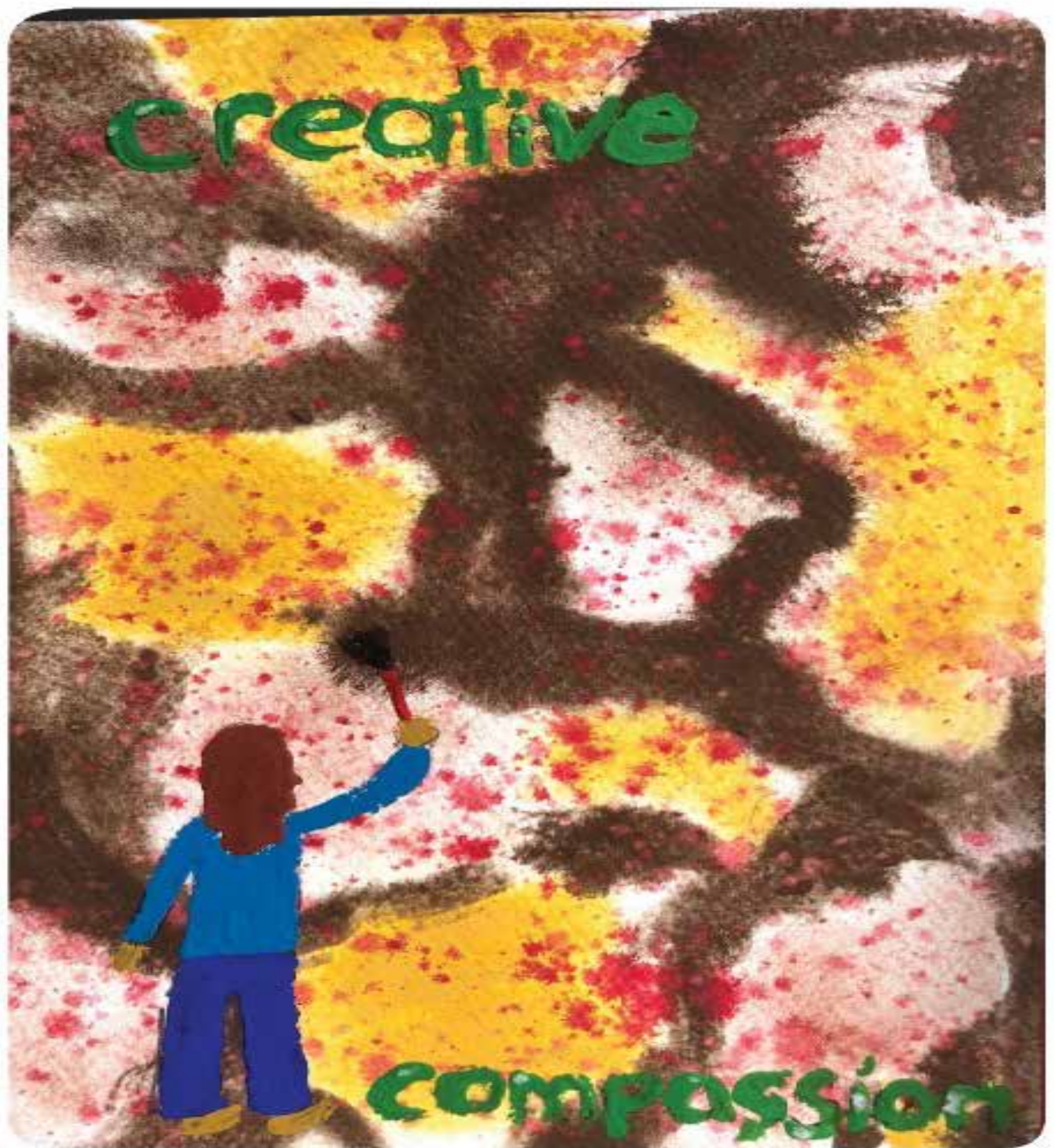




**Arts based compassion
workshops.
A RealArtWorks.Inc report.**

Compiled by Sunita Bala

A snapshot.

