



Photo Stories for Impact

Using art to centre lived
experience, share stories,
and inform strategy

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Whadjuk people of the Nyoongar Nation and the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which workshops were held. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. We recognise that their sovereignty was never ceded. We recognise First Nations Peoples as the first storytellers and the important role art and story plays in their continuing connection to culture.

Thank you

We extend our deepest gratitude to the people with Lived Experience who participated in the project. We appreciate the time, creativity, vulnerability, energy, openness, curiosity you generously shared with us.



We acknowledge Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities as the Traditional Custodians of the land we work on and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise that their sovereignty was never ceded.

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Neami celebrates, values and includes people of all backgrounds, genders, sexualities, cultures, bodies and abilities.

Cover Photo Story

Resilient Not Broken by Teresa Hall

We don't always create our fall; we have often been hurt in our softness and innocence. We don't always run away from our wellness; we just value our freedom. We may be worn and ragged, we may have been trodden on and discarded, but there is beauty in our story, there is value in our being. Don't treat us like a lost cause, or that we are weak because we have fallen. Reframe how you see us, maybe you'll see how strong we are to have gotten this far, faced things you could never dream of facing, made hope out of nightmares and dreams out of fears. We have faced the darkest parts of life and are working our way out to the other side. See our worth, encourage our contribution. We are not broken goods; we are resilient beings in the process of transformation.

Full gallery

This report features a selection of Photo Stories created by participants. You can view the full online gallery at neaminational.org.au/photostories

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Social impact is...

“Action or a driving force of action on the issues that matter.”

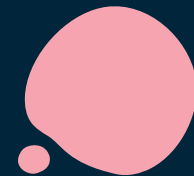
“Acknowledging issues, gaps, good things, hidden things, then finding meaningful and actionable ways to make a collective shift or change.”

“Keeping hope.”

“Sometimes life’s very heavy. Social impact – if we all support each other it’s a better world.”

(Lived Experience participants)

Respect By Chantelle



The photo is of my nan and myself. My nan raised me up from the age of 5. In that time she taught me a lot about respect. This day and age there is not a lot of people that have or give respect. I believe that you should treat others the way you want to be treated and you should always show respect to your elders. If it wasn't for my nan bringing me up the way she did I wouldn't be the person I am today, so I take my hat off to her. Unfortunately, my nan passed away last year. Losing her made me reflect on everything she taught me and reminded me about respect and my morals. This photo was taken when I was taking my nan shopping.

About Photo Stories for Impact

Social impact

The Photo Stories for Impact project aimed to support the development of Neami National's first Social Impact Strategy.

Neami is a national not-for-profit organisation offering mental health and wellbeing support, housing and suicide prevention services across Australia. We are proud to support 38,000 people living with mental health challenges and offer more than 75 services, over 45 different Indigenous lands.

Social impact is about big picture, long-term change. It's about how we contribute to better outcomes for society and the planet, now and into the future.

A Social Impact Strategy should communicate what we stand for and believe in – recognising and responding to the issues most important to the people and communities we serve.

Lived Experience engagement

We created the Photo Stories for Impact project because it is essential that consumer, carer, and community perspectives inform strategy development and have influence at all levels of mental health organisations.

People with Lived Experience have the right to communicate and contribute in ways that are meaningful and make sense to them, and for organisations to take the time to listen.

We recognise art as an alternative language and an accessible and meaningful way of expressing and communicating experiences, ideas, and perspectives.

The Photo Stories for Impact project aimed to create space for people with Lived Experience to express what social impact means to them and their hopes for the future for individuals, communities, the mental health system, and the environment. We aimed to position these learnings at the heart of Neami's Social Impact Strategy.



Photovoice

We used a creative method called Photovoice to explore social impact and come to know what matters to consumers, carers, and community members (Liebenberg, 2018).

Photovoice is a participatory, community-based research method (Wang and Burris, 1994; 1997). The overarching goals of Photovoice are to:

- enable people to reflect upon and share their community's strengths and concerns,
- promote dialogue about important issues, and
- reach and inform decision makers.

Photovoice is considered an accessible and culturally appropriate method that can reduce some traditional barriers to participation (Anderson et al, 2023). It centres people's Lived Experience and creates space for diverse ways of knowing, doing and being (Anderson et al, 2023).

