Labelled a Freak - Eating Disorder Prevention through Body Image Workshops for Young Women

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I don’t even know who I should be
I don’t even know who is me
Am I real
Am I thin
Maybe I’m hollow (1998:41)

The societal construction of gender is based within the boundaries of the flesh. This reconstruction allows no scope for the personal creation of identity. Our patriarchal culture has promoted and propagated a myriad of myths and taboos surrounding idealised forms of feminine beauty. This has perpetuated a crisis of identity arising from the constricting notions of the female roles not of an individual sexual being, however, of carer, nurturer, mother, cook, sexual object, the thinner and more bereaved the better, all working together to create a masked and gagged body. It is imperative to create an open forum for young women to work together to squash the beauty myth and promote the acceptance of diversity.

THE LABELLED A FREAK JOURNEY

It was, I believe, through fate and destiny combined, that in 1996 I found a journal I wrote over a brief time during 1982–83 while I was undergoing treatment in a psychiatric institution for Anorexia Nervosa. It is the text of this journal that forms the framework of Labelled a Freak the book and the platform for the young women and eating disorder prevention workshops.

I was treated for Anorexia Nervosa over a period of four years, substantially wiping out my teenage years. My first hospital admission was in 1980 at the age of thirteen; my final contact with the Clinic and the professionals involved with my case was in 1984 at the age of seventeen. This was a terrifying and extremely destructive time of my life, for myself, my family and all those who shared their love with me.

What is it that labels do
they’ll always affect both me and you
labels manage to take the key
the key to your individuality
don’t let them tell you who you are
then you’ll manage to fly free and far
look inside and find yourself
take the chances you create
I choose to believe in fate (1998:4)
The _Labelled a Freak_ young women and body image workshops are designed to explore the issues surrounding identity, self image and eating disorder prevention. By offering participants a safe, supportive, trusting and creative environment, we endeavour to create alternative representations of the body through the deconstruction of stereotypes and myths inherent in the media and societal notions of beauty. _Labelled a Freak_ works on the basic principle of empowerment through validation and ownership of the personal process creating a constant sense of progression and hope.

_Labelled a Freak_ is a journey of discovery which is taken together.

A series of workshop tasks are planned before the workshop begins, however, the direction and focus must always be the decision of the participants, remembering they are the experts and we are merely the facilitators. This leads me to the conclusion that the best laid plans will most likely be tossed out the window. The project by its nature necessitates an organic process to occur. The only rule is constant validation of the participant’s ideas. We have on display at all times the various art works, brainstorming sheets and relevant material from our workshops, enabling the young women to feel included and proud.

The Victoria Body Image and Better Health Program found “72% of teenage girls want to be thinner, even some who are of normal or low weight.” (1996:1). The centre for dietary disorders at the University of Sydney states “Of all women 18–30 years, 18% will suffer from an eating disorder with less than 50% making a full recovery and up to 20% dead by 20 years” (1996:29).

A 1996 eating disorder needs assessment conducted on the Central Coast estimates that “7500 individuals in NSW are suffering from Anorexia Nervosa, while 3% of the female population are suffering from Bulimia Nervosa. In NSW it is estimated that 570 new cases of Bulimia arise each year” (EDNA:1996). Timing is of the essence and we must act now to curb the increasing incidences of eating disorders and false representations of young women.

The Central Coast along with many rural areas is suffering from an alarming lack of support and treatment options for people affected by an Eating Disorder. A holistic, multi-disciplinary approach is essential, as no one person will be suffering from the exact same issues. My dream is to start a holistic healing farm, which will incorporate alternative healing methods, psychotherapy, and the arts to create viable choices for people to choose the best options for their journey towards recovery. _Labelled a Freak_ is primarily a prevention project and the start towards a greater dream.

**ARTISTIC PRACTICES AND SELF-DIRECTED GROUP WORK**

The _Labelled a Freak_ project actively encourages young people from all walks of life to participate in the workshops. The project is based on empowerment and giving young women a voice to be able to participate in the decisions, which affect their lives. The workshops are designed to follow a self-directed group work format, whereby the participants set the agenda of progress, giving ownership of the project to the young women involved. The project works toward increasing the self-respect of participants whilst also acquiring skills in the areas of creative and visual arts, multi-media,
performance art, writing and music. While endeavouring to unlock the often hidden reality that food is fun. Labelled a Freak is designed to increase the self-love of all those involved with and touched by the project.

The initial Labelled a Freak workshops are used as a basis for the creative being to explode. Discussion is focused on the concepts behind the Labelled a Freak project and what the young women would like to achieve. We explore issues such as stereotypical media images and how these images can effect the individual and society in general. Moving on to look at labelling and the devastating effects of this form of practice, ensuring the reality that an individual is a whole being with a myriad of issues affecting one’s life. When a label is accepted you lose your identity, leaving it extremely difficult to regain your essence of truth. The group then focuses on the issues of “normality”, attractiveness, the real and unreal and the female as a construction of mainstream cultural values. This works to promote a positive and holistic body image message to enable freedom from such limitations and new growth to begin.

Food fiestas are also a vital element throughout the Labelled a Freak process. We believe giving the young women involved an opportunity to eat various healthy and “taboo” munchies will help to relieve food phobias while experiencing new and unusual delicacies. This process works toward creating the reality that food can contribute to the enjoyment of life.

The use of creative arts is a key used to unlock the hidden self. Artistic endeavours are constantly being discussed and acted upon to succour the stepping stones essential to bridging the gap between the individual and society. The pilot project for Labelled a Freak acted upon the desires of the young women to create a video Distortion, culminating from the extensive range of ideas created within the ten-week workshop process. This was produced once funding for the project had finished in my (the facilitators) backyard with a borrowed video camera and free editing assistance.

