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Inner Canvas

an exploration of creative
journalling practice



Master of Design Thesis

By Preeti Sharma



Acknowledgment

I am sincerely grateful to Massey University and my supervisors Anna Brown and Jo Bailey for their thoughtful guidance, honest feedback and patience throughout this journey. Your willingness to challenge my thinking made this work stronger.

I would like to thank the mental health professionals, Asian community members and my peers who generously shared their time, insights and cultural knowledge during the design process. This journal exists because of your honesty and trust.

To my family — thank you for your constant encouragement and belief in me. As an immigrant building a life in Aotearoa New Zealand, your support has been the quiet foundation beneath everything I do.

To young Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand — this is for you. Break that stigma.

Abstract

In Aotearoa New Zealand, mental health has been under-discussed among most Asian communities due to cultural stigma, and inadequate culturally responsive services. My Master's of Design research uses visual communication design, illustration, and creative practices to develop an informative and interactive journal, wellbeing resource, targeted to young Asian adults (18-28) that aims to enhance their overall wellbeing.

My project is grounded in human-centred design, informed by design psychology, trauma-informed principles, and social design. The project adopts a strength-based language approach. The journal highlights the idea of empowerment and self-reflection. It includes guided prompts about emotional triggers, personal goals, and coping techniques, alongside creative activities such as collage-making and doodling. These activities promote stigma-free engagement with emotions.

Specifically, culturally resonating visual language, such as patterns, lotus, waves, lanterns, and earthy and soothing colour palettes are used to produce a safe and reassuring journalling space with Asian youth. The methodology involves user testing of the journal with 11 participants during one week with an emphasis on usability, emotional resonance, and engagement. My project combines the use of culturally responsive visuals with reflective journalling to show how design can be an empowering resource that helps improve wellbeing of young Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand.



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Introduction

Mental health and wellbeing have become increasingly important global issues, with young people being most affected by stress, anxiety, and emotional challenges (Fellin et al., 2024). These issues are also reflected in Asian communities in Aotearoa New Zealand, as studies indicate that young Asians can be at increased risk of depression while facing barriers to accessing mental health support (Asian Family Services & Trace Research Ltd., 2021).

In most Asian societies, discussions about mental health are perceived as a personal or sensitive matter, which can discourage people from expressing their feelings and struggles. As a result, there is a growing need for alternative methods that support emotional reflection in a way that is safe, personal, and culturally sensitive. Creative practices like journalling, drawing and visual expression have been widely identified as accessible tools for self-reflection and emotional expression. These practices allow people to engage with their thoughts and feelings, and help build awareness of their emotions (Jean-Berluce, 2024).

Inner Canvas is driven by a desire to understand how creative practices like drawing and visual storytelling can play a meaningful role in supporting the wellbeing of young Asians (aged 18 to 28) in Aotearoa New Zealand. Instead of presenting mental health through a clinical or problem-focused perspective, I want to explore how creative prompts, visual metaphors, and culturally resonant design elements can encourage self-reflection.

I have designed an interactive journal that provides young people with a safe journalling space to explore their emotions and take proactive steps to reduce negative thoughts. To create a visual journalling space that feels familiar, meaningful and emotionally safe, I have focused on Asian visual language through drawing on nature-based symbolism, patterns, and motifs across Asian cultural traditions.

Being an immigrant and a designer searching for my cultural identity and belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand, Inner Canvas is informed by both personal experience and academic research. That positionality shaped the way I approached the research, with curiosity, empathy and a desire to listen to the communities this work was meant to serve.

My project adopts a qualitative, design research framework, where the design process and research work hand in hand through the creation and testing of a journalling prototype. The framework is informed by human-centred design, social design, design psychology, and trauma-informed design, which focus on empathy, cultural sensitivity, and emotional experience. With accessibility, safety and reflection as key elements, these methods shaped the development of visuals, structured prompts and creative activities to facilitate a gentle and meaningful engagement with wellbeing.

The journal was tested with participants from the target audience, who engaged with the visuals, prompts and activities and gave feedback about their experience. Their responses helped me identify how the journal supported emotional reflection and whether the visuals and prompts felt approachable and meaningful.

Finally, *Inner Canvas* presents a tool designed to act as a supportive resource for wellbeing, that can promote self-reflection and how culturally centred visual communication and human-centred approach can enhance the effectiveness of visual journalling in Asian communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. This thesis documents the entire journey, from initial question to final designs and ultimately argues that thoughtful, culturally responsive design can play a real role in opening up conversations around mental wellbeing. This led to the following research question:



How might human-centred design and culturally sensitive visual communication be used to enhance creative journalling experiences to support the wellbeing of young Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand?



The Approach

My project adopts a qualitative design research framework, drawing on literature review, informal interviews, iterative prototyping and user testing.

A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth examination of participants' experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses to the developed journal. This approach is particularly suited to research in the areas of wellbeing and creative practice, where the focus lies in individual reflection and lived experience.

The research unfolded in two phases: secondary research and practice-based design development, followed by user testing and evaluation.

The first phase consisted of exploring visual communication and mental health, wellbeing, colour psychology, creative practices and trauma-informed design, discussed further in the context section. Wellbeing books, reflective journals, creative publications, and strength-based language have also been studied to understand the way emotions, prompts, or visual strategies are framed, which is discussed in the design journey section.

The second phase was focused on the development of the journal and gathering feedback through user testing. Drawing from secondary research and informed by the principles of human-centred design, design psychology, social design and trauma-informed design (fig. 1), I developed a draft of the journal incorporating self-reflective prompts, creative tasks, and culturally relevant visuals with colours influenced by Asian culture. This prototype was then tested with participants to gather feedback and ensure that the language, imagery, and prompts were inclusive, respectful, and culturally appropriate and to determine the level of engagement, usability and emotional impact while considering ethics and participants' wellbeing.