This approach aligns with Neami's Collaborative Relational Practice approach and Lived Experience Peer Work values (hope, equity, mutuality, authenticity), and principles (lived experience as expertise, recovery-focussed, person-directed, strengths-based, relational, voluntary) (Byrne et al., 2021).

Arts-based methods provide an opportunity for people to express themselves and their experiences, emotions, ideas, and thoughts about a complex topic without relying on words alone (Lorenz, 2010).

Photovoice also draws on the power of storytelling. Stories can connect us, offer hope, help us feel less alone, support deeper understanding, and highlight the human side of a social issue.

Place

Workshops were run in parallel in two locations:

- On Whadjuk Nyoongar country, in Perth, Western Australia
- On Wurundjeri country, in Melbourne, Victoria

We used a place-based approach that recognised local context. Workshops were held in-person to support the hands-on creative engagement approach. Venues included a local hub Neami service users were familiar with, and a state library.

These locations (Perth and Melbourne) were based on team resourcing and provided an opportunity to pilot the engagement approach with the hope of engaging more communities in the future. See [Limitations and Opportunities](#) for more on this.

Whilst both groups followed a similar process, a flexible approach was taken to respond to the unique needs of each group. As the workshops were facilitated by different team members, the process was also expressed slightly differently across the two states.

Participants

The project engaged 22 people with Lived and Living Experience who were curious about communicating and expressing themselves creatively. This included people with personal experience of mental health challenges, and people with experience walking alongside or caring for someone with mental health challenges.

Participants included people who identify as living with a disability, being a part of and connected to a particular cultural and linguistic group, as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and LGBTQIA+. Several people also spoke about how their lived experience of homelessness, alcohol and other drug use, family violence, trauma, and other experiences of distress and adversity shaped their contributions.

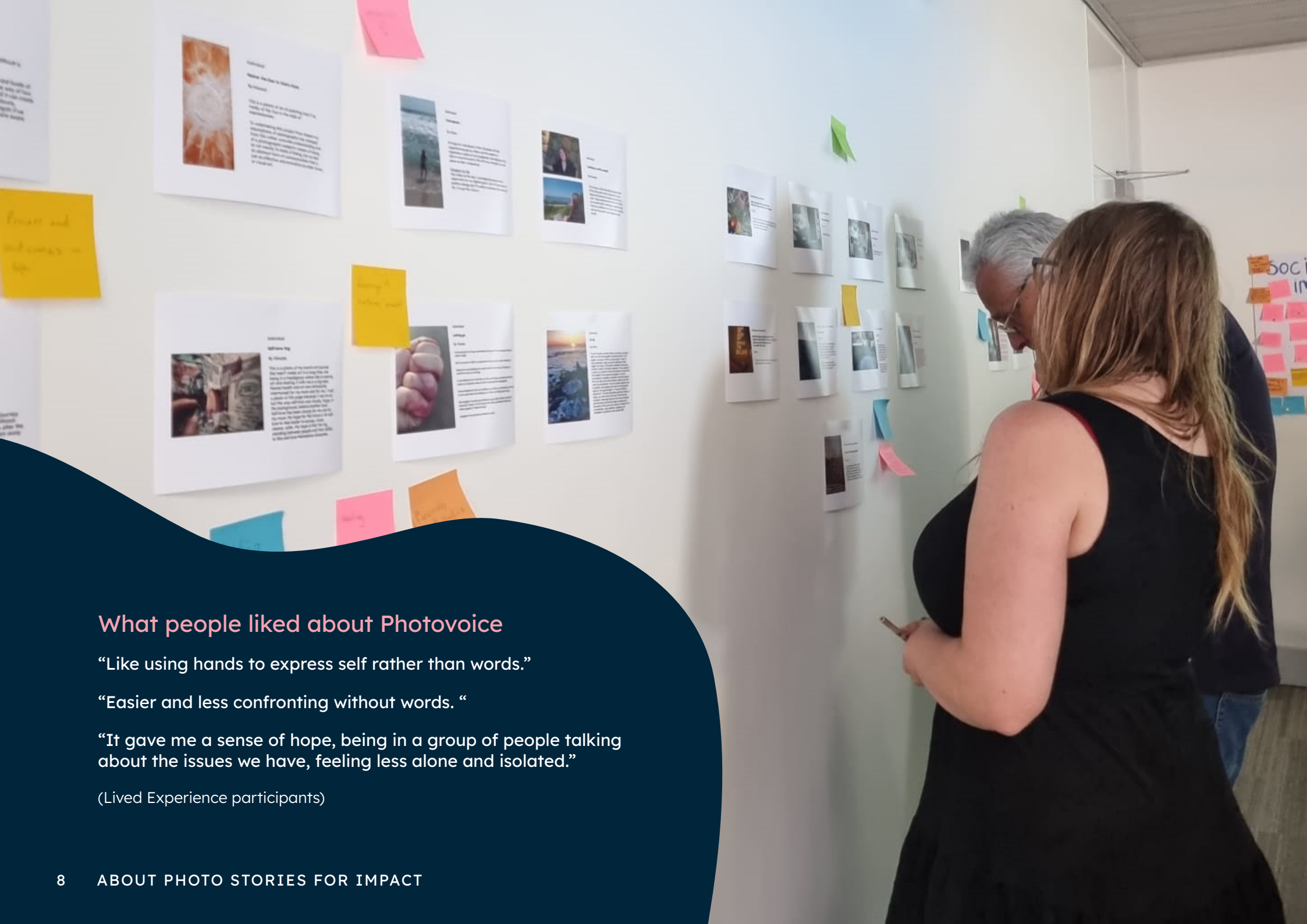
Half of the participants had engaged with a Neami service and half had not but may have had experience engaging with other community services.