The Labelled a Freak pilot project and the second round of workshops have been funded through the Gosford Council Community and Cultural Development Funding Scheme and auspiced by Wyoming Women’s Health Centre. The most recent workshops have also been supported by way of space and skills of the arts worker to co-facilitate the workshop process through YPPI (young people prevention and intervention) a service provided by Gosford Hospital. Creative and visual arts have been a constant tool within this workshop process, used to continually validate the concepts generated by the young women involved. The use of differing arts practices gives the participants choice in a world where they often believe they have none, creating a sense of confidence to begin the release of hidden fears.

An integral part of the second round of Labelled a Freak has been to incorporate new ways of seeing. We have been able to do this not only through varied arts practices, but, by also gleanng an essence of spirituality of the land and ourselves. Travelling Country is a process designed and facilitated by Omera Edwards allowing us to see truth, life and meaning through Indigenous eyes. Omera takes us as a group into our coastal bush to explain the spirituality of the land. This enables us to experience local Aboriginal dreaming stories and practices such as making paint from ochre, collecting and eating bush tucker while being instrumental to our own connection to the harmony and energy which surrounds our environment. This process enable the young women involved to
glean an even greater knowledge of choice and a sound base to work towards a respect of self, others and the environment we live in.

**CO-FACILITATION THE KEY TO EMPOWERMENT**

Co-facilitation is a central aspect of the workshop process. Not only does this form of practice allow for support, it generates and creates energy forces, which are unobtainable when flying solo. Through this method of practice we are able to increase the skills and knowledge base for both the workers and participants. The *Labelled a Freak* workshops are a combination of issue-based discussion and artistic action. The blending of two workers doesn’t allow for young people to fall through the gaps. While one facilitator is focused on the task at hand, the other is picking up on the energy, attention, apathy or fear generated by the participants. Constant validation of the young women’s process is an integral part of increasing the self-esteem of those involved.

A core, element of the co-facilitation process is to be able to thrash out the workers values and beliefs surrounding the causes and societal factors involved in the issue of young women and body image, keeping us on track and focused. An imperative aspect of the process has been to look at our own inherent value systems and to recognise their alignment with the principles of self-directed group work. We have been able to evaluate past work practices and recognise that our working styles and ethics fit within five practice principles as stated by Mullander and Ward in their text, *Self Directed Group Work*.

♦ We must refuse to accept negative labels and recognise all people are valuable with skills, understanding and ability.

♦ People have the right to be heard and to control their own lives.

♦ Practice must reflect the reality of people’s situations taking into account the issues of oppression, social policy, the environment and the economy.

♦ Practice can effectively be built on the knowledge that people acting collectively can be powerful.

♦ Methods of working must reflect non-elitist principles”. (1991:31)

**WORKSHOP AIMS**

♦ To broaden the range and scope of body beautiful images throughout our community.

♦ To develop strategies to combat the bombardment of negative images of the body and challenge these destructive messages.

♦ To create an increasing awareness of the need for positive and realistic representations of the body.

♦ To increase the self-esteem of those involved in and exposed to the workshops.
To promote new ways of seeing.

To incorporate an essence of truth and spirituality through Indigenous eyes.

To create community service provider links for young women on the Central Coast.

**WORKSHOP OUTCOMES**

- Allows for the provision of hope for a positive, healthy future.
- Provides a holistic approach to the prevention and treatment of eating disorders.
- The creation of community awareness surrounding the issue of eating disorders.
- The creation of a series of multi-medium artworks surrounding the theme body beautiful to be used as resources throughout the community.
- To feel confident with the message difference is beautiful.

The *Labelled a Freak* project is constantly building an organic body of work. This currently consists of *Labelled a Freak* the book (an autobiographical account of a young women’s journey through Anorexia), Distortion the video (an alternative representation of young women’s beliefs surrounding the beauty myth), a package of successful workshop ideas, visual art works, photography, writing, poetry, installation art, and performance art scripts. *Labelled a Freak* has taken five years of soul searching and researching from its conception to completion. With phase one now completed, the journey will move on. The process has been truly challenging personally and professionally. Working as a freelance artist in the area of community and cultural development seems to be far from being accepted within our society. It is especially challenging in a rural environment. I hope the time is soon approaching when all professionals will be recognised as such, not because you belong to an organisation but because you are a passionate, innovative, inspirational worker wishing to join forces to create a healthy society.

**REFERENCES**


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AUTHORS

Nikki Fallon has diverse skills in creating and facilitating innovative projects. Projects include rural youth research, “YWAM” — young women and media, “Labelled a Freak”— eating disorder prevention through body image workshops, “The Freak Show” — NSW Youth Arts and Skills Festival as well as liaison with key figures in NSW health to further the research and development of eating disorder prevention and early intervention programs. Nikki is also experienced in holistic healing and dreams that a healing farm will one day be established for women in the acute phases of eating disorders.

Zoe Scrogings is currently employed as Creative Arts Youth Mental Health Worker at the YPPI centre (Young People Prevention and Early Intervention), Gosford NSW. Her previous projects include Labelled a Freak co-facilitation, The Freak Show and the Wizard of Youth self-devised youth theatre as part of NSW Youth Arts and Skills Festival. She is co-ordinator of AWCM Inc (Australian Women’s Contemporary Music) — Girl Nation project, and has extensive experience in community cultural development and youth arts in health. She is currently on the board of the NSW Community Arts Association.