

Kicking Up Autumn Leaves

A Report on the Women Owning Wellness Evaluation Project

Summary

The report *Kicking Up Autumn Leaves* is based on the stories of wellness told by 43 older women. The report describes how the stories were gathered, what they reveal about wellness, and highlight significant policy implications for older women's health.

This evaluation was undertaken in three Older Women's Network (OWN) Wellness groups operating in Bankstown, Chatswood and Sutherland, suburbs in the metropolitan area of Sydney. Carried out collaboratively during 2005, it involved a group of older women from OWN, researchers from the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and University of Technology (UTS), and health professionals from Northern Sydney Central Coast Women's Health Services (NSCCWHS) and Northern Sydney Central Coast Health Promotion (NSCCHP), which also provided administrative, management and funding support.



Project Team

The evaluation was designed to both broaden and deepen our understanding of wellness in older women and to do this in ways that enabled meaningful participation in the research process by the older women involved. How the story harvesting evaluation was done is as important as what was discovered.

In 2005 there were seven Wellness groups in NSW that were initiated by OWN, a community-based network run by and for older women. Rather than focus on addressing illness, OWN has consciously





chosen to emphasise wellbeing and its achievement through enabling its members to find a balance between the physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual aspects of their lives (Northern Sydney Health 2003a).

As well as participant-initiated activities, in OWN Wellness groups there is a strong belief in an holistic approach, community ownership, developing partnerships and advocating for older women's health and wellbeing (Older Women's Network 1993). In addition to setting up Wellness Centres and groups, OWN NSW has initiated many other projects, including an Aboriginal support circle, a Sydney Theatre group, a music group, a film discussion group, an advocacy group, and other discussion groups. OWN produces a monthly newsletter, *OWN Matters*, and has a range of available publications and videos.

OWN NSW is the peak body for over 20 OWN groups in NSW. It emphasises the rights,



dignity and wellbeing of older women. It was incorporated in 1993 and is managed by a voluntary management committee.² Women from OWN initiated this evaluation. They sought an approach that was congruent with the participatory processes central to their Wellness groups.

This demanded innovation. A Creative Reference Group (CRG) comprising older women, health professionals and university researchers was established to design the direction and nature of the evaluation. This dynamic initiative involved older women in a pivotal role in designing the methodology and promoted and used those women's skills, knowledge and experience in the collection and analysis of the data. The principles and practices of participation were central to the process.

Because it was designed to extend the discussion about issues of wellness and wellness activities for older women in three OWN Wellness groups, rather than be a comprehensive evaluation of wellness and Wellness groups in general, *Kicking up Autumn Leaves* focuses on women's stories of wellness.

These stories provided a rich source of data about women's lived experience and their particular perceptions of wellness. The responses revealed not only women's individual experience, but also significant contextual settings and social conditions that enable us to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the many interrelated factors that generate and sustain wellness.

The Functional Health Status and Wellbeing questionnaire (The SF-36) was also administered in the three Wellness groups to provide us with a profile of women's physical and psychological wellbeing.



Across the whole inquiry there were three main areas of discovery:

1. Although wellness will continue to be hard to grasp, because of its holistic nature, we now have a much richer, detailed and grounded picture of what types of activities are effective in enabling wellness.
2. We now know that the processes used by OWN are effective for setting up and sustaining Wellness groups.
3. The use of participatory and narrative research methods, which are congruent with OWN's wellness philosophies, resulted in a richer body of data, as well as being more acceptable to the participants, than if the study had relied only on quantitative data.

This evaluation was successful in building a new and sustained partnership between older women's Wellness groups, health professionals and university researchers. As a result of a collaborative evaluation methodology, all involved now have a shared ownership and understanding of the data and will continue to collaborate in advocating for particular policy directions relating to older women's wellness and health.



The evaluation found that:

- › **Wellness groups provide an affordable gateway for older women's journeys into wellness.**
- › **Women's wellness activities enable them to challenge stereotypes of older women and replace them with a growing realisation that they are valuable and empowered elders and potential leaders within their communities.**
- › **Wellness groups' culture of acceptance and self-direction is central to enabling wellness and providing support for the development of self-esteem, confidence, courage and emotional intelligence.**
- › **Support for lifelong learning is a vital aspect of wellness and leads to the development of new skills and an improved sense of wellbeing.**
- › **Social action, advocacy and citizenship develop through wellness activities, and women became more competent and active citizens.**
- › **Epiphanies brought about transformative understandings of wellness and led to women trying out new activities, taking meaningful risks and changing their sense of themselves.**
- › **Expressions of wellness are complex and often paradoxical. As these expressions are not easily mapped or measured, Wellness groups, their activities and research with them must be approached in ways that reflect this richness and complexity.**



Key Recommendations:

- 1. National, state and local agencies support the operation of initiatives like OWN Wellness Centres. Because of the demonstrated resourcefulness of the participants, practical support may come in many forms:**
 - › funding
 - › providing paid staff to work with the volunteers in Wellness
 - › providing rent-free space that is suitable for the activities
 - › including Wellness activities in social and community service plans, as well as considering Wellness activities when designing new facilities and buildings.
- 2. A longitudinal study in a new program site be undertaken. Such a study will need to be thorough and sensitively designed in order to examine the cost effectiveness of the OWN wellness model. The funding needs to be at a realistic level and extend for a period that is long enough to demonstrate useful results.**
- 3. Research methods for evaluating such projects need to be congruent with the philosophy, content and processes of wellness.**
- 4. Future initiatives, such as the establishment of additional OWN Wellness Centres, be grounded in the community development philosophy of the program and involve groups of local women in a prominent collaborative role, involving the potential users of Wellness Centres in their design, establishment and management of such centres.**

*My inner eye surveys the empty, barren plains
of age,*

How can it be that youth has fled?

The many busy years of 'doing' quickly sped.

And now there's time to pause,

Another stage of life begins.

How to traverse those plains so bleak?

I hear a voice of wisdom speak.

'Don't let the weary body weaken,

Use muscles, bones, and what you will,

Dance and stretch and best the beast of age.

Read and write, chat and laugh,

Share your skills with others.'

Now the empty plains of age

Will fill with movement, laughter, friends,

And peace of mind.

My fear of loneliness and pain is now assuaged.

The ageing process will be kind.

(Evelyn)



Older Women's Network

in partnership with

NORTHERN SYDNEY
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