Nearer the Sun to One's Eyes By Edward



This is a photo of an oil painting that I've made, of the Sun in the style of expressionism. In undertaking this project from Neami my assumptions of photography has changed from this rather concrete understanding that of a photographic subject's reason of being as not merely its state of being, but as also an abstract form of communication that is just as effective and evocative as other forms or visual art.



What people liked about Photovoice

“Like using hands to express self rather than words.”

“Easier and less confronting without words. “

“It gave me a sense of hope, being in a group of people talking about the issues we have, feeling less alone and isolated.”

(Lived Experience participants)

The Photovoice process

We asked participants to take photos of their hopes for the future regarding the social impact areas of individual, community, systems and environment.



Conditions at the heart of the Photovoice process

- ▲ Creating an environment of non-judgement
- ▲ Celebrating the strength of vulnerability
- ▲ Creating a mutually beneficial experience
- ▲ Valuing Lived Experience and diverse perspectives
- ▲ Connecting as people
- ▲ Being flexible

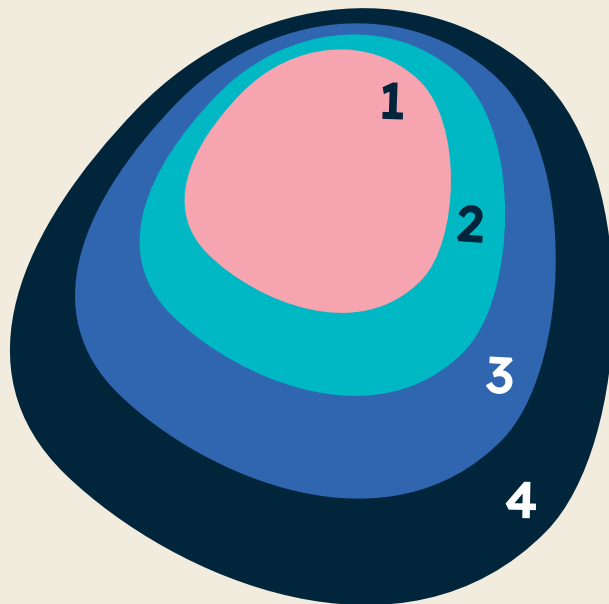


Outcomes of the Photovoice process

- ▲ Promoting dialogue about important issues
- ▲ Connecting with and informing decision makers
- ▲ Sharing with community



The Photovoice process



Guiding prompts

People were given the following prompts to guide their photo taking.

1. Individual

What are your hopes for the future for people who experience mental health challenges, or for individual wellbeing?

2. Community

What are your hopes for the future for communities you are a part of or would like to be a part of?

3. System

What are your hopes for the future for mental health support or the mental health system?

4. Environment

What are your hopes for the future for the environment?

We used a nested model to illustrate the interconnected nature of the layers.

