Art and mental health
A submission to the NSW Health and the Arts TaskForce
This submission

By outlining its activities that foster and promote mental health and the arts, the NSW Mental Health Commission hopes that this submission will be valuable to the Taskforce as it makes recommendations to Government.

Lois Birk, Dancing tree, Living Well Photography exhibition
As part of the NSW Mental Health Commission’s commitment to promoting the importance of living well, breaking down stigma around mental illness and giving those living with mental illness a voice, over the past few years the Commission has hosted exhibitions of artworks on the theme of living well as well as a night of comedy ‘No Offence’. The exhibitions have featured works by people living with mental illness and have been possible through partnerships with other organisations. Some have been open to the general community and focus on promoting mental health.

This submission outlines how these activities have helped foster the principles of:

- improving mental health literacy
- building community and engagement
- acknowledging and raising awareness of arts and health practice and supporting effective mental health outcomes
Improving mental health literacy

Meeting the artists at launch events and seeing their works and the stories they share through their artist statements helps to create understanding and demystify the lived experience of mental illness.

One artist gives an insight into her state of mind through her artist statement:

“I feel alone and singled out, I am surrounded by negative voices which I hear all day. [There] seems like no way out. I am stuck in the middle. My mental health stops me from getting the most out of life. I wish people could see me as a person, not as an illness. Can things get better. Can I discover my dreams. Only time will tell.”

Margaret Mackay, See Me Hear Me exhibition

Staff and visitors to the Commission who view the exhibitions on display remark on how touched they are by experiencing the artworks and reading the artists’ statements. They gain an insight into what it can be like living with mental illness. Connections are made through the art.

Melanie Kirton, The Path, See Me Hear Me exhibition

“This painting shows the darkness of the forest and this is like the darkness of our minds and souls. At the very end of the path there is a faint light of hope in the darkness. This is the path many of us travel. A dark path full of struggles and sorrow but in the end there is light that we strive to get to.”
Building community and engagement

By sharing the artworks with visitors and on the Commission's website and social media channels, the Commission is connecting people through art, sharing the artworks and the stories of struggle and recovery that go with them, amplifying the consumer voice. Breaking down barriers and stigma by showing the human-ness of the artists.

Commission staff and visitors have been able to purchase artworks on display at the exhibition, by contacting the artists directly and negotiating payment. This gives the artists confidence and a social connection beyond their usual circle. It also allows people working at the Commission and in the community more generally to relate directly to people living with mental illness.

The Commission has also featured artworks displayed at its office through its social media channels, sharing the message of living well with its online networks.

Lee Woon Lim, *Laughing makes me feel great*, What makes me happy makes me well exhibition
Acknowledging and raising awareness of arts and mental health practice, supporting effective mental health outcomes

By using consumer art and promoting consumer art exhibitions, the Commission is raising awareness of art and mental health practice and supporting positive outcomes as evidenced through artist statements that tell how art making has helped in the artist’s recovery journey:

“My artwork through the years has always been a therapy for me. This allows me to stay on my spiritual journey creating new song lines for self and my children and children to come... This year 2015 the works I have created helped me through my healing process to be grounded and focus on my health and wellbeing.”

Debra Beale, Recovery in Art exhibition

“I paint for the pursuit of relaxation and the capacity to get “outside of myself”. Painting provides an escape from both myself and a reality that can be hard for me at times.”

Brigitte Van Heere, See Me Hear Me exhibition

“This work symbolizes regrowth after the trials we face in life. As the trees are burnt during a bushfire and in time sprout new foliage; we can endure, learn and move on to new possibilities. The beauty of the natural world can give us such peace that we are enriched and inspired to create. It nurtures our minds and teaches us life lessons. The Benevolent Society courses helped get me restarted on this creative journey.”

Jan Neaves, See Me Hear Me exhibition

“I have been painting for many years. I feel good when I complete a work, that I have achieved something. Painting settles my mood.”

Aree Grandpoulos, See Me Hear Me exhibition

The Recovery in Art exhibition featured Richard Bell, who has spoke about how writing poetry has helped him express and share his experiences in a positive and creative light at the launch in October 2015.

The exhibitions may also provide the artists with confidence and ideas for their art-making or to pursue other interests.

Aree Grandpoulos, Climbing vines, See Me Hear Me exhibition
Endorsing a partnership approach

The Commission, as a government organisation, has partnered with various community organisations and other government agencies in order to host the exhibitions and launch events. These include the Benevolent Society, the Gaimaragal Group, Sydney North Shore and Beaches Partners in Recovery, Sydney Local Health District and Being. These partnerships help to promote the benefits of arts programs for people living with mental illness as well as the general community. The Commission has been able to provide in-kind support through an investment in time and engagement to foster these events as well as providing a venue and covering hanging and catering costs.