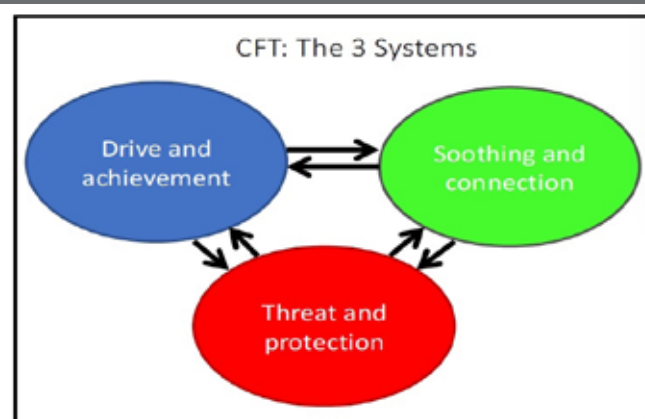
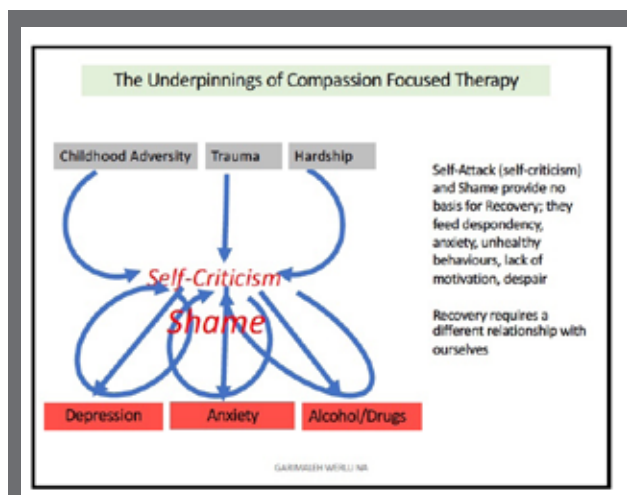
The Creative Compassion Workshop was a project partnership between Realartworks.Inc, The University of Rural Health (UCRH) and was Commonwealth funded through the North Coast Primary Health Network.

During a 3 month period from March-May 2018, UCRH facilitators, Professor James Bennett-Levy and Natalie Rouxburgh collaborated with RealArtWorks Creatives, Sunita Bala, Zeb Schulz, Mat Daymond, Michael Philp and Shelly Nagas to deliver a series of workshops that explored the concepts of compassion based therapy through creativity. The workshops engaged clients of Aboriginal based community services: Rekindling The Spirit, Namatjira Haven and Bunjum Corporation Ballina. A total of 3 workshop programs were held and took place at the facility hosting the workshops.

The workshops were free to participants. They engaged a total of 35 participants with ages ranging from 15-78 years old and were facilitated by professional artists to create exciting artworks using a number of art forms and materials.

The focus was for participants to engage in their creativity, learn new skills and learn more about their relationship to themselves and others through the concepts of compassion based therapy, devised by Prof Paul Gilbert (UK) in early 2000 to address shame and self-criticism where traditional therapies were not working. The antidote to shame recognises the affect regulation systems of Threat, Drive and Soothing and encompassed the concepts of Compassion for Other, Receiving Compassion and Compassion for Self.

The workshops were open to all abilities, were fully accessible and did not require participants to attend each week, but presented a flexible and adaptable approach that was responsive to participant's lives and needs.



The Workshops.

Rekindling the Spirit.

Dates: 15th March-19th April 2018

Creative Facilitators: Sunita Bala, Michael Phelps

Rekindling The Spirit is a program that services the Aboriginal Families of Lismore and the surrounding areas, dealing with a clientele who have substance abuse issues, problems with violent behaviour, and difficulty connecting with Partners and Children.