Taking photos

People were invited to interpret the questions in whatever way was meaningful to them. They did not have to answer all questions and could just focus on the ones they were drawn to if preferred. Some people found it challenging to take photos about the future, so they were encouraged to take photos of what was meaningful and important to them.

People took their photos in between workshops, and approached this in a range of ways:

- Planning the photos in advance and then creating the image
- Going about day-to-day life and taking candid photos along the way
- Reviewing and repurposing photos they had taken before the project
- Taking photos of art that they had created e.g., paintings.

People experienced the photo taking as challenging but enjoyable. In particular, people found it challenging to respond to what felt like an abstract question, with the concrete output of a photograph. Overall, people described this part of the process as thought-provoking, cathartic, interesting, and eye opening.



Selecting photos and writing words

People were invited to select up to four photos that were most important and meaningful to them that they would like to share. This refining process was easy for some people and others found it hard to pick their favourites.

People were then invited to give each photo a title and write any additional words they would like included (i.e., a caption, description, blurb, artist statement, narrative, or story).

The following prompts were provided to support reflection and writing:

- What is the photo?
- Why did you take it?
- What does it mean to you?
- What emotions, experiences, thoughts, or messages does this photo represent to you?
- How does this photo relate to the change you want to see and your hopes for the future?

Whilst we started this writing activity in the workshop, some participants took theirs home as they wanted more time to complete their stories.

Linking photo to a question

People were invited to indicate which question/s their photo and words were related to (i.e., individual, community, system, and/or environment).

Many participants stated they couldn't just pick one, as their hopes for individuals, communities, systems and the environment were similar and interconnected. This feedback highlighted the importance of supporting participants to adapt the activity to meet their needs. Rather than requiring people to just select one, we used this as an opportunity to better understand the interconnected nature of the areas. In the end, over a third of the photos had multiple questions ticked.



Sharing and reflecting

People were invited to share about their Photo Stories verbally with the group at various points in the process. In the final workshops, completed Photo Stories were shared within the group as an opportunity to see and appreciate each other's contributions.

People were invited to reflect on the connections between their own stories and those shared by others in the group. They were invited to notice what was standing out to them, common themes, or any other reflections.



Conditions

The design of this project was informed by Lived Experience, and we aimed to infuse ethics and care into the process. Based on participant feedback, the relational approach and conditions fostered contributed to participants positive experience of the project.

Connection

We took the time to get to know each other, create connection, listen to each other, and create a space that supported people to feel comfortable to participate.

Each group co-created a set of mindsets and ways of working together as a group and revisited these throughout the process.

“Project allowed for connection as it went deep. It cut through the small talk and people talked about what matters to them - something we don’t usually talk about with people”

(Lived Experience participant)

Non-judgement

The importance of non-judgement came up frequently – not judging each other but also not judging oneself.

To support this, we spent time talking about there being no right or wrong way to do things, the value of diverse perspectives, and being curious about our unique interpretation and perception. Photography and imagery provided a valuable frame for holding these conversations about diverse perspectives, perception, and interpretation.

“Liked the sense of non-judgement”

“How diverse people’s lives and perspectives are, yet we can still connect and find common ground”

(Lived Experience participants)

Vulnerability and openness

We acknowledged the vulnerability of sharing parts of ourselves and giving a new way of expressing ourselves a go.

In the spirit of reciprocity, in one state the facilitators chose to participate in the Photo Stories process alongside participants, sharing not only our photos and stories but also our own challenges and experience taking photos. This aimed to reduce the power imbalances often experienced between facilitators and participants and co-create a mutual space that valued the strength of vulnerability. Walking this journey together supported the connection within our group as it lessened the divide between facilitator and participant.

In the other state, pre-existing relationships between participants and with the facilitator was a strength of the workshops. Participants were able to share their thoughts and experiences openly due to existing rapport, and this supported deep discussions and greater comfortability expressing vulnerability in front of peers. Participants shared openly about their difficult interactions with systems and connected over shared experiences. The workshops served as an opportunity to further build and strengthen these existing relationships.

“I really enjoyed the project as I was able to be vulnerable, think deeply about what was important to me, and engage with like-minded people”

“I liked that both (facilitators) did the project with us”

(Lived Experience participants)



Mutuality

It was important to us that the project was mutually beneficial – that it didn't just benefit Neami but also the people who participated. Participants described the project as fun and enjoyable. They expressed the benefits of connecting with peers, space for creativity, learning about photography, and feeling empowered to create change.

