



## EXPRESSIVE THERAPY AND SYSTEMS THINKING

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**INTERVIEWER: DAVID HADDAD, EdD**

**David Haddad:** Thank you for agreeing to have this conversation. By way of introduction, your background is in Expressive Arts, and you have a doctorate from Lesley. You also teach and practice Family Therapy, and have been engaged in community work in Palestine, and other places around the world ... So perhaps we can begin with your saying something about expressive therapy. I think many people know the term ‘expressive therapy’ but would you share how you think about it? And how it is applied with the emergence of telehealth?

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Thank you, David. So, to begin with, as a discipline, expressive therapies are relatively new. It started in the 1970’s, in Massachusetts.

**David Haddad:** At Lesley, right?

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yes, at Lesley. It was created by Shaun McNiff and Norma Canner, among others, who were thinking “How can we take the arts and apply them in psychotherapy?” These early expressive therapists understood that the arts have been around for thousands and thousands of years and have been the source of healing throughout history.

**David Haddad:** Yes, in all cultures...

**Yousef AlAjarma:** ...since the beginning of life as we know it. Consider the paintings in the caves and on rocks and stones that have been around forever. And people have used the arts in one form or another throughout the history for catharsis and self-healings, ritual dances, and music. We can see it in every culture. So as a discipline, integrating expressive arts in psychotherapy, it’s a newer approach, maybe forty-five years old. And within the expressive arts, there are many disciplines like art therapy, music therapy, dance/movement therapy, play therapy, drama/psychodrama... And when we say ‘expressive arts’ or ‘expressive therapy’ it’s that use of all those, together in one setting or in different settings as well. While individuals can specialize in various modalities like art therapy or music therapy, an expressive therapist would go on for more specialized training.

**David Haddad:** So, an expressive therapist can be a generalist...

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yes, you can be a generalist, but also, many people in the expressive arts who become expressive therapists came from an expressive arts background. For example, I have an undergraduate degree in Social Work and then my masters and PhD in Expressive Arts. But with my undergrad in Social Work and Psychology, I wanted to do psychotherapy and I wanted to use the arts. So that's why I went that route. If I wanted to go to a music school for music therapy, or an art school for art therapy, I would not have gotten in since I didn't have the undergraduate credits. As someone who went to school in Palestine and Switzerland, I had to consider the country that could allow me to pursue my interests. For example, if you think about North America—the most straight forward way to go is a master's degree, but as an international student that's a problem when it comes to credentialing, as each country does different things. Like in Japan, for example, expressive therapies struggle to get the credentials under the U.S. regulations. Same with Europe, same with the Middle East, and Latin America, as well. So that's the discipline in general.

But when, also, we think about expressive art or expressive therapies, I think about the need, the client, that you're working with. And this is important because the fact that you are a generalist, and you are trained how to use the arts in different settings and with different populations, makes you a better fit to apply expressive arts with anyone, and in any setting.

**David Haddad:** Because it's collaborative?

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yes exactly, thank you for using that term. I'll be using that more often. It's a collaboration with the client, whether that is a family, a group, or a community, not top down. The invitation is, "Let's all work on this together", or "let's see what will work here". "Do you like music?" "Yes." "Let's talk about music", "Let's talk about the kind of music that you like". "What kind of music makes you happy?". "What kind of music can be expressive for you?" "What kind of music, makes you sad or take you out of your sadness?" Same thing with any of the other art modalities. Psychodrama, for example, has been around since the 1920's, developed by Jacob Moreno. And it's still used widely around the world, and has direct applications to family therapy. So one can be an expressive therapist and use all of these aspects in a collaborative way. At the beginning of our conversation, you mentioned the challenges of COVID...

**David Haddad:** I have one question before you go into it. Can you say more about your path, you said you had your degree in social work and psychology—so, what was it about your experience that led you to be interested in art therapy?

**Yousef AlAjarma:** In my undergraduate school we had to do practicum and internships in the third and fourth year. In the first year, when I was doing the work, it was mainly with people with physical disabilities, like those who were involved in car accidents or were shot, mostly adults, and when I would go in and talk with them, talk therapy was limiting their ability to express what they were feeling. And at that time, I was looking for more tools for talking but I did not find more. I felt I would attempt to talk and then I would say, "I'm so sorry that you're going through this," and I found myself hitting a wall. And that was my experience in practicum. And I was so frustrated with the experience. Here these individuals are struggling, and I felt I could not do anything to help. On top of this, I was young, and it left me wondering I'm doing maybe the wrong thing or I'm not a right fit for this field."