6 all day workshops took place at Rekindling The Spirit and involved a total of 15 participants that included two Rekindling the spirit facilitators. Both men and women attended with ages ranging from 19- 65.

Participants were supported to learn skills in visual arts: painting with water colours, gouache, collage and mixed media to create their own A5 cards that reflected both the creative skills that were being taught the concepts about compassion and resulting conversations amongst the group that evolved. A total of 46 cards were created, professionally printed and presented as a deck of boxed sets that participants received at a morning exhibition and celebration of their work. The set also included the words of the guided meditation that James from UHCR facilitated at the end of each workshop and that participants felt resonated strongly with them.



Namatjira Haven.

Dates: May 28th 2018

Creative Facilitators: Zeb Schulz, Sunita Bala, Michael Philp, Mat Daymond.

Namatjira Haven Drug & Alcohol Healing Centre is an independent Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation. The Gulgiuwen program for Men is designed for Aboriginal men aged 18 years + and is intended to provide education and support towards addressing the issues of substance misuse and related harms such as criminality, and to improve health and well-being.

This all day, one day workshop engaged 5 male participants and their Councillor. The creative facilitators considered that most of these men were at different points in their journey of recovery, felt that the previous workshop of collaging and sitting around a table would not be as successful. There was an agreement that participants needed to be able to move around freely, expend physical energy and also exercise the decision to not engage on individual pieces of work if they preferred not to. The workshop also considered that the men who were not at Namatjira necessarily by choice, were residents of the facility but may not know each other well. In response to this, the workshop was created with opportunities for the men to collaborate and share experiences and stories in a way that encouraged bonding and peer support.

The workshop consisted of a giant canvas where participants painted, collaged and printed around the concepts of compassion that needed them to move around freely to work on the different elements of the canvas.

The most popular part of the workshop was when participants created their own design to be exposed onto screens and screenprinted onto shirts. Participants were actively involved in all parts of the process. The day facilitated much conversation and sharing of stories as well as an end of day guided reflection and mediation facilitated by James.

"The pride in the men's faces as they screen printed their own designs onto the t-shirts was palpable. One of the men had an iron which he brought from his room, so that they could heat seal the designs to make them permanent, by the end of the workshop several of the participants were wearing the shirts that they had printed that day, and sharing their designs with each other, words and designs about the change they were experiencing being a part of the program. Every time they wear that shirt they will remember that feeling. A tangible reminder of the compassion they felt for themselves and their fellow participants" **Zeb Schulz** screen printing facilitator.



Bunjum.

Dates: May 24th 2018

Creative Facilitators: Sunita Bala and Shelly Nagas

Bunjum provides various services and support to Goori People (Aboriginal) on Bundjalung Country to access support services and connect to Aboriginal Cultural Heritage,

The Bunjum workshop was held off site at a retreat and was initially a two day workshop. The workshops engaged women who ranged from ages 15-67. 12 women attended which included 4 support staff. Some of the women were supported to attend from very socially isolated places such as Cabbage Tree Island. The women were supported to learn skills in painting, collage and printing to create their own A1 posters that reflected both their identity and relationship to the Circles of Compassion.

Shelly Nagas an emerging Aboriginal artist co-facilitated the workshops, giving her the opportunity to upskill and gain an experience in workshop facilitation. She also brought to the workshops a new artform: live music performance where she performed songs that she had written about resilience and recovery and that strongly resonated with the participants.

A death in the community the next day meant that the workshop was cut to one day and that participants did not attend the last workshop day.



Key Factors that contributed to the success of the project.

The workshops included facilitators skilled in working with participants of varying abilities and who were also skilled in delivering the concepts of compassion through quality art facilitation. Both creative facilitators had experience in working with Aboriginal people and had received training in cultural awareness.