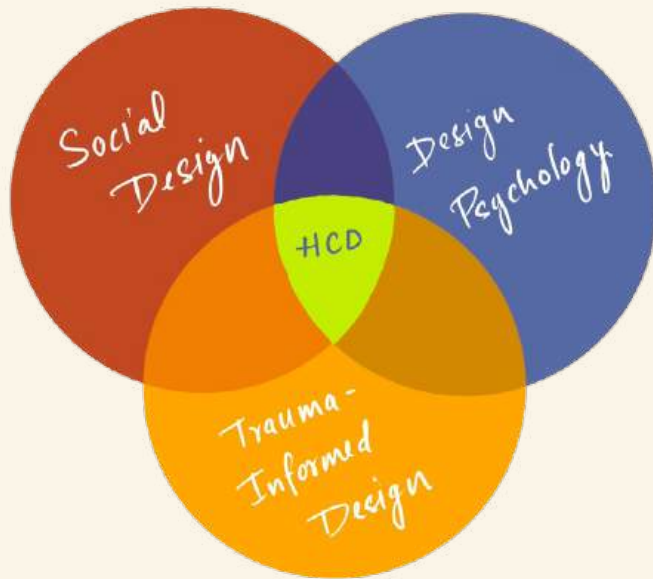


Fig. 1 Project principles, Diagram my own

Why This Matters

Since the beginning of my journey as a designer, I was always curious about psychology and how I can make impactful design. In previous projects, I designed awareness-based campaigns on national human rights in India, through a poster series (fig. 2), microsite and advertisement (fig. 3), aimed at creating awareness about citizens' rights. I also created an illustrative series (fig. 4) addressing children's wellbeing showcasing imagery of children playing Indian traditional games to encourage them to play outside and reduce screen time. Another illustrative series addressed social media addiction (fig. 5), visually showing the psychological effects of excessive use of Instagram and Facebook. All these projects have contributed to my understanding of the need for socially motivated design.



Fig. 2 Poster series on NHRC India



Fig. 3 Magazine ad on NHRC in India



Fig. 4 Illustrative series on children's wellbeing

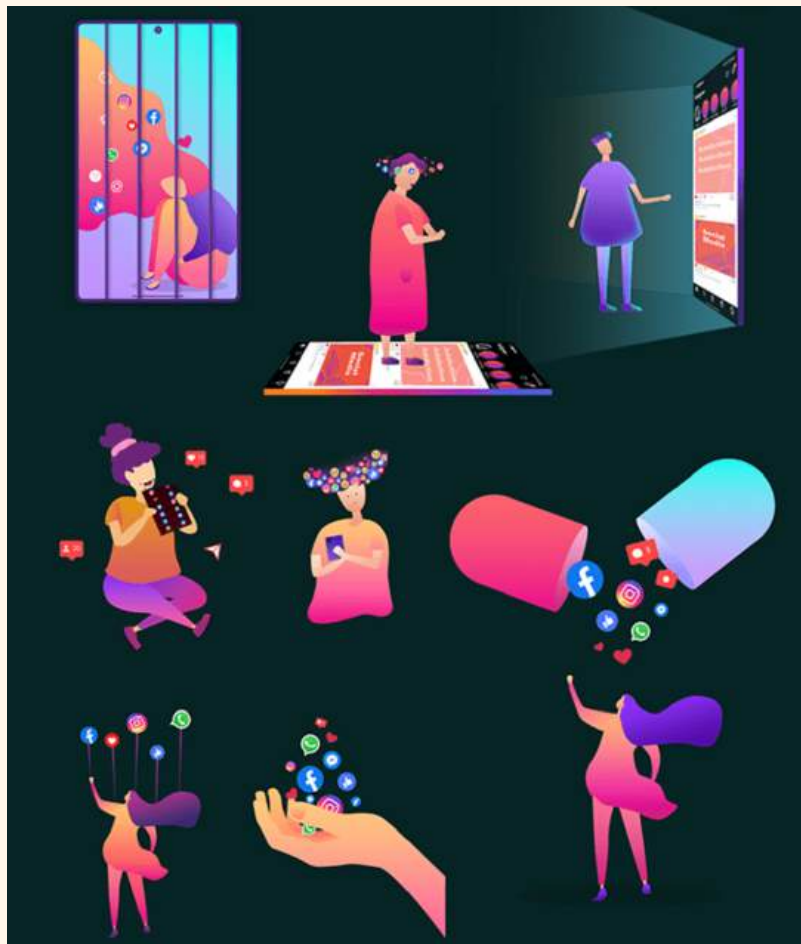


Fig. 4 Illustrative series on children's wellbeing

Recently, I have seen two of my friends going through mental health issues, so this inspired me to explore mental health support specifically for 18 to 28 year olds within Asian communities. Being from an Asian background myself and an immigrant in New Zealand, I feel I can approach this work with cultural authenticity, sensitivity, and an understanding of the unique stigma patterns, communication styles, and lived experiences that may affect how mental health is perceived and addressed. So, how as a designer I can raise awareness of mental health issues currently facing young people, and what tools or resources I could develop. I wanted to focus on non-screen-based, tangible resources that encourage reflection, connection and self-expression.

Young adults already spend hours on digital devices during leisure, study and work time, which contribute to screen fatigue, sleep problems and reduced mental wellbeing (Kaewpradit et al., 2025). While digital tools may be convenient and scalable, the personal, mindful, and distraction-free nature of analogue tools makes them a valuable alternative for mental health interventions (Baronfig Team, 2025). Analogue tools like journalling, sketching or using paper can provide a much-needed break from screens, helping individuals engage more mindfully with the activity and leading to better understanding (Baronfig Team, 2025).