“This project was a great experience. I liked unleashing my creativity and doing what I love”

“Deepened sense of empowerment to make impact and social change. Deepened perspective, through provoked. Inspiration to do more”

(Lived Experience participants)

Flexibility

Being flexible in our approach was essential to support access, inclusion and participation. We supported people to participate in ways they could and adapted activities to meet their needs and preferences. Flexibility and meeting people where they were at was more important to us than everyone following the same method. To support this, we created an atmosphere where people were welcome to share if parts of the process were feeling challenging and then identified alternatives together.

Participant-led interpretation and meaning making

An ethical consideration in arts-based approaches, like Photovoice, is interpretation. Some Photovoice projects involve participants taking photos and researchers interpreting and ascribing meaning to them. It was important to us that interpretation and meaning making was led by participants themselves. In consideration of this:

- Participants provided the context, meaning and interpretation of their photos through narratives written in their own words
- The team did not analyse or interpret the photographs and instead focused on listening to what they meant to participants
- Participants self-categorised their photos into the themes of individual, community, system, and/or environment
- Participants were invited to reflect on and notice common themes across the collection of Photo Stories and this was used to ground the team's further synthesis

See [Limitations and Opportunities](#) for how this could be strengthened further.

“Never thought of photography as having interpretive meaning, thought of things as being what it is - opened eyes to interpretation”

(Lived Experience participant)

Informed consent

Participation was voluntary. Participants were given the choice to just participate in the workshops for the experience, without the expectation of releasing their photos to Neami.

Participants provided consent for specific photos and stories to be released at the end of the process and were not asked to provide blanket consent at the start of the process.

Some participants also chose to share their Photo Stories anonymously.

Remuneration

People were paid for their time at the workshops, as well as two hours outside of the workshops to take photos and prepare for the workshops.



Connecting the dots



Individual and collective stories

Throughout the project, we hoped to honour individual stories and the diversity of experiences, perspectives and hopes expressed. Given the projects intention to inform strategy development, we also wanted to understand and capture the points of connection between people's stories and notice what was shared.

Identifying common threads

Initial reflection about common threads across the collection of Photo Stories occurred with participants during the workshops. The team then conducted an in-depth synthesis after the completion of the workshops.

As well as looking at what people shared through their Photo Story narratives, we also paid attention to the deep dialogue held in the workshops and the supporting activities we utilised to explore different parts of the process.

The team began by synthesising the learnings and key themes for each state separately and sharing it with participants for feedback. The team then looked at learnings across the two states to understand overarching themes.

We initially grouped our learnings under headings of individual, community, system, and environment. However, based on what we heard from participants about how interconnected these are, we decided to look for the themes across and beyond these and explore a more meaningful way of capturing what matters.

Light Breaks Amongst the Leaves By Edward



This is a photo of a tree that's outside my unit, aside the skies it's the first thing I see out the window. In contemplating the meaning of this project there's this qualia that's occurred when I try to articulate thoughts that seem so obvious, it's a real sense of embarrassment and yet also clarity to me. That interactions between the concepts of the individual, the community, the system, and of the environment are interconnected and that such hopes of a better future involves deep thoughtfulness of one's capacity and limitations to affect the lesser and greater scales of meaningful change.

Nature up close with a dash of mist. Different reds with different size yellows.

By Zoe Malski

You don't have to drive miles away to be close to nature. Doesn't talk back and only needs 2 things/isn't stubborn. Is as big or small as you want it. Is as colourful as you want it.





Gazing Upwards

By Catherine Berger



Hit by sunlight only, falling into laneway decorations. These orbs will sparkle at night and light the way. I wonder about all the people who live on the streets, laneways, hiding places. Where is there comfort and beauty for them? They have light and hopes inside them too.

Weaving what we heard matters into strategy



Several themes came through strongly and spoke to the heart of what matters and the change people want to see for individuals, communities, systems, and the environment.

These key themes were thoughtfully woven into Neami's Social Impact Strategy alongside other sources of information including staff consultation, key organisational documents, and external literature.