The workshops were free, accessible and catered to all abilities. The venue was not only physically accessible, but were open to all creative abilities. This allowed for people who are normally excluded inadvertently not only from the arts but from many areas of community power the opportunity to engage and bring their own stories and perspective to the creative table and create new social networks like these. The making of collaborative art fostered an environment of reciprocity, trust and cooperation making it a safe place to share stories around the concepts of compassion.

"I collaged a photo of my son. He's the one that keeps me going. Keeps me wanting to heal myself and make a new life. He is the soul" **Richard, Participant Namatjira Haven.**



Skilled creative facilitators.

The workshop included facilitators skilled in quality art making and the group used quality art materials which gave participants who wanted to be taught art skills the opportunity to create quality work in painting, screen printing and other mediums. Many of the participants did not consider themselves creatives and for many of the participants these new skills contributed to a sense of achievement and confidence to try something new.

"At first I felt stuck, I didn't know what to draw on my card, but talking to Sunny really helped. I discovered that my soothing place was my spirituality, and staying home to watch DVD's calms me and allows me to get away from all the stress of work, even though I love my work. I started painting my card without knowing why I was using those colours and images and it was only through talking about my card that I realised what I was trying to say. That I need to stop being harsh on myself. I'm my worst critic" **Sarah, Councillor, Rekindling The Spirit.**

The creative facilitators also had a solid understanding and were skilled in delivering the concepts of compassion.

"It's beautiful, all the colours I see now. I used to look at a tree and think, that's a green tree. But now I see lots more colours in the leaves and the bark. I started looking at art books, lots of different styles of art. I'm thinking differently about my World. I'm being kinder to myself. I have too many people wanting too much for me. I know now from doing this compassion stuff that I have to stop or I will drop." **Nancy, Participant Rekindling the Spirit.**



Equal participation and ownership.

There was no hierarchy between participants and facilitators. Group guidelines around communication and confidentiality were created and agreed on by the whole group. Everyone engaged in art making around the table and everyone used their art making to contribute to the conversations around compassion and to interpret and assign their own personal meaning or memories to the activity.

"In terms of my personal journey, it was the most relaxing group I've ever been involved with! I loved doing the art, and being a participating member of the group. To my surprise this was something group members really appreciated - they saw a different side of me, and it somehow 'humanised' the psychologists, Natalie and me (who at times hit 'artist-block' too)." **James Bennett-Levy, Facilitator, UCRH.**

The physical set up of the seating was culturally sensitive and resembled a “yarning circle” that resonated with the participants. The sharing of food over lunch and morning teas were a successful way for the participants to bond and create an harmonious group. The sharing of food reflected the importance Aboriginal people put on sharing as part of their culture and as a means to bond and build trust. The participants were in charge of the music and used it as an opportunity to play favorite songs and share their experiences and memories that were provoked through the music.

An equitable environment meant that learnings happened for both participants and the facilitators.

Strength based focus.

This was not art therapy. Participants and facilitators were encouraged to reflect and acknowledge their experiences and stories but the focus was not on reliving the trauma to gain healing. The focus instead was to build on the strengths and supports of the person, to challenge and stretch their abilities and learn new skills which contributed to personal growth. Within this there was a sense of risk taking through stretching one’s comfort zone to learn new ways of doing and thinking. People through the workshops discovered new interests and passions that they intended to continue to explore.

“The workshop inspired me to buy some canvases and paints for my grandchildren. I said to them, “Let’s paint what happiness looks like.” They were so fast and the paintings so real and honest. They are up over my mantel piece. Children are so honest” **Sarah, Councillor, Rekindling The Spirit.**



Responsive and fluid.

The workshops took into account that most aboriginal participants have large extended families and complex family obligations. Participants were free to come and go in the workshop space as they needed to. They were able to take their art home to continue their work and felt that they were still welcome to rejoin the group if they had missed a week.