The Context

More than one billion people worldwide are living with mental health disorders, like anxiety and depression (World Health Organization, 2025b). The 2022/23 New Zealand Health Survey established that although more than a quarter of youths have high mental health needs, the proportion who are unable to receive help when they need increased by 77%. The Chief Executive of Mental Health Foundation (MHF), Shaun Robinson, said the results of the survey are proof that the current approach to mental health and addiction among young people in Aotearoa New Zealand is failing.

“Our country is experiencing a youth mental health crisis”

he stated (MHF, 2024).

Asian Family Services and Trace Research (2021) report that, in Aotearoa New Zealand, Asian communities represent one of the fastest-growing populations, now comprising 17.3% of the total population. This represents a substantial increase from 15.1% in 2018, mainly driven by migration. The major contributors are Indian (5.8%), Chinese (5.6%), Filipino (2.2%) and Korean (1%) communities — a demographic that is notably young, highly educated, and facing evolving mental health dynamics (Asian Family Services and Trace Research Ltd., 2021).

According to the New Zealand Asian Wellbeing and Mental Health Survey 2021, 44.4% of Asians are at risk of depression and those who are younger (under 30 years) have the highest risk of depression (61.3%), yet mental health within these communities remains under-discussed due to cultural stigma, language barriers, and limited access to culturally appropriate support. While many young Asians experience emotional distress, the most common challenges (fig. 6) faced are: low awareness of mental health issues, limited knowledge of available services, lack of language and cultural support, concerns about privacy, and uncertainty about the effectiveness of mental health services and seeking help through traditional clinical pathways (Asian Family Services and Trace Research Ltd., 2021).

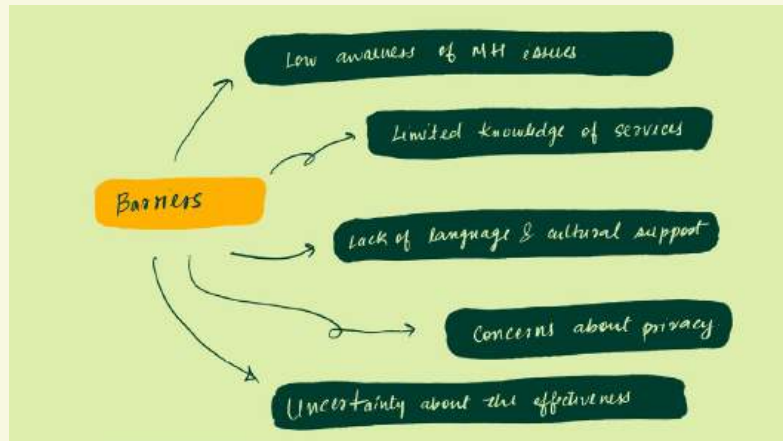


Fig. 6. Barriers faced by Asians in accessing mental health resources, as described in New Zealand Asian Wellbeing & Mental Health Report, 2021. Diagram my own.

To address these issues, Inner Canvas targets young Asian adults (18–28 years old), who might feel overwhelmed by the shift to adulthood. Through a combination of structured reflective exercises, creative expression, and wellness challenges, this wellbeing resource aims to empower people to take charge of their mental health and wellbeing in a way that is approachable and non-clinical. Through this, users will gain knowledge about the significance of mental health as well as prompts and suggested actions to encourage them to take initiative, and through doing so, enhance their wellbeing. This provides users with a private, self-paced platform to track wellbeing, explore feelings, and participate in creative practices from the comfort of their own environment.

In recent years, research has highlighted the potential of creative practices, visual communication, and human-centred design methods to facilitate emotional expression and self-reflection (Bennett, 2023; Craven et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2017). However, many existing mental health resources continue to be based on standardised, clinical, or culturally generic models which may not be appealing to diverse communities (Bennett, 2023; Sweeney and Taggart, 2018). Among young Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand, cultural stigma, language barriers and a lack of culturally sensitive resources may further limit access to wellbeing support (New Zealand Asian Wellbeing & Mental Health Survey, 2021). My project examines existing ideas and research relevant to the development of a culturally sensitive and creative wellbeing journal.



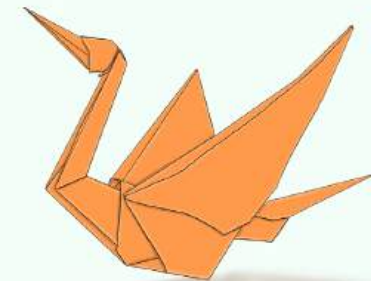
Understanding Mental Health and Wellbeing

To understand the importance of these problems, it is necessary to examine how mental health and wellbeing are defined and experienced. According to the World Health Organisation (2025a), mental health is a state of mental wellbeing that enables people to manage life's stresses, recognize their abilities, learn and work effectively, and give back to their community. Mental health touches many parts of our lives, from relationships with others to what makes us feel fulfilled and how we deal with life's challenges, including how we think, feel, and act, and respond (WHO, 2025a). It is an integral component of health and wellbeing that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in (WHO, 2025a).

Poor mental health can affect self-esteem, socialising, values and interpretations of one's life, psychological functioning and physical wellbeing (WHO, 2025a). There are many determinants that can alter an individual's mental health including: social and structural determinants, psychological and biological factors, and exposure to unfavourable social, economic, geopolitical, and environmental circumstances. Sometimes, people may not experience mental health issues even after being exposed to above-mentioned factors, while there are many cases of mental health conditions with no visible determinants (WHO, 2025a). Therefore, it could be argued that an individual cannot fully understand their mental health until they have awareness of their thoughts and feelings. Self-reflection and awareness can play an important role in enhancing and understanding an individual's overall wellbeing, which can be achieved through creative practices.