For each Impact Area, the Strategy highlights how Neami plans to contribute to change in these areas, and these intended outcomes and objectives were informed by and expand on what we heard from participants.

Throughout the Photovoice project, participants spoke about the value of nature and the many metaphors it offers us about life and change. Therefore, we chose to use the metaphor of a tree in the Social Impact Strategy to illustrate the foundations of Neami's work in this area (our roots), the impact areas we hope to grow and contribute to (branches and leaves), and the broader ecosystem that our tree/organisation lives in, influences, and is influenced by.

As well as directly integrating learnings and key themes into the Strategy, 18 Photo Stories by participants are featured throughout it. The full Gallery of over 60 Photo Stories will also be shared alongside the Strategy for people to engage with.

The six key Impact Areas of the Strategy reflect the key themes that came out of the Photo Stories project.

Here is a brief snapshot:

Social inclusion, connection and belonging

This impact area is about the importance of relationships with friends, family, pets, peers, and community, having people and places where someone feels like they belong, and reducing stigma.

Meaningful activities and financial resources

This impact area is about the impact of the rising cost of living, having access to financial stability and resources, and engaging in meaningful employment and other activities.

Safety and stability

This impact area is about the impact of homelessness, people's right to safe, secure, and sustainable housing, and ensuring people feel safe in all environments.

Holistic, person-centred systems

This impact area is about people having more support options, being able to access holistic care that supports emotional, social, cultural, spiritual, and physical wellbeing, and a system that supports people in an integrated way.

Empowered communities

This impact area is about community participation and leadership, and communities sharing resources and knowledge.

Environmental health

This impact area is about the value of connecting with nature for wellbeing, the impact of climate change, and respecting Indigenous knowledge and ways of caring for Country.

Limitations and opportunities

Longer time frame

It was challenging to move through the entire Photovoice process in three workshops. Participants recommended having more workshops and/or a longer time frame as this would provide more time to think about the questions, take photos, and write stories.

Participatory process across all phases

Whilst we actively created opportunities for collaboration within the given time and resource constraints, the process and outcomes could be strengthened by working in partnership with participants throughout all stages. This includes collaboratively defining the topic, designing and facilitating workshops, synthesising learnings, translating learnings into strategy, and producing outputs. Working in this way would require significantly more resourcing but would demonstrate a commitment to truly elevating Lived Experience perspectives. This could also be extended to an overarching Lived Experience Governance Committee that provides oversight and is connected throughout the broader development of the Strategy, from start to finish.

Asking the right questions

Whilst greater collaboration throughout all stages would be beneficial, co-creating the questions with participants is highly recommended. This would ensure questions asked are directly relevant to participants' real-world experiences and needs, and support even deeper insights and solutions that are attuned to the challenges and opportunities faced by participants and their communities.

Diversity of locations

As a national organisation, it is essential we consider how we maintain a place-based approach, whilst capturing the diverse experiences and perspectives of communities across the locations we deliver services in. Considering how the Photovoice process may be translated to an online offering may be one way to support this.

Integrating more creative activities into workshops

Participants suggested incorporating more creative activities into workshops. This could include an arts table that can freely be accessed during the workshops as well as more activities during the sessions that encourage hands on arts-based forms of expressing ideas and perspectives. These activities can unlock creative thinking and solution finding, allowing participants to express their perspectives in more diverse and innovative ways.



Roses are red
By Christopher Dumble

Love
Delight
Passion
Warmth

Conclusion

The Photo Stories project has supported Neami to better understand what truly matters to the people we aim to support and align our strategic initiatives with community needs and aspirations for positive social change.

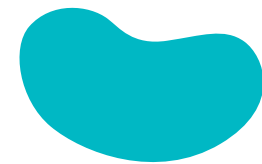
We believe the inclusion of Photo Stories in the development of Neami's Social Impact Strategy will have impact for years to come by:

- Speaking to peoples' hearts, as well as their minds
- Helping big, complex, abstract social issues and organisational priorities make more sense and feel more real and relatable
- Demonstrating the power of arts-based methods of understanding and communicating beyond words
- Grounding our organisation's approach to impact in the voice of consumers, carers, and community.