People living with mental illness, their carers and supporters are at the heart of mental health reform. This focus and sense of partnership is reflected through a wide consultation with these groups but also in the use of art by people with mental illness on the covers of Living Well (Plan and Report). These artworks were bought by the Commission and royalties were paid to the artist according to the use of the image in print and online publications.

A small collection of art by people living with mental illness is housed at the Commission office, to demonstrate the commitment to supporting art practice as part of mental health recovery.
In 2013 and 2014, the Commission worked with the Benevolent Society to bring a series of ‘See Me Hear Me’ art exhibitions to the Gladesville office. The Commission welcomed the Benevolent Society, and artists from the Campbelltown and Fairfield areas whose work was displayed at the Commission as part of the See Me, Hear Me exhibition.

The exhibition series featured works made by people who live with mental illness, almost all of them self-taught. The Benevolent Society has exhibited works in south west Sydney at the Campbelltown Arts Centre, Fairfield City Museum and Gallery, Liverpool Library, NSW Parliament House and various venues in Bowral.

In November, the Sydney Local Health District kindly donated for temporary display at the Commission artworks submitted to its inaugural Living Well Photography Competition. The competition was open to residents and employees of the District and was held to mark Mental Health Month. Submissions captured representations of wellbeing, resilience, purpose or happiness and all related to the competition theme of ‘Living Well, Mental Health’. The Commission celebrated the exhibition with a morning tea on 17 November. View the gallery.

Also displayed mid year were pieces from a PhotoVoice Project on the theme ‘What makes me happy, makes me well’. This photographic exhibition was a collaborative initiative of the Northern Sydney First Australian Community, The Gaimaragal Group and Sydney North Shore and Beaches Partners in Recovery. View the gallery.

Currently on display at the Commission are works from Being’s 2015 Recovery in Art exhibition. The collection features artworks by those with a lived experience of mental illness, in recognition that art can play an important role in people’s recovery journey. The artists featured joined with Commission and Being staff on 8 December for a celebratory launch of the exhibition. Read more about Recovery in Art on Being’s website.
A night of comedy: breaking down barriers and reducing stigma and discrimination.

To increase awareness of mental health issues and to help reduce stigma and discrimination, the Commission hosted No Offence, a night of comedy and conversation about stigma, language and mental health.

The event, held in June 2015 at the Cell Block Theatre in Sydney, featured comedians, media professionals and performers who shared inspiring and often hilarious insights into their experiences with mental illness and the role that language and stigma have played in their lives.

Comedian Nelly Thomas compered the event and Olympian and author Matthew Mitcham was among the star performers, engaging the audience with his raw account of struggles with mental illness, sexuality and addiction. Deputy Commissioner Fay Jackson entertained and challenged with her candid account of the power of language in mental health as part of a panel of speakers including Bjorn Stewart (Black Comedy) and Chris Taylor (The Chaser), facilitated by Lynne Malcolm (ABC). Amy Vee played original songs about reducing stigma and comedians Zac Anderson and Mel de Silva provided insights into living with bipolar disorder.

“No Offence... was a spectacular success. It made people laugh and think – a sure way to win hearts and minds.”

John Feneley
About the Commission

The Mental Health Commission of NSW is an independent statutory agency responsible for monitoring, reviewing and improving the mental health system and the mental health and wellbeing for people in NSW. It works with Government and the community to secure better mental health and wellbeing for everyone and to prevent mental illness, and to ensure the availability of appropriate supports in or close to home when people are unwell or at risk of becoming unwell.

In all its work, the Commission is guided by the lived experience of people with mental illness, and their families and carers. The Commission promotes policies and practices that recognise the autonomy of people who experience mental illness and support their recovery, emphasising their personal and social needs and preferences as well as broader health

The Commission works in three main ways:

- Advocating, educating and advising about positive change to mental health policy, practice and systems in order to support better responses to people who experience mental illness, and their families and carers.

- Partnering with community-managed organisations, academic institutions, professional groups or government agencies to support the development of better approaches to the provision of mental health services and improved community wellbeing, and promote their wide adoption.

- Monitoring and reviewing the current system of mental health supports and progress towards achieving the Actions in the Strategic Plan, and providing this information to the community and the mental health sector in ways that encourage positive change.

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