Whilst the facilitators did have a workshop agenda and plan, these were parameters that allowed for the mood and focus of the group to dictate what was discussed and when. For James and Natalie, previous workshops on compassion therapy had not been as successful in engaging the Aboriginal community. The new round of workshops which covered less theory were more conversational and generated a greater input from participants.

"I don't think the workshops would have been as good without the art making. I don't want to be talked at. I want to learn about compassion in my own way with others. Sitting and making art, sharing ideas, gave me the chance to tell my story in my own way and learn from the group. That's real compassion" **Lisa, Participant Rekindling The Spirit.**



The power of Creativity.

There is the perception that the role of the arts in recovery is simply about cheering people up and providing a short term distraction through entertainment.

People do need respite. The arts give people a reason to come together to relax, and engage in a leisure activity that enables them to take a break.

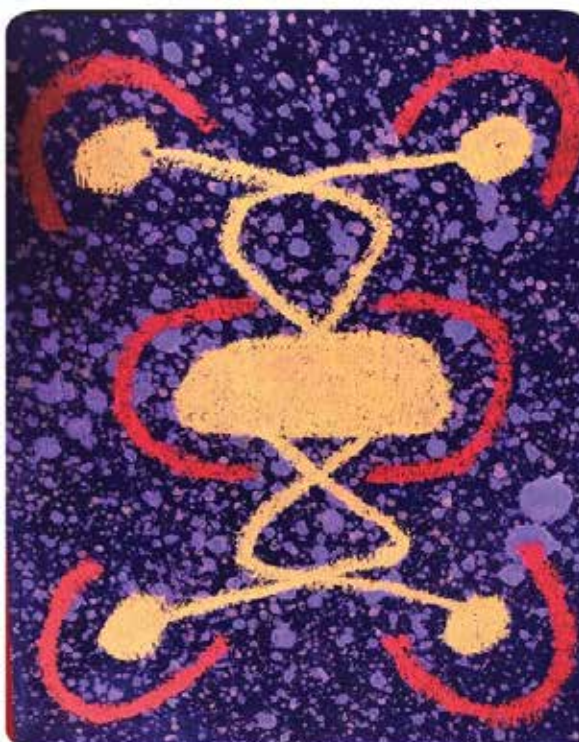
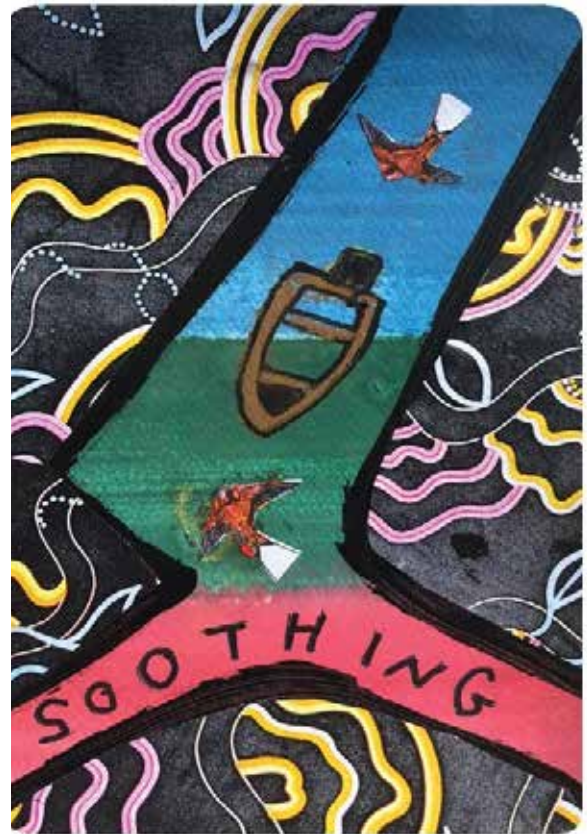
The workshops on one level provided entertainment and joy when people faced difficult challenges rebuilding their lives. But the arts engender so much more than that and can contribute to long-term outcomes of recovery and rebuilding of communities.