Effects of Creative Practices on Wellbeing

In a study investigating the effect of the first Covid-19 lockdown on creativity, 343 participants said they were, on average, more creative during the lockdown than before. This suggests that creative activities can be used as coping mechanisms during times of uncertainty and disruption, and this appears to be a wider change in how people approach health and wellbeing (Lopez-Persem et al., 2022). Creative activities such as painting, drawing, poetry, music, craft, photography, weaving, and sculpting can be effective ways to reduce mental health problems like anxiety and depression, as art and other creative therapies facilitate non-verbal expression, allowing individuals to externalise emotions that may be difficult to articulate verbally, thereby promoting better emotional regulation and coping strategies. For instance, studies indicate that creating art helps individuals access their emotions more directly than traditional talk therapies, aiding self-reflection and emotional release (Abbing et al., 2018).



Creative practices like journalling is a method of forming intimacy with the self, allowing us to hear our own voice and develop a relationship with ourselves. Research shows that “journalling 15–20 minutes a day, 3–4 times a week can improve mental health” (Reid, 2024). Creative expression can assist individuals in working through difficult times and understanding their feelings. Research has shown that journalling can improve anxiety and depression symptoms and reflective writing can be an accessible tool for emotional support (Sohal et al., 2022). Another study on creative expression and mental health highlights that writing or visual art and other forms of creativity can be used to manage emotions and overcome stress (Jean-Berluche, 2024). In a screen-based world, handwriting, doodling, or journalling can help the mind slow down, be mindful, and give people a moment to reflect (Barragan, 2025). Together, these insights suggest that creative practices can provide accessible means through which people can gain a deeper insight into their feelings and support their overall wellbeing.

Creative practices have been broadly identified as effective mechanisms of encouraging engagement and personal relevance in wellbeing interventions. A study by Craven et al. (2019) investigated how individuals can create personalised visual representations of wellbeing, through a workshop process. They involved participants with lived experience of mental health issues in the exploration, definition, and development of visual tools using the Double Diamond framework (Craven et al., 2019). Their results indicate that the participants created highly personalised and detailed representations, which were quite different compared to standardised digital health formats, such as graphs or emoji-based trackers. Most participants favoured multimedia, hand-drawn or symbolic representations that reflected their own personal narratives. Craven et al. (2019) suggests that the opportunity to



create their personal visual content led to a sense of ownership, self-assessment, and emotional attachment in the user.

According to Craven et al. (2019) predefined visualisation tools do not tend to support diverse emotional experiences. Conversely, creative tools with flexibility allow for personal meanings to emerge. These results highlight the importance of creative expression in the development of wellbeing resources that serve the needs of individuals, as opposed to the application of generic designs.



On the same note, Kelly, Levey and Lay (2017) discussed the evolution of arts therapy practice in Southeast Asia and highlighted the role of cultural context in creative wellbeing interventions. Their study emphasises how Western models of therapy need to be adjusted to the local traditions, values, and social systems in order to be effective. They demonstrate that creative processes, including storytelling, visual art and communal activities, are more effective when grounded in cultural knowledge and community relationships.

Collectively, these studies imply that creative wellbeing tools must be human-centred, culturally responsive, and flexible. Instead of situating users in the passive role of receivers of expert knowledge, human-centred methods and creative practices allow them to actively engage with their own wellbeing. This informs the use of open-ended prompts, flexible creative tasks and user generated responses in the journal.

Visual Communication and Mental Health

Professor Jill Bennett (2023), Founding Director of the Big Anxiety Research Centre (BARC) at UNSW Sydney, believes that visual communication is significant in shaping mental health perception, its experience, and how it is discussed. Her study provides a critical analysis of how mental illness is visualised in the media and public discourse. She states that most visual narratives tend to rely on stereotypical and negative imagery, including isolated characters and figures (fig. 7), dark and dull environments, or a distressed expression (fig. 8), which can reinforce stigma and reduce the complexity of emotional experiences. These representations can discourage people from engaging with mental health resources, particularly when they fail to reflect personal or cultural realities (Bennett, 2023). Similarly, Azmin and Mohamed Salim (2024), researchers in graphic design and digital media at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia, argue that many current mental health campaigns rely on outdated and clichéd visuals that actually reinforce stigma rather than reduce it. They also note that audiences, particularly younger people, have become desensitised to the overwhelming amount of visual content in digital media, making it harder for mental health messages to cut through and genuinely connect (Azmin & Mohamed Salim, 2024).



Fig. 7 Asian Mental Health Collective (Ads of the World)



Fig. 8 Ad campaign by OHBULANI!, Malaysia (Tuan, 2023)

Bennett (2023) proposes more personal, interactive, and experience-based visual models that centred lived experience instead of clinical labels. She argues that visual communication must allow people to recognise their personal feelings in subtle and meaningful ways. This means going beyond literal or symbolic portrayals of mental illness towards layered and metaphorical imagery that is open to interpretation and emotional engagement. Azmin and Salim (2024) conclude that to prevent desensitisation and stereotyping, visual content has to be culturally relevant and innovative.

One of the key strategies highlighted by Bennett, Azmin and Salim is the use of visual metaphors. Bennett (2023) states that emotions, which are hard to express in words, can be conveyed in art through metaphors, enabling people to explore their experiences in indirect but effective ways. Instead of using an obvious symbol, Bennett (2023) promotes the use of rich multi-layered imagery that can hold multiple meanings and evolve over time. Visual metaphors are especially powerful in mental health communication, as they make complex concepts more accessible and easier to approach emotionally (Azmin & Mohamed Salim, 2024). This approach acknowledges that emotional experiences are not usually linear or fixed (Bennett, 2023).

An example of this approach can be seen in the Wellcome Photography Prize entry *Head in Hole*, by Dulcie Wagstaff (Bennett, 2023). Here (fig. 9), the artist shows herself half covered with soil in a floral dress, which signifies her experience of depression and gardening as her coping mechanism. The Wellcome website explains:

“To help with her depression, she works in her garden . . . she confronted the cold with a summery floral dress and imagined burying herself, connecting with the earth while hiding from the world above”

Wagstaff says: “Gardening in winter is a defiant act . . . a lifeline, in search of light, connection, movement and purpose” (as cited in Bennett, 2023)



Fig. 9 'Head in Hole' by Wagstaff (2017). Reproduced from Wellcome Collection

Wagstaff refers to winter gardening as a rebellious activity and a search for light and purpose (as cited in Bennett, 2023). Instead of showing depression in the typical way, through imagery of darkness or despair, the photo conveys vulnerability, resilience, and hope.

