

Jewish Agency provides art and movement therapy to aid in healing trauma

by Lisa Traiger
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The few women gathered in a nondescript room, in an unremarkable office building somewhere in Rockville, hesitate at first. Unsure of what to expect, they hang back until facilitator Vicki Berman hands them a large swath of Lycra that they stretch out and tug on with their hands. Then she dumps an armload of balloons on the elastic fabric. Suddenly the mood in the room lightens, as if the tension, self-doubt, fear and anger have floated away inside those balloons.

The women were participants in a movement workshop for victims of domestic abuse sponsored by JCADA, the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse.

So, as fun and lighthearted as the exercise might sound, it has, Berman noted, a very serious purpose. These women, who remain unnamed to protect their privacy and safety, became immersed in the process of healing from the trauma of abuse. Whether that abuse is physical, psychological or emotional, according to Jessica Gada, JCADA adolescent and young adult clinician who organized the summer series of movement, poetry and art workshops for clients of the agency, “Art therapy has become a really effective modality for people recovering from trauma because it’s able to tap into subconscious feelings and experiences that people who have been through trauma have a really hard time putting words to. The art-making can be a really effective vehicle for expressing things in a very, very different way when words may not be adequate.”

Berman, a trained dancer and certified movement analyst, explained: “I call this [workshop] ‘Discovering Your Inner Strength.’ I want to give people tools they can do themselves.” She began one session with breathing exercises noting that connecting with the breath can help relieve stress and tension, and is easy to practice anywhere. She continued, “I also work on the sense of being grounded: I use the imagery like a tree with deep roots and talk about how the weight of the pelvis can give you strength. We use words and speak together, saying, ‘I am in

control, I am strong.’ And then [they] start to get that idea into the body and believe it.”

Founded in 1999 to address a pressing need in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan Jewish community, JCADA assists victims of domestic abuse in becoming empowered; aids them in finding safe environments (including, when necessary, kosher safe houses); supports them through counseling and a newly instituted legal aid program; educates the local Jewish community about domestic abuse that is in its midst; and educates the public, including a program for adolescents and young adults, on appropriate and safe responses to abuse. Services JCADA offers include an emergency hotline; individual and small group counseling with two staff clinicians; workshops in the community for teens and young adults on developing healthy relationships; and training sessions for rabbis, cantors, *mikvah* attendants and community leaders on how to recognize domestic abuse and refer those in need to the appropriate agencies and organizations.

Each month, the social workers and staff of JCADA serve about 78 individuals, women and men, not including family members who also are often affected by domestic abuse. According to executive director Elissa Schwartz, 82 percent of the clientele identify as Jewish; 17 percent of clients are noted as an “underrepresented population,” because of sexual orientation, culture/national origin or religion. And JCADA serves individuals of all faiths, sexual orientations and national status, including people in same-sex relationships, immigrants, Hindus and Muslims, Schwartz added.

This past summer Gada facilitated a short series of art-making workshops for interested JCADA clients. Spread out on the conference tables were paints, markers, crayons, felt and fabric, doodads and beads, glue and other art accoutrements for the participants to use in a mask-making exercise. “The topic was ‘identity’ and the impact of domestic abuse on a survivor’s sense of identity,” Gada explained. Mask-making was a perfect medium for “dealing with what they’ve been through and where that leads them, where they are now and who they are now, and, for many, how their lives have changed,” she

said. “I led them through a guided imagery that tied into this theme of being wounded, but also emphasizing how they could be their own healers, tapping into their inner strength and resilience.” What was so interesting is that the masks, of course, were three-dimensional and had an outside and an inside area, Gada said, and some in the group used the underside

of the client’s lived experience and process it through discussion. “This process,” Gada added, “is a great springboard in helping someone eventually put words to [an issue or trauma].” She said this one-on-one therapy process works especially well with her teen and young adult clients.

Participants in Berman’s movement

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of the mask in interesting ways that suggested hidden parts of their lives.

Both Gada and Berman noted that neither of these workshops serve as actual therapy sessions – although, they could indeed be therapeutic for the participants – but at each one a trained therapist was a participant-observer in the room, available in case anyone needed additional support.

For more than a century, Western psychology, under the strong influence of the Freudian psychoanalytic model, pushed the mode of talk therapy as the best means to heal from trauma.

“Art can be a really effective vehicle for expressing things in a very, very different way when words may not be adequate,” Gada said on why art therapy can often be a better choice than standard talk therapy sessions. “Art therapy is used in many different settings from hospitals to agencies like JCADA.”

Typically a client will come in with an issue that is particularly stressing or vexing, but he or she isn’t quite sure what’s going on beneath the surface. Using expressive art therapy, Gada invites the client to make a piece of art about the issue at hand.

“The really important thing is that it’s not about producing a finished product or making a pretty picture,” Gada said about the art-making therapy sessions she conducts. “It’s about the effort and the expression and letting whatever comes out come out.”

After that, the therapist and the client examine the art as a visual representation

and dance workshop provided written feedback at the end of the sessions. “I was a little intimidated about trying this but I pushed myself to come to JCADA, and I am so happy I did. Courage, strength, stamina are only a few of the things you will feel while doing all the fantastic movements,” one woman wrote. Then she added, “I plan on teaching some of these moves to my four-year-old grandson. Vicki is full of life.”

An expressive movement therapist based in Pittsburgh, Sheila K. Collins draws on both her dance and her psychology and social work backgrounds for her work teaching a performance system called Interplay, which, too, can be used in therapeutic settings. She notes the efficacy of movement – and art-based healing therapies, particularly for trauma and abuse victims. “Often I tell people: you may not believe me but your body is smarter than you are. The body is the gateway to the unconscious. Our unconscious is so big; our conscious mind is small. What we’re conscious of is much smaller than what we really know.” ■

To learn more about JCADA, visit <http://jcada.org/>. On Sunday, Oct. 5, 8:30 a.m., JCADA will hold a 5K walk/run/awareness day for all ages at Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy, 13300 Arctic Ave., Rockville, to raise funds for programming. \$30. To register: call (301) 315-8040.