"Making art makes time go slower. I can breathe. I can think about things and think about myself. I used to write lyrics to songs and I haven't written anything since being in here. I'm going to get myself a notebook and start writing again" **Jason, Participant Namatjira Haven.**

For many people in this evaluation, coming together to play was an important part of their recovery.

"My young nephews: one's a recovering alcoholic and one is getting off the gunga. Two of them, always sitting around drawing and painting. I used to think to myself, 'why you fella's wasting your time?' Now I know, the art was healing, if they weren't making art they would go crazy" **Jack, Participant Rekindling The Spirit.**

I am a 68 year old aboriginal man. I reckon I won the trifecta, I'm black, I'm male and I live regionally. I never did any art as a kid. It wasn't what young fella's did back then. I never thought about what it was like to feel happy. Today when I was makin' art I realised" I feel happy. This is what happy feels like." **Jack, Participant Rekindling The Spirit.**



"I really enjoyed the workshops. There was a good feeling in the group and it was good to have a day for myself to forget about the outside world and have a laugh. The Compassion workshops taught me to look inside myself and find the beauty that makes me, me. The meditation at the end of the day was healing, I learned to smile and say hello to myself. I see how I can take this and share what I have learned with my family. My children and I are making a set of compassion cards for my husband. I want to share this with them." **Mary, Participant Rekindling The Spirit.**

Creative projects had a tangible outcome.

The focus on making something tangible helped bring order to people's lives, when everything else signified disorder. Counseling is good, but art can be better.

"Why am I not painting circles? I'm painting stars. I'm sick of going round in circles. That's all I do and it's gonna stop" **Isobel Participant Bunjum.**

Colour, touch, and vibrational qualities of music can touch people's emotional core and it was more natural for participants to talk while making a mural together, painting, or creating a card. In this way, they could share stories in a group, in their own time.

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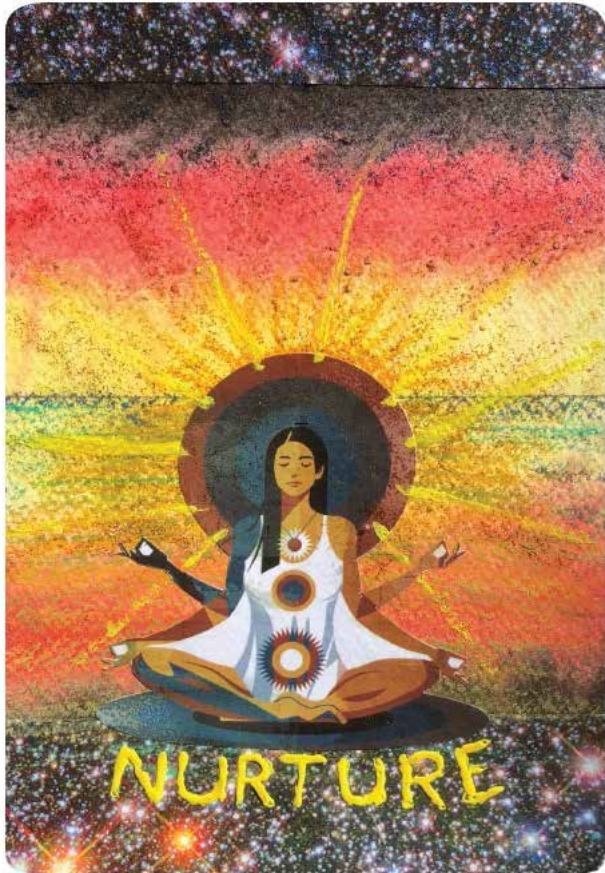
Accommodating people recovering at different rates and in their own way.

Successful recovery initiatives should recognize and accommodate the need for flexibility and adaptability. Not everyone is at the same stage of recovery. The workshops were structured around creative concepts but allowed people to create individually or in groups their own art projects.