For instance, in advertising, visual metaphors are often used to connect unrelated objects to convey an idea in an engaging and memorable way (Design Project, 2022). Santiago Alvarez Tocalli, a media professional at Design Project, noted a relevant example: the United Nations adopted a creative approach to its “Keep your distance” campaign (fig. 10, 11), in a calm and accessible manner. Instead of reinforcing chaos, the message was delivered through simple and metaphorical visuals that encouraged understanding (Design Project, 2022). Layered metaphor encourages the audience to think of the picture in their own emotional context, fostering empathy and introspection (Bennett, 2023).

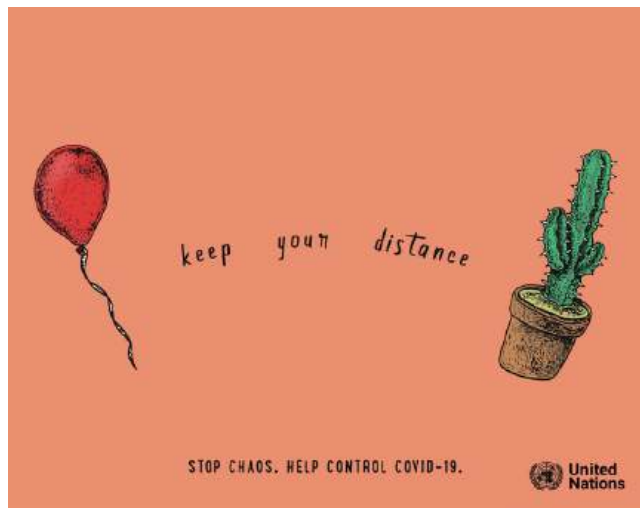


Fig. 10 'Keep your distance' by United Nations (Design Project, 2022)



Fig. 11 'Keep your distance' by United Nations (Design Project, 2022)

Marc Bryant of Mindframe, as quoted by Bennett (2023), adds that repeated exposure to stereotypical mental health images may distort public perception and make it harder for individuals to connect their own experiences with those depicted. Visuals that fail to capture lived realities risk alienating already marginalised people

These insights indicate the importance of developing a flexible, personal, and culturally responsive visual language. This guided me to create metaphorical representations like 'Ramen is a warm hug' (fig. 12), enabling users to engage with their emotions in non-prescriptive ways. In doing so, the journal aims to avoid stigmatising representations by focusing on experiential and layered visuals.



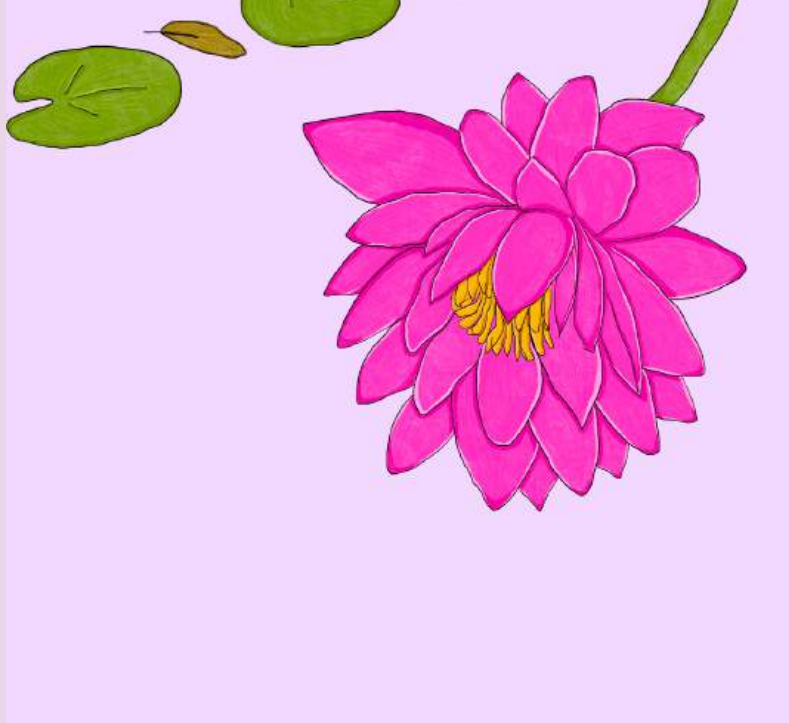
If your recent emotions were colours, what
would they look like?

COLOUR THEM HERE!!

Colour, Emotion and Psychological Functioning

Colour is one of the basic components of visual communication with significant impacts on emotional and cognitive response. Professor of Psychology at University of Rochester, Andrew J. Elliot, provides a detailed overview of theoretical and empirical studies on the psychology of colour, showing that colour has an impact on emotion, arousal, motivation, and behaviour in various ways (Elliot, 2015). Building on this foundation, Professor of Cognitive Psychology Christine Mohr and Senior Lecturer in Psychology Domicile Jonauskaitė at University of Lausanne (Jonauskaitė & Mohr, 2025), conducted a comprehensive systematic review of 128 years of psychological research, analysing 132 empirical studies across 64 countries and over 42,000 participants. While these studies identify systematic patterns, they also acknowledge that colour-emotion responses are influenced by contextual factors such as culture, individual differences, situations, gender, tasks and colour variation.