**David Haddad:** And where were you? Was that in...you're talking about your undergraduate?

**Yousef AlAjarma:** I was in Palestine in the West Bank, I went to Bethlehem University, which has also one of the oldest social work programs in Palestine. In my fourth year at my internship, I was working with families and kids who were mostly under eight years old, and most of my clients at that time were coming because they were wetting the beds. So, bed-wetting was a big thing and I have all those five, six years old, and I would start talking with them and nothing was happening. At that time, I had a supervisor who was from Switzerland, and I went to her and said, "You know, I don't know if I'm a good fit for this field because nothing seems to be happening". And she said, "Have you ever tried to ask them to draw something?" And I looked at her as if she has ten heads, I'm thinking, I'm not an artist. I cannot— I draw stick figures. I don't know how to play any instruments. I grew up in poverty, so art is a privilege that I never had. And she said, "Well, just try it. Just try it. See if you can just do something and try it and come back. Let's talk about it after the session when you do that." So, I did that and asked one of the kids if they wanted to draw something. And I don't remember what they drew, but I do recall that we had a very nice conversation about the drawing. So, instead of me being stressed out about the thirty minutes of the session, now the kids were doing really something that they were really engaged in. We just talked about it. I think we created a story. I went back to my supervisor, got some supervision about it, and she, gave me some pointers, such as, "You know you can ask them about their favorite memory, about their favorite thing, things they want to do, about a fun thing, something with their families..." She essentially gave me permission to be curious in this way and added that you might also want to ask them to write a story, or write story with them. But you also start doing...maybe you want to ask them to write a story or write a story with them." This was the change for me, this was not just art, we were talking about bed wetting, we were talking about monsters, and about the things the kids are afraid for, trauma, shootings, war.

**David Haddad:** So, would you say that the symptoms you saw in these kids, like bed wetting, was a byproduct of the system in which they were in? The challenges of the system?

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yes.

**David Haddad:** Ok. So perhaps that is a link to COVID. Can we speak to the mental health issues that we see emerging during COVID?

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yes, kids would come in for bed-wetting but it's the trauma that they are going through. I did that work for almost a year and was very happy with the work. And then after I finished that work, I was working both with families and individuals. But I felt like I wanted more, I needed more of the arts." And that when I was introduced to the school in Switzerland that had a master's degree in expressive arts and was connected to Lesley. It was great for me, as it now allowed me to begin to put to words, what I only knew in action. This allowed me to use expressive arts more readily, which then put things in perspective. The statement that we always say in expressive arts is "low skills, high sensitivity." So, you don't have to have the skills in the arts, but you must be a highly sensitive, and collaborative if you want to use the arts in your clinical work. You want to be sensitive to the culture, you want to be sensitive to the age, you want to be sensitive to the gender, essentially understand the client in the context of their lived experience.

**David Haddad:** So, all those qualities that you speak of, are often not considered in many evidenced based, manualized treatments.

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yes, so many are skills-based, the expertise of the clinician. With expressive arts, the task is to be present, guide the client through the process, let them guide you, let them be in the driver's seat, and then work together on the things that they're going through. Journaling becomes fun, writing becomes fun, art is uplifting and become something the client enjoys engaging in. And, in that way, working alongside clients, guiding them, that can enhance their lives, not just for the session, but for life. So, getting back to COVID...

**David Haddad:** Yes.

**Yousef AlAjarma:** If you would ask me two years ago, "Would expressive arts work online? Or would it work with, I don't know, in COVID times?" "Yes, but I'm not sure if I want to do it." I would not be as excited to use expressive arts. Now having done this work now for almost two years, I can see how beneficial it is, we can do it. It's limited, like all therapies might be, but it remains an opportunity for client and clinician to do art together. Over the past months we have seen the emergence of software and websites to do arts with the clients. Like a virtual sand tray, for example, that you can use with your clients. There are many apps that allow the clinician to draw and paint with clients. Videos that clients can make representing some aspect of their lives that can then be talked about in session. All these activities require mindfulness, breathing, and taken together, expressive arts can be incredible valuable during covid as people are more isolated. Simply walking in nature can be an expressive art, working in the garden, all of these can be incorporated into expressive arts.

**David Haddad:** So, getting people outside into the environment.

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yes exactly, consider "Land art" or "earth art" has been around for thousands of years. Today if you go walking in nature, or strolling along a river, you're likely to see rocks piled on top of another that people have left...that is a form of land art.

**David Haddad:** Yes, since the pandemic began we have seen how getting out in nature, what has been referred by the trendy reference of "forest bathing" where people are going to just be in the forest and have the experience of being in nature. That in and of itself is healing. So introducing the idea of land art is another way of being in nature.

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yes, and just to be clear when I speak about land art, I think of sculptures, or carvings, any physical activity, using your body. If you're doing drama or music, you're using your body there, like, even...people are carving things in the trees or putting things together there in the forest or when they are outside... It's part of art, it, it's a physical activity. And that's the basic model when it comes to art, or art practices: you are using your body all the time when you are doing arts. If you are painting, you are using your body. If you are moving, you are using your body. If you are doing drama or music, or something... you are always using your body, "Take this feeling out of your body and put it somewhere. Externalize the experience and then dialogue about it.

