

IN FOCUS: PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

Most publicly available information about mental health appears to focus on mental illness, and research shows that most young people interpret “mental health” as meaning mental illness. It is also known that many “at-risk” young people lack the necessary social support networks and skills to cope with adverse life events and that the creative arts are a useful tool for promoting self-expression, health and wellbeing.

In Focus was a pilot project that aimed to engage and support at-risk young people (aged 12-25 years) from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds by promoting positive mental health and wellbeing through the creative medium of photography.

This collaborative project was funded by the NSW Transcultural Mental Health Centre and was proudly sponsored by Platinum Imaging (a Chakra Alliance Member) and Fuji Film. The Transcultural Mental Health Centre’s Youth Mental Health Project worked in partnership with several youth health, mental health and multicultural services across eastern, central, south-western and western Sydney in 2003.

Young people were recruited to participate in interactive workshops and outings, culminating in a roving photography exhibition (October 2003 to April 2004). They were given disposable cameras and encouraged to explore and capture images that they felt best reflected positive mental health and wellbeing and the experience of living in a culturally diverse society.

In Focus enabled service providers to connect with young people who were particularly at risk because of language barriers, poor literacy skills, homelessness or risk of homelessness, education break down, or under-utilisation of youth health services because of stigma or lack of awareness. The project allowed youth health workers and young people to engage in a creative, positive and constructive process to explore issues and portray images relating to

mental health and multicultural Australia — themes particularly relevant in today’s political and social climate. Most importantly, *In Focus* promoted the mental health and wellbeing of the young people involved by providing them with access to early intervention services such as counselling; encouragement to re-engage with their schooling to pursue the creative arts; and the chance to express their thoughts and make new friends. As a medium for self-expression for these young people, photography proved to be an accessible yet powerful communication and educational tool.

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For other images see following page.



