peace.”

— Participant 120, session 1

“Pent up emotions and upset released.”

— Participant 999, session 4

This matters particularly given my research interest. My MSc thesis argued that women’s midlife anger is distinct, under-recognised and rarely given a name. In the workshop room, women were naming it themselves — and finding somewhere to put it that was neither confrontation nor silence.

4. Perfectionism loosened

A theme that emerged unprompted and repeatedly: permission to stop controlling the outcome.

“No need for perfection, just create.”

— Participant 115, session 4

“The collage showed me that things don’t have to be perfect.”

— Participant SaimaSK, session 3

“You can make something beautiful even if it goes wrong.”

— Participant 103, session 4

5. Confidence returned

One participant’s progression across the series captures the arc of the programme better than any average. In session four she wrote that she felt nervous, having not painted in more than twenty years. Two sessions later:

“Very confident that I can continue with this on my own, because it made me feel more secure in my abilities. To take time out for myself and enjoy my hobbies and the little things in life.”

— Participant 116, session 6

6. The effect strengthened over time

Mean ratings rose across the six weeks, from 3.94 in session one to 4.42 by session six. The programme was not front-loaded; it deepened. Eighteen participants returned for three or more sessions and eleven for four or more, in a voluntary programme with no obligation to continue.

Session	Mean rating	Responses
Session 1	3.94	21
Session 2	4.33	21
Session 3	4.03	22
Session 4	4.12	20
Session 5	4.25	14
Session 6	4.42	10

What the data does not say

A case study that reports only its successes is not worth much. Three honest qualifications.

The measures are immediate and self-reported

Questionnaires were completed at the end of each session. They capture how someone felt in that moment, not whether the effect lasted a week. There was no long-term follow-up, and no control comparison. These are indications of impact, not proof of it.

It did not work for everyone

One participant gave consistently critical feedback, finding a session too simple for the time allocated and the room too noisy to be restful. She wrote that she felt she was wasting her time. That response is preserved in the data and worth keeping in view: a programme pitched to be accessible will sometimes underserve those who want more challenge.

The work can surface difficult material

One participant, who had said at the outset that she was working through trauma, recorded low scores and described real discomfort during a painting session — pressure on the chest, a feeling of being unsafe. She also, in a later session, wrote something that has shaped how I facilitate since:

“You don’t always have to talk or be busy. Consciously choosing for yourself is very valuable.”
— Participant 118, session 3

Expressive work reaches material that ordinary craft does not. That is precisely its value, and precisely why it needs careful facilitation, a genuine option not to share, and an honest acknowledgement that a difficult session is not the same as a failed one.

What this demonstrates

Three things I would want a reader to take from it.

7. The work has measurable effect. Across 108 structured responses from 43 women, an overall mean of 4.15 out of 5, with 90 per cent reporting emotional safety and 76 per cent reporting they left calmer.
8. The practice is evidence-informed rather than improvised. The programme was designed against my research into women’s midlife mental health, evaluated with consistent instruments, and adjusted between cohorts.
9. It reaches people the system often misses. Women in midlife, largely outside formal mental health services, many re-entering creative practice after decades away, in a low-cost community setting rather than a clinical one.

Where this sits now

The second cohort finished in October 2025. No further sessions have run since, because the uncertainty of the past months has made it impossible to plan or commit to a venue, and to fill places at a price people could afford. The programme has a tested structure, a demonstrated effect and a waiting community. What it currently lacks is the stability to schedule the next series.