Elliot (2015) observes that studies have gone beyond posing a question concerning 'Does colour influence behaviour?' to 'when' — Under what condition does colour influence behaviour? This change emphasises the need to understand context instead of assuming constant colour or emotions associations. For example, red can be used to signify anger, embarrassment and arousal in certain Western societies, while in Chinese culture it represents good fortune and in South Africa it symbolises mourning. Similarly, blue or green colours can be a sign of sickness or sadness in one culture, yet a sign of calmness, nature or spirituality in another. These differences suggest that the interpretation of colour is both



culturally constructed and biologically defined. Elliot argues that designers and researchers should therefore apply colour theory with consideration of cultural background, age, gender and situational factors. Jonauskaite and Mohr (2025) showed that colour-emotion links are systematic and consistent. For example, light colours are broadly linked to positive emotions and dark colours with negative ones. Warm colours such as yellow and orange were associated with positive emotions like joy and excitement, while cooler colours like blue and green are associated with calmer and relaxing emotional states (Jonauskaite & Mohr, 2025). These studies show that colour is not just an aesthetic choice; it is also a powerful psychological tool.

Therefore, as reflected in my earlier designs, inappropriate colour choices can unintentionally lead to discomfort, anxiety, or confusion (fig. 13). On the other hand, emotionally safe and engaging outcomes can be supported by culturally informed colour choices (Elliot, 2015). In my project, exploration into these theories contributed to my use of earthy, soft and calming colours chosen due to the overall psychological comfort but also for their cultural appeal in Asian contexts. This informed the use of design psychological principles through which the journal seeks to provide a visually supportive atmosphere that promotes emotional engagement without overlooking cultural diversity in colour interpretation.



Fig. 13 Journal prototype page.

Asian Culture and Symbolism

Asian art is extremely diverse with the influence of long histories of cultural, religious impacts and regional influences. It blends traditional practices such as Chinese calligraphy, Japanese woodblock printing and Indian Rangoli with modern techniques and materials. Despite this diversity, most Asian art forms share a strong emphasis on symbolism, typically inspired by nature, spirituality, and cultural identity — symbolism that carries layered meanings communicating beliefs, values, and emotional experiences (Asian Art, n.d.).

The East Asian traditions are mostly based upon harmony, balance and subtle motion, whereas Indian and Philippine art is usually characterised by bright colours, intricate patterns, and narrative motifs based on mythology and history. Popular motifs like lotus flowers, cranes, mandalas, and dragons have multiple layers of cultural significance relating to purity, longevity, balance, and strength and recur across the visual tradition of many Asian countries as a shared symbolic language (Tsui, 2025).



In all of these traditions, the role of nature is central, and animals, plants, and landscapes are often depicted not as decorative, but as symbolic. Moral values, spiritual beliefs and social ideals are frequently portrayed through artistic detail, affirming art's role as a carrier of cultural continuity and identity. Buddhist and Hindu religious philosophies significantly impacted Asian visual expression, both in themes and aesthetic style, influencing art forms across South, East, and Southeast Asia in a way that crosses regional boundaries (Soullière, 2018). Collectively, these factors make Asian art a valuable source of cultural pride and a point of reference for creative practice in the modern world (Kelly, Levey and Lay, 2017).

As discussed earlier, major Asian cultures in New Zealand are Indian, Chinese, Filipino and somewhat Korean. To develop a visual language, I studied art styles, primarily associated with these communities (fig. 14 to 17). Motifs such as lotus flowers, birds, waves, lanterns and organic shapes recur throughout these cultures, associated with growth, harmony, resilience and emotional introspection (fig. 18). Cultural sensitivity of these elements was achieved through informal feedback on the visuals from Asian mental health professionals and peers to make them feel familiar, respectful, and not stereotypical. This influenced the style and the visual language of the journal.



Fig. 14 Moodboard of Korean art style (Screenshot from Miro)

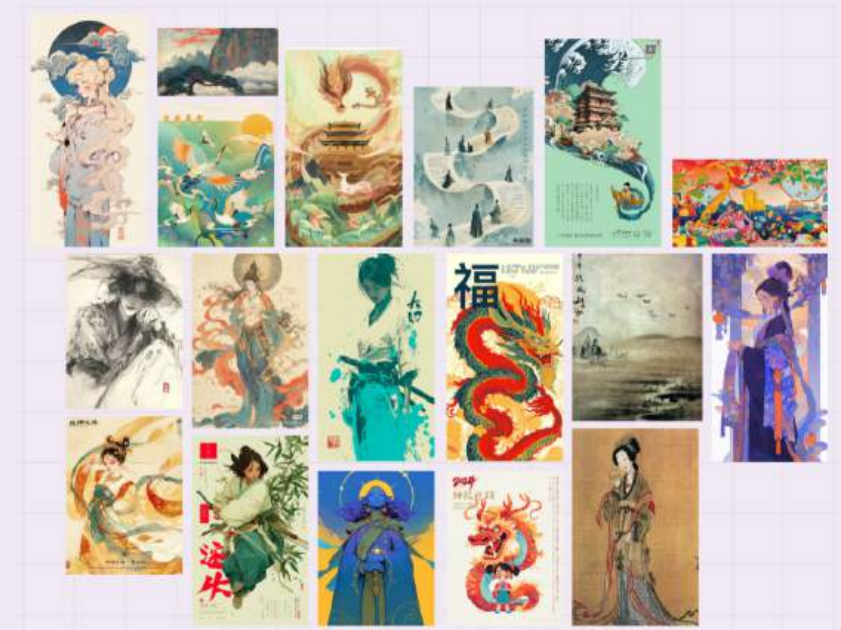


Fig. 16 Moodboard of Chinese art style (Screenshot from Miro)

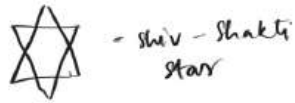


Fig. 15 Moodboard of Filipino art style (Screenshot from Miro)



Fig. 17 Moodboard of Indian art style (Screenshot from Miro)

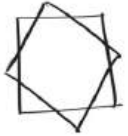
Relevant Indian Symbols.



