

Celebrating Connectedness

One in four people will face mental health problems some time in their lives; even if you haven't lived with this experience, there's a high chance that someone you know has.

During what can often be a lonely experience, it's important to have a good support network. It's important to feel connected to the world and the people around you.

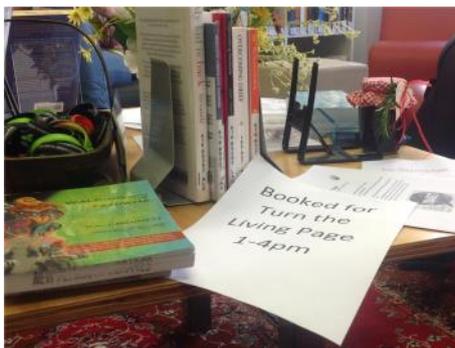
"Connect" was the theme of this year's Mental Health Awareness Week. This is something of a misnomer, because there were too many events happening in Taranaki to cram into a single week. Each saw people connecting with others, but in different ways.

The annual Hawera social has been one of the highlights for years now, and the latest one didn't disappoint. It gave tangata whaiora (people seeking wellness) and the organisations that assist us a chance to join together, and meet others who have walked similar paths in life.

It was a rainy morning, but that didn't put a dent in attendance with about 70 people coming to the event. The hall was full of warmth, not just from the heaters inside, but from a sense of aroha generated by those who gathered. There was a barbecue provided, but I found that my spirit was also nourished by that day.

"Turn the Living Page" was a more intimate interpretation of the "Connect" message, and yet one that was just as powerful. Taking place at the Puke Ariki library, in this case the "books" were people willing to share their stories with interested "readers" for a half an hour.

I didn't have the chance to read a book, but instead played a role as a minder. This included making sure my book had a steady supply of coffee (generously provided by the cafe), and keeping track of how long she'd been "read" for, as each book had more than one reader waiting.



The day ended without me having to issue any overdue notices, and judging from the feedback generated by both books and readers it was an enlightening and informative experience for all.

Puke Ariki also opened its doors for the "Yahoo Connection". Five speakers shared their messages with an audience that was engaged by their diverse subjects.

From connecting with one's inner self through creativity, connecting with nature through mindfulness, to the feeling of disconnection

from society that can come with drug addiction; there was something for everyone.

It was also great to hear about the new crisis respite facilities which have been made available in Taranaki. They offer the kind of care that has up to now only been available in hospital, but in a warm home environment. I'm sure they will assist many people to a swifter recovery during their time of need.

Another great facility on offer was the 4th Wall Theatre, for the launch of *Feeling Down on the Farm*. This 16-page publication contains a plethora of information and advice about depression and mental illness, and has been sent far and wide to rural addresses throughout Taranaki.

This knowledge is sorely needed as the farming community is sadly over represented in New Zealand's suicide statistics. The serious need for this information was offset by the celebratory atmosphere in which the publication was launched.

Christmas is on its way; it is seen as one special day that reiterates the importance of family – which should in fact be celebrated all year round.

Similarly, although Mental Health Awareness Week only happens once a year, I know I'm not alone in hoping that its message continues to resonate in the hearts and minds of the community.

Tony Spencer

"Korero Mai" is edited by Virginia Winder, "What's On" by Stephanie Mapley and "Whakaaro Pai" by Tony Spencer—all from Like Minds Taranaki. Your news and views are eagerly sought. Like Minds Taranaki, PO Box 5015, New Plymouth, 3rd Floor, Brougham House, Devon Street West, NP, ph 06-759-0966 mental.health@xtra.co.nz. www.likemindstaranaki.org.nz

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