We hope that sharing our experience supports you to explore creative, participatory engagement approaches in your own contexts. This approach has the potential to support services to:

- Connect with consumers, carers and community members in a new way
- Understand local community perspectives and needs
- Offer an accessible, mutually beneficial way for people to participate in service development
- Invest in community-led problem solving and solutions
- Develop more community-oriented organisational strategies grounded in Lived Experience.

We greatly appreciate the people with Lived Experience who went on this journey with us and are already creating impact through their stories and contribution.

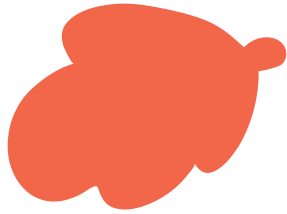


RIP in the fabric

By Jae

Beast looks worried as her human slides sideways 'what will happen to us'. Hopes for the future: There is a desperate need for quality, evidence-based publicly funded psychiatry and medical support that is actually person centred. Now is a source of fear and instability as doctors change and many not lifestyle focused and holistic but seek to use drug medications as chemical restraint with aim of minimising hospital admissions even if destroying life quality and creating physical disabilities and illness from excessive drug side effects. Remove such 'doctors' form Australia's health system. Investigate Indigenous wisdom on mental health. Accessible ongoing support workers reinstated into organisations who were defunded due to NDIS. Not everyone qualifies for the NDIS.





Home

By Anonymous

I took this image to represent home and the integral importance of having one. At the beginning of this year, I found myself part of a growing cohort of women, homeless and in the 50 plus age group category. It's a terrifying thought to be entering your 50s and to have such instability in your housing situation. To be honest, I'd never had housing stability, abusive relationships spanning 31 years of my 50 meant home had never felt or been safe for me, childhood abuse from the age of 7 until I escaped into an even more abusive situation meant my only memories of a safe home were as a child living within the safe compounds of my grandmother's home.

I had no superannuation to fall back on as I'd spent most of my adult life doing unpaid domestic work. I was terrified of falling through the cracks of a grossly incompetent system and never being able to recover. I'd witnessed it happening all around me, women my age living in tents, crashing on friends couches or living in their cars, smart educated women who'd fallen through the very cracks I was desperately trying not to slip into. I was uneducated, unemployed and I no longer had a car to fall back on, I'd

lived in my car before and I remember at the time giving up my car was such a difficult decision because it had provided me with such safety and sanctuary during a previous abusive relationship. Without a car there was a real clear sense of vulnerability, no protection from any of the vast number of dangers women are susceptible to. It's a terrifying thought to face. Especially when you are facing that alone.

I remember sitting in the offices of Launch Housing in Collingwood after being told a few days prior that there was no more support or financial assistance for me after using up all my "crisis accommodation support" and meeting 2 housing outreach support workers who were about to deliver me news that would fundamentally change my life, in more ways than I could ever imagine. I was initially shocked and stunned and couldn't quite believe what they were saying to me. I had a home. I HAD A HOME. HOME. The sense of relief in that room on that day was palpable to all present, both of my workers mentioned this to me on several occasions. We had succeeded in a system that was almost purpose built to fail. It was unheard of in the current housing crisis. I couldn't

quite believe that I had a home. A home. My home. Safe home. I cried so hard, I couldn't say thank you in enough ways or show them how much this meant to me.

I moved in immediately even though my furniture and belongings weren't arriving for 2 more weeks. I bought a blow-up mattress and cheap bedding at Kmart. The place was stark and barren so I immediately set about decorating it. I scoured op-shops for old magazines to collage my walls with and I stumbled upon this rather kitsch little sign that perhaps previously I would never have looked twice at. HOME. I knew then that this somewhat tacky little sign was going to have permanent residence with me for the rest of my life, for every time I look at it, I'm reminded. HOME. Within a safe home we have space to dream and to hope. Within a safe home healing and recovery and growth can happen with infinite possibilities. Broken along the way, left alone without help. Support given by many and different advice services. We can build a better future for everyone. Little bit at a time to add a bit of colourful life to guide us in the right direction. A future that is maintained, looked after, and allowed to be comfortable for everyone.



Mindfulness By Sally



Mindfulness is not difficult. What is difficult is remembering to be mindful. We often get caught with the hustle and bustle of life and we let needs, wants get in the way of how much is enough. When the mind is full it can create stress that can lead to illness, breakdowns, burnouts. However, every now and again if we STOP and just BE, we can become more aware and thus mindful.

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