"Making my own design and screenprinting my own shirt was great! I felt pretty proud. When Ray asked if he could print my design on his shirt it felt good!" **Jason, Participant Namatjira Haven.**



"I really loved the compassion workshops. It was really cool that we all didn't all make the same images for safety and for drive. We all had different ideas about what that meant for us. I couldn't think about what drives me at first, but then I realised it's my art. It's inspired me to take the chance and have my first market stall this weekend" **Lisa, Participant Rekindling The Spirit.**



Some people did not make art all of the time but wanted to just sit and listen as being around others with a shared experience was just as helpful.

"We all have different ways of knowing ourselves. The compassion workshops made me think about how I love myself now. I have done a lot of bad things to myself and the people I love in the past. Doing this project, I learned to forgive myself, and that's really hard. It showed me a different level, a different way of knowing myself. It really was a light bulb moment, a realisation that I want to be kinder to myself" **Danny, Councillor Rekindling the Spirit.**

The workshops ended each day with a guided relaxation and meditation. For most participants, this was a new experience and one that most participants felt they would use again.

'I know that I feel the same way when I go out into the bush. Going bush is my soothing card," **Roy, Participant Namatjira Haven.**

Art making is soothing.

Art making created the ambience and context for participants to work from the soothing system as opposed to threat.

Because art is slow, you cannot take it fast, it is absorbing and is focused on one thing. For Aboriginal communities, art making is core to their expression and when the subject matter is compassion it gave the opportunity for the group to build a solid foundation of trust and safety.

Workshop facilitator James who had run previous compassion workshops without a creative focus recognized that these workshops were too intellectual and potentially could trigger people back into trauma

"In our debrief following previous groups, we recognised we needed a different approach. The previous 'talking group' approach had been gruelling for some of the clients, for the Aboriginal health professionals and for us. One of the conclusions we came to were: Imagery exercises which are usually used to build self-compassion skills easily triggered past memories of abuse, distress, grief in some of these participants. These methods were unsafe. Another method to build self-compassion was required" **James Bennett-Levy, Facilitator, UCRH.**



In conclusion.

The workshops were extremely successful and met their objective of introducing the theory of self-compassion in a way that was sensitive and relevant to the participants and gave participants control about how and when they engaged.

"These groups were a revelation - a total opposite of the pre-Christmas groups: Participants found them a joy to participate in; they were a pleasure to run; and participants had major breakthroughs in their thinking about themselves and their worlds.

Over our many years of working with Aboriginal people, we consider art-based CFT to be one of the most promising approaches to enhancing social and emotional wellbeing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients that we have yet been involved with." **James Bennett-Levy, Facilitator, UCRH.**

Language was also an important consideration. A flyer that was distributed by UCRH to the Aboriginal community prior to the Rekindling the Spirit workshop calling for participants, used language GURIMALEH WERLU NA (Taking care of yourself) that was not of the language of the Nation used in the town of Lismore where the workshop was being held and so did not resonate with some local Aboriginal people specific to the Lismore area.

On the other hand participants that did attend, did share their stories and experiences in a safe non-confrontational creative space and through the workshops were open to using the terminology such as "soothing, drive and threat" to describe their experiences. Participants also acknowledged that finding "common ground" through language and activities that did not require words created a deeper understanding and appreciation for their journey together.

In retrospect, the most successful workshop was the one held at Rekindling The Spirit which gave participants time to absorb and reflect on stories and concepts. Facilitators acknowledged that in the future, for workshops to be a valuable and relevant experience for facilitators and participants, the length of the course is a vital consideration.

Projects such as Creative Compassion are vitally important. They cross the divide between race, culture, gender and nation. They show us that the principles of compassion are universal and as old as time itself. That in order for communities and individuals to grow and strive, not just thrive, we need to revisit and remind ourselves of where we have come from, where we are now and where we are going. In doing so we acquire the knowledge and confidence that we are able to be in the present and meet whatever the future has in store for us.