**David Haddad:** So, one thing I often hear from students or clinicians who try to incorporate expressive arts, is a feeling of getting stuck, where the activity falls flat. But I hear you making a distinction here, it seems like you're saying the clinicians needs to bring a philosophical understanding to the activity if they hope to maximize the full potential of expressive arts.

**Yusef AlAjarma:** Yes, well you are feeling stuck, what is the stuckness about? I think that's really important. If you are only using one thing—say every time the child comes in and you ask them to draw without any direction, then you must refine your directions. Asking them to draw may be a good start, but as time goes on, you need to be more focused, leading them in the process. For example, if you have a family come to you and all the time you give them the jenga game to play with and you are not structuring it in a way, then the family may wonder, “What are we doing here?” Even though just the act of playing jenga together and communicating about that is really important, but without direction, it can simply be more of the same.

**David Haddad:** So, say more about that. I hear many students, as well as clinicians talk about game playing with children, yet the clinician does not provide a structure. How would you, if you were going to give people, our readers general advice about using games in therapy, how would expressive therapy help them to think about structure?

**Yusef AlAjarma:** I would always start with the unknowing and the observer perspective, just looking at what's happening, and then I might wonder, how was the communication between family members? Who took the lead? And how did that feel? How did you feel when your spouse told you, ‘No, that would ruin the game,’ or ‘Don't take this one,?’ How do you think your child felt when you pulled that jenga piece and the whole thing fell down?” So, it's not about them just having fun, but an opportunity for connection and understanding.

**David Haddad:** It's the process.

**Yusef AlAjarma:** Yes, the process is really important. And some people...not every therapist or not everybody who uses the arts will believe in the process as well. So, some will tell you that people can process that on their own. I believe that process is an important part of the work. And to process it when people are there, helping them see the process that expressive arts reveals. So here you are really pointing that process out, for example, “The next time you do this at home when you are playing this game together, notice what happens and talk about it.”

**David Haddad:** So you're teaching them skills that they can then go back into their home and think about. And just the intention to notice brings up many other opportunities to talk about process, or what the family values.

**Yusef AlAjarma:** Yes, for example, in my family we used to play monopoly. And my son would be the best player, and suddenly he would say “You know what? Here, mom, dad, you can take my money.” We would always talk about what a wonderful quality he was demonstrating, but it was also an opportunity to talk about money. So, we might say, that is very generous of you, but you might need to keep some. So, in this example, I was not saying that as a therapeutic intervention, but when we incorporate this into therapy, we use play as an opportunity to recognize patterns, helping families cultivate resources for managing the complexities of life. In game playing, we might wonder what kind of attitude do members bring to the moment? Are they punishing, or bullying? What do others say when these behaviors show up? So often these behaviors are just incorporated into the play, as families are simply not aware.

**David Haddad:** Right, absolutely. So as a family therapist and teaching family therapy and supervising family therapists, that process observation is the essence of family therapy. Content is important but process is what we're looking at.

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yes, And I love the arts with families because— with families so these art forms are non-threatening.

**David Haddad:** Yeah. What about with resistance? I know people talk about that where you have families coming in, they're under duress, and then you're asking them to engage in something... Could you say something about how you think about, resistance when that shows up in your experience working with families?

**Yousef AlAjarma:** I would say first to go with the resistance and see what it is, and if they're resisting something, why are they resisting that? So, if I'm introducing, say a family drawing task—to ask everybody...we have a big piece of paper, and let's all get on the floor or on the table and the direction to everyone is to create a family portrait of something of a family memory. And if somebody then says something like “Oh, this is dumb,” in the beginning, I might say “Ok, what's dumb about it? And why do you think it's dumb? “Oh, I'm not an artist,” I can say that it doesn't require talent, or let's do it and we can destroy it after. It will be up to you. But ultimately, it's all about the process, not the product. So that, that, that's another key in expressive arts: process versus product.

**David Haddad:** Right, so they're resistance is just an opportunity to explore their understanding skills, and also their willingness to go along with something to find a new solution.

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yes, I recall working with a family, we were not even doing any art. I asked them to think about, to come up with a memory that they all did together. And they start brainstorming things that they agree about, and they came up with a memory when they were driving across the country. And the interesting part was—that each of them has a different memory of that drive. They had disagreements about things: “No, we did not do that, we did this”, or “we went to that place.” And here the process was made clear. How is it that the family went through the same experience and had such different memories? What happens to those individual differences? In these memories we can see who aligns with who, we see coalitions, and triangulation. During this kind of non-threatening activity, we see conflict arise and then the family talks about it. While not clearly expressive arts, it becomes art when the therapist helps the family deepen the story.

