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Step Up: Managing Mental Health With Music And Movement



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by Australia Plus

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Psychological illness, stigma and the side effects of medication once meant a life of isolation for many Fijians battling mental illness.

But supported recovery that includes a tailor-made dance fitness programme has proven a choreographed step in the right direction.

The furniture has been stacked high at one end of the room.

There's a queue for the change rooms.

One after another, they appear at the front door, shaking off the heavy downpour outside.

Stino is loading up the boom box, well aware everyone is pumped.

"I like the steps and moves," says Asena.

"It's very exciting," offers John.

"It makes me feel happy."

The fuss and buzz is because it is AeroGym time.

Fiji's Community Recovery Outreach Programme (CROP) is run out of a humble building high on a hill above Suva. Created six years ago as a way for Fijians who have suffered often-severe mental illness to re-integrate into the community, its walls are adorned with their confronting stories. Stories of anger, stories of illness but also stories of hope and ambition.

"Most of them, when they came in, preferred to be alone," remembers CROP Nurse in Charge Ilivia Tava.

"They were afraid to go out."

CROP tackles that isolation by offering a sense of community, and group exercise is a cornerstone of the programme's philosophy. AeroGym, the Australian Aid-backed Gymnastics Australia dance fitness programme that combines aerobics and gymnastics is a simple, fun and highly-effective way to assist recovery.



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“The medication they are taking has side effects,” Ilivia explains.

“One of the side effects is they grow. They become big.

“That’s why they should do their daily exercise, so they don’t become obese and those side effects can’t be really seen.”

Development Officer Selevasio Stino Lebaiwasa, known to all simply as “Stino”, leads the session with all the enthusiasm you’d expect from an aerobics instructor, and gets both delighted and occasionally bemused responses to his upbeat demands to “climb the mountain” and “do the grapevine” while the boom box belts out Sia’s *Chandelier*.

“I like the steps and moves that we do,” says Asena, who first came to CROP five years ago.

“It helps me in moving my body. I like the recent songs.”

“Sometimes it’s hard, sometimes easy,” says John, who is positioned in the front row for the duration.

“I usually get a bit tired.”

After about 20 minutes, drenched in sweat from the brutal Fijian humidity, he wasn’t the only one.

Dripping and smiling all the way, Stino was born to do this work.

“It’s a passion,” he grins.

“It’s my passion for fitness. I help people.

“Meeting the challenges here, I don’t see as a hard thing.

“They’re from all walks of life and they have faced their obstacles.

“This brings them a new life and a fresh beginning.

“I see it on their face. I see it when they smile, when they laugh.”

Some CROP attendees have found work, others have returned to school or university. But Stino feels he, too, is undergoing a transformation, just from spending time at CROP.

“Being engaged with these people, getting to know them from when they started to the end point, and seeing the difference, it will change my life.

“It makes me the person I am.”

But if he wants to uncover Fiji’s next Olympic gymnast, he may need to look no further than Asena, in the back row of his Tuesday morning AeroGym session at CROP.

“I watched the gymnastics at the Olympics but I’ll be a soccer player, not a gymnast,” she says, apparently appalled at the very suggestion, despite her enthusiasm during the session.

“I think my niece will be the gymnast.” Australia Plus

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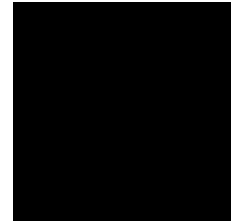
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