- Shiv - Shakti
star



petals



- dot
- Bindi



Lotus - purity
strength -
symbol of life



- chakra -
energy center

- provides grounding
- release fear & insecurity
- encourages joy, creativity
- emotional balance
- boosts confidence
- mental clarity
- personal power

- opens the heart to love
- emotional healing
- facilitates clear communication & self expression
- spiritual enlightenment
- higher consciousness
- enhance meditation



- fosters inner peace wisdom

Andraksha (Sacred Beads)



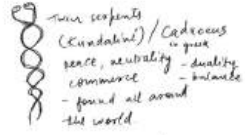
Tulsi
- protection
- divine consciousness



shankh
- giver
- longevity
- prosperity
- cleanses

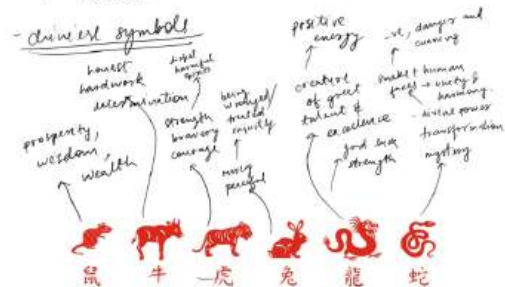


Swan - soul
- liberated soul
(moving towards spiritual enlightenment)
- knowledge & wisdom
- inner beauty



serpents
(Kundalini) / Caduceus
in yoga
peace, neutrality - duality
commerce - balance
- found all around the world

- Chinese symbols



In the final illustrations and motifs I chose to focus on similarities and commonly used symbols between these cultures including lotus, flowers, birds, lanterns, waves, and traditional patterns using warm and calming colour palettes, keeping the emotional essence of these traditions rather than reproducing culturally specific imagery. Collectively, Asian visual traditions are a valuable source of cultural pride and a meaningful point of reference for contemporary creative practice. A visual language that is culturally familiar to young Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand is not merely an aesthetic choice, but a cultural act of care.

Fig. 18 Research in Asian symbolism (Screenshot from Miro)

Ethical and Trauma-Informed Design

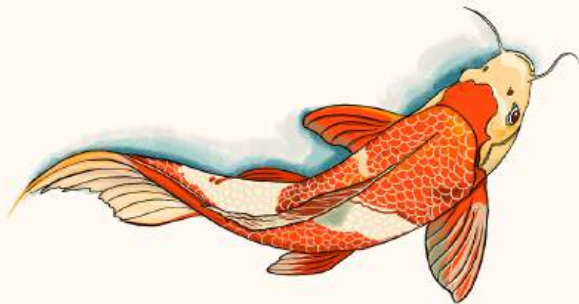
Trauma-informed approaches underscore safety, empowerment and emotional sensitivity when it comes to mental health related practices. Dr Angela Sweeney, Reader in Lived Experience at King's College London and Dr Dany Taggart, Reader in School of Health and Social Care at University of Essex, critically discuss how trauma-informed frameworks are often misunderstood, and that the use of trauma-informed approaches in mental health services is often inconsistent (Sweeney & Taggart, 2018). They argue that numerous institutions use the language of trauma-informed care without actualising the core principles of the model, which results in superficial or ineffective practices.

Sweeney and Taggart (2018) state that truly trauma-informed practices require acknowledgement of the lived experience of people, the encouragement of autonomy, openness, and transparent communication, and the avoidance of practices that

can re-traumatise participants. Similarly, Bennett (2022) also highlights avoiding negative and stereotypical imagery which does not show lived realities and may reinforce stigma. Both studies emphasise that emotional safety cannot only be achieved by good intentions alone but by careful design decisions that respect personal boundaries and agency.

In a design context, trauma-informed principles suggest the establishment of environments and resources that are predictable, non-threatening, and empowering. This involves the use of gentle language, providing options, avoiding provocative material, and allowing the user to determine the level of disclosure. Notably, trauma-informed design acknowledges that people access wellbeing resources from diverse emotional states and may be carrying unspoken experience of distress.

In my project, I avoided clinical or diagnostic language, instead drawing on strength-based communication, and voluntary participation. The journal is structured to promote reflection without positioning users as patients or problems to be solved. The prompts aim to create a safe and respectful space for emotional exploration by incorporating trauma-informed principles and minimising potential harm.



The Influences

Asian Mental Health Hub at Te Papa

The Asian Mental Health Hub at Te Papa (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, 2022) is a nationwide programme that seeks to raise awareness and advocacy for mental health experiences among Asian communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. The project was initiated by researcher Mehwish Mughal and curator Grace Cassin in response to the limited representation of Asian perspectives in mainstream mental health discourse. The project incorporates a range of interconnected outputs, including the digital zine *Unravelling Threads* (fig. 19, 20), featuring personal narratives and thoughts from Asian New Zealanders, a video series on important mental health issues, community events, such as the 'Reimagining Asian Mental Health hui', and the creation of museum collections about community experiences. Together, these platforms provide public space to narrate stories, discuss, and reflect on them collectively.

This project shows the value of culturally grounded, community-based mental health communication. The Hub provides an example of how to build emotionally resonant and socially relevant wellbeing resources by prioritising lived experiences and amplifying under-represented voices. It informs the current project's focus on cultural sensitivity, storytelling engagement, and human-centred design.



Fig. 19 Asian mental health zine, 2022, 'Unravelling threads'.



Fig. 20 Grace Cassin and Mehwish Mughal launching AMH project (Te papa, 2022)

Love Better Campaign

The Love Better campaign (Love Better, n.d.) is a public health programme that encourages healthy relationships and emotional health among youth in Aotearoa New Zealand. With the support of the Ministry of Social Development, the platform includes interactive tools, educational resources, and guidance based on the themes of communication, consent, and emotional resilience. The campaign is characterised by its accessible visual language, easy navigation and youthful tone (fig. 21, 22). Instead of authoritative or clinical communication, Love Better appeals to the audience with conversational language and relatable scenarios. This way helps minimise stigma and motivates young people to seek information and support.