**David Haddad:** It reminds me of one of the axioms of structural therapy that we can see how families process by watching how they organize, structural patterns, who talks to whom...

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Sure. In music you can ask them to talk about their favorite music or wonder if there are any favorite songs. Is there any kind of genre of music that the people can relate to? Is there any movie or tv show that they all can relate to and what's that about? And bring in more of the common things. So, the arts can bring so much of what is common between people, and in this way, increasing connection.

**David Haddad:** Thank you for sharing that. So, I am aware that we have a few moments left and I wanted to make sure I ask you about your international experience, having worked in Palestine, Israel, and Haiti. I'm wondering if you might make some observations about the type of challenges that kids are facing in some of the places that you have worked.

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yes. Even though there may be different circumstances and cultures, when it

comes to trauma and stress, I see lots of similarities. You can see the same signs; you can see kids withdraw, you can see them having nightmares, you can see them have behavioral issues. They come to therapy through bullying...I mean there are so many problems. And I would say, across the globe, you see similarities. How to work with them in each culture requires sensitivity, to ensure that you are doing something that really works within that culture. One example I have used is a guided meditation. I might begin: "Picture a red color," and then, "Picture a red delicious apple." So, I did this for many years and a few years back I was doing a training in Palestine, and I was saying this, and it was a certain difficult time and when I said, "Picture the color red," some people had some resistance with that, and we had to talk about it after I asked, "How was the guided meditation or imagery?" And people responded by saying, "It really was tough." When we explored this further, I learned that many of them had been witnesses to war trauma, and the color red brought up memories of blood, about suicide, about issues that they were not ready to deal with. Here, their difficulty with the exercise, became an opportunity to learn about their reaction to the trauma.

We did some similar work in Haiti, Guatemala, Hong Kong, and Canada. In Palestine, for many years I worked with refugees who have all suffered trauma, and the one common thread across all this was the need to make each intervention culturally appropriate, and sensitive to the context in which the client is embedded. Yet in all of these diverse cultures, people have their music; across all cultures people can relate to music—as long as you bring them the right music, or they choose their own music. In Haiti, for example, we used to ask people to sing and do the traditional dances that they enjoyed or inspired them. In this way the experience is theirs, shaped by their music, their lived experience. "This music is ours and we can use it." So, we would do that with the dances, we'd use music, we'd play games that are culturally appropriate and it's their own games. For example, the game hide and go seek is one game that children across the globe play, but with different variations. So, I would not just assume, if I say, "hide and go seek" people understand what that is. We would, brainstorm together and I might wonder, "Can we talk about games or things that you do to make you comfortable?" And people will list those. "Oh yeah, that's in my culture. We have that as well. In my culture we have that." Movements is another example, people across the globe have movement and dance as part of their experience. They will put their hands up to say stop, or come closer, or praying to God, it really doesn't matter what you call it, the client names it and the clinician joins in the experience.

**David Haddad:** Here the clinician is open, and curious...

**Yusef AlAjarma:** Yes. And when you are curious in this way, it is collaborative. The clinician enjoys, and feels the connection, and they clients feel seen and validated. So, in my international work as well as when I am working with clients in my office, I start by being curious, and wanting to know more.

**David Haddad:** Right, taking a stance of not knowing....

**Yusef AlAjarma:** "Tell me more. Educate me more on the arts or the things that you do." For example, when I do my individual work here or family work, I generally bring ten different kinds of markers, ten different kinds of oil pastels, two or three kinds of clay—which in reality, if you go somewhere else, especially other countries or other places, you'll only find one kind of clay, one kind of markers, and maybe one kind of paper as well. So, you want this to be accessible for people and for people to know that they can do this at any time they want. You don't have to get

the air-dry clay to do this. You want this experience to be accessible to them, even when you're not around.

**David Haddad:** As we come to the end of our time today, I hear you reminding us that as we prepare to use an art technique in session, let the activity, whatever it is, emerge from what your client values.

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yes. And you can also use the art as an assessment as well. In my work with the groups, I would give them a big piece of paper or small pieces of paper, and it's ask to create something "Why are you here? What brings you here? Or how will this be the most beneficial group for you?" And I would have them do that and then come together and talk about it.

**David Haddad:** So, everybody, so everyone is invited to write something or draw something.

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yes, there are many ways to use arts in assessments.

**David Haddad:** So, you're saying both narrative as well as more traditional arts could be used in some form of assessment.

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yes, and in each case, whenever possible, I want to let the client take the lead, to invite them to tell you what kind of arts they enjoy and are willing to try. To introduce something that is outside of their comfort zone. If it is too unusual, they might get stuck.

**David Haddad:** Well, thank you so much for this conversation, Yousef, you have been very gracious with your time, and I found the conversation very engaging, I hope you did as well.

**Yousef AlAjarma:** Yeah, it is always uplifting when we learn about each other.