

Using Participatory Art Approaches to Promote Health and Empower Client Voice: Examples from the Black Women First Initiative

Why the Arts Belong in Healthcare

Art can be a powerful tool to promote individual and collective healing.¹ It can draw on all our senses and spark the capacity for empathy.² Creating art can help with processing intense emotions and grief associated with illness and trauma, promote holistic wellness, and be a motivating factor in recovery.² Participatory art brings individuals together to create art in a collective, meaningful way, oftentimes with non-art related agendas. Through music, drama, writing, video, or photography, the participatory arts can be used to generate dialogue and engage individuals in receiving health care and provide a safe space for individuals to speak more freely outside the confines of the medical system. In addition to individual level benefits, the participatory arts can inspire social activism, engagement, and create community level change.³⁻⁵

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Participatory art projects foster emotional connections and can reduce social isolation amongst participants, be used to address stigma, and provide education to the broader community about a specific topic or lived experience, such as living with HIV.^{6,7}

Arts and The Black Women First Initiative

Art therapy and other arts-based interventions have proven to be effective in allowing people with HIV to process difficult emotions, create meaning in their lives, and connect with other people with HIV.⁷⁻⁹ The arts can also be a way to express the harm and heal from traumatic experiences for people with HIV, including the stigma and discrimination they encounter in health care settings.

Several sites involved in the Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program Part F: Special Project of National Significance "Improving Care and Treatment Coordination: Focusing on Black Women with HIV" initiative, also known as the Black Women First Initiative (BWF), have utilized participatory arts-based events and workshops, like documentary creation and viewing and theater performance, to support the holistic healing of their clients, build community among Black women with HIV, and inspire social change.



“Resilient. Black. & Graceful: A Night of a Thousand Words”

“*Resilient. Black. & Graceful: A Night of a Thousand Words*,” was an event hosted by BWF sites Positive Impact Health Center and Grady Health Systems in June 2022 that brought together thirty Black women with HIV from the Atlanta area. The main goal of “*Resilient. Black. & Graceful: A Night of a Thousand Words*” was to create a space of connection, social networking, and mentorship for their Black women clients. This event included two main components to inspire and empower attendees: intentional storytelling and a documentary screening. Using photos and recordings, three Black women with HIV reflected on their lives and shared their experiences living with HIV.

Attendees also watched *New Nickels*, a documentary exploring the healing journeys of five Black women with HIV in New Orleans. The film was created by the Institute of Women & Ethnic Studies (IWES), a non-profit organization in New Orleans and fellow BWF Initiative demonstration site. Following the screening, those who attended the event had the opportunity to reflect on how it has inspired their personal and collective aspirations to find safety while living with HIV.

“I learn[ed] that HIV doesn’t define me... I can pursue my dreams for school and work.”

“This initiative is about having a place that I can push myself [to] come out of my shell and find a safe place...”

new nickels

a film by
Iman Shervington

new orleans
film festival

OFFICIAL SELECTION 2021

New Nickels Documentary

New Nickels is a film produced and directed by Iman Shervington, the Director of Media & Communications at IWES. It showcases the healing journey of five Black women with HIV in New Orleans, Louisiana. Through funding from Gilead Sciences, Shervington was able to capture and uplift the joys, resiliency, and agency of these women in their everyday lives. The filming process provided a therapeutic space for the women to be vulnerable and process the stigma, pain, and isolation of living with HIV in the South, while also reflecting upon their journeys to self-love, acceptance, activism, and healing. The film highlights their journeys “coming out on the bright side like a shiny new nickel,” and their roles in inspiring collective healing in their communities and advocating for a socially just society for all. The production of this film demonstrates the power and asset of using art in healthcare, particularly for those who are marginalized due to structural racism. The film premiered in 2021 at the annual New Orleans Film Festival and is being further developed to include a discussion guide to stimulate meaningful conversation among folks with HIV, providers of HIV-related services, and the public at large.

[Watch New Nickels Here](#)

The Medea Project

University of California San Francisco's Women's HIV Program HERS+ project and The Medea Project partnered to provide workshops addressing the many intersecting stigmas that Black women with HIV may encounter, such as HIV stigma, substance use stigma, and stigma associated with homelessness.

Founded in partnership with San Francisco County Jail in 1988 by noted performance artist Rhodessa Jones, the Medea Project continues to place women at the center, telling their own story, engaging in their own truth and experiences of survival and resilience. In 2008, the project expanded to become The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women/HIV Circle, including specifically women with and at high risk for HIV.



"People (women) need to feel their bodies. So much information is trapped inside a traumatized body. The more we free them, the more easily the words come. Sometimes the words don't come easily because of the emotion, trauma, education... Once it's on the page (poetry/journaling), you can let it go." ¹⁰

Through the self-expression of writing poetry, engaging in theater, movement and performance, The Medea Project HIV Circle offers a space for women's individual healing and sisterhood, and it provides workshops that give them the space to work past traumas through storytelling. The Medea Project: HIV Circle has performed shows across the U.S., sharing what it means to be a woman with HIV to break the silence and counter the stigma that still surrounds HIV today.¹¹

[Learn more about The Medea Project Here](#)

Summary

The arts can be a powerful way to inspire healing and create community. Black Women First Initiative sites have utilized various types of participatory arts-based approaches, including photography, filmmaking, and theater, to center the voices of their clients and provide more holistic forms of care for Black women with HIV.

“Overall, the arts settle people and bring them together. There is something in it for every human. We are all drawn to the beauty of a voice or music or a painting or a story. Agencies need to look outside of the usual ways to increase engagement and introducing the arts is a great place to start.”

Want to host an arts-based event or facilitate a participatory arts project at your health center? Here are a few lessons learned and tips to help you get started:

- **Use the arts to break the ice.** The structure, rules, and regulations of conventional clinic-based approaches can feel restrictive. Engagement in the arts is a less conventional approach that can soften the experience of your clients.
- **Create spaces for freedom of expression.** Arts-based events and participatory art projects create spaces where clients feel freer to speak their minds and express their ideas in ways that don't involve medical terminology and typical HIV language.
- **Explore each client's unique talents.** Sometimes society overlooks artistic talent as a valuable skill, but once people experience art that moves them, they are amazed! It's important to support your clients in discovering their own creativity.

Here are some ideas for arts-based events/projects:

- **A Photovoice project.** Photos taken by participants could be shared in an exhibition open to the public.
- **A film project.** Participants could use cellphones or affordable, easy-to-use, and easily transported cameras (such as GoPros) to record parts of their daily lives that they want others to see and understand more deeply. Films can be edited together or individually and shared on social media or through a special screening event.
- **Peer interviews.** Participants could interview each other on topics of their choice, then compile small narratives from the interviews and display them on a website, social media, or in print media like brochures and billboards. Interviews can be filmed, or audio recorded then transcribed, and can be shared as short videos, audio pieces, or podcasts.

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