As a design precedent, Love Better demonstrates that simplicity, accessibility, and empathy are important in communicating wellbeing to young people. It informs the current project's focus on developing a non-intimidating, friendly, and visually accessible journaling experience for young users.

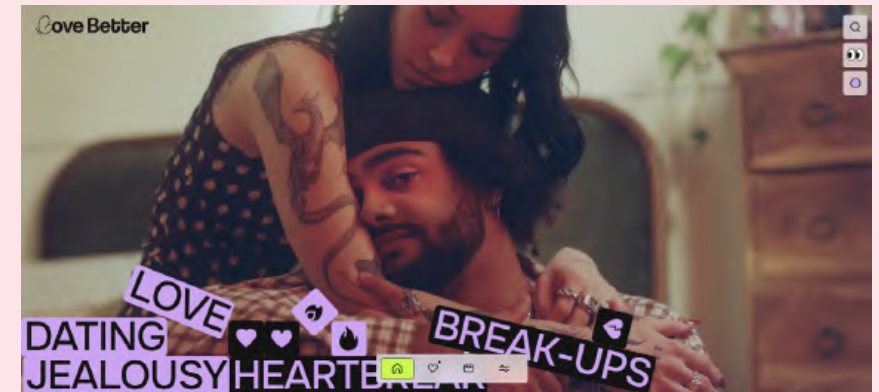


Fig. 21 Love better, website screenshot

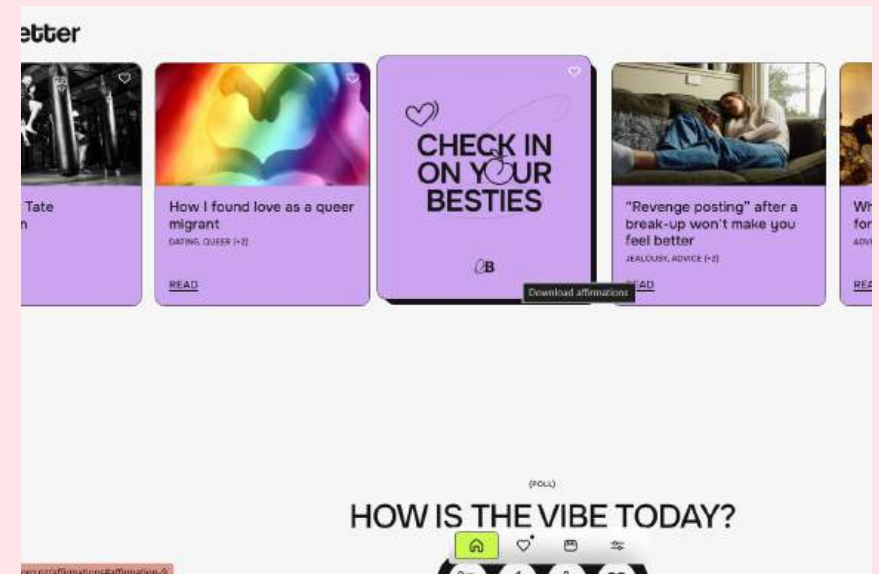


Fig. 22 Love better, website screenshot

MindJournal by Ollie Aplin

MindJournal (Aplin, 2017) (fig. 23) is a guided journaling resource created by designer Ollie Aplin in the United Kingdom, inspired by his own journaling practice as a means of supporting his mental health. The project was developed in response to the absence of non-clinical mental health resources specifically designed for men. The journal provides structured, daily check-ins and reflective activities guiding users to explore their thoughts, emotions, and goals in a format that is manageable and private. Alongside the print journal, MindJournal provides online resources, such as articles and guides on topics including emotional regulation, productivity, and self-reflection.

MindJournal is thoughtfully designed with a supportive tone that addresses the stigma surrounding men's mental health and encourages the expression of emotions. It demonstrates how thoughtful design can transform journaling into an effective and accessible wellbeing resource. The use of guided prompts, consistent structure, and supportive language to facilitate long-term engagement informs the design of my project.



Fig. 23 Mindjournal by Aplin, (2017)

Visual Language for Mental Health Week

The observations discussed by Visualising Mental Health (2019) offer important insights into the intersection of design and communication in mental health. Tim Coyle, Media Officer at the Flinders University Student Association (Visualising Mental Health, 2019), observed that a lot of mental health design focuses on distress, illness, or problem-solving, which can unintentionally reinforce negative associations. Messages centred on empowerment, self-care, and everyday emotional maintenance are considered more effective, as they promote positive habits rather than crisis-only responses.

Coyle embraced the mantra “communicate and don’t decorate”, prioritising clarity, emotional resonance and relevance were prioritised over decorative values (Visualising Mental Health, 2019). There were also metaphors such as taking care of a garden or finding peace in nature to evoke wellbeing without resorting to clichés. Visual approaches such as warm colour palette, thoughtful composition, evoking feelings of comfort, hope, and resilience, reinforces messaging that supports habitual wellbeing practices instead of focusing only on hardship.

Reflecting on the design of the Mental Health Week poster (fig. 24), at Flinders University, I personally feel there are areas that can be improved. Though the communication is preserved over the decoration, the use of colours and imagery conveying sadness or dullness can reinforce negative perceptions unintentionally and limit emotional engagement. This suggests that despite the emphasis on communicative clarity, visual and colour choices are equally

crucial in defining positive emotional resonance, ensuring that wellbeing messages are not only accessible but also empowering. This precedent demonstrates how mental health design can move beyond problem-oriented visuals to encompass design methods that promote empowerment, emotional engagement, and habitual wellbeing practices.



Fig. 24 Mental Health Week 2019 poster. Visualizing Mental Health (2019)

The Unfolding

At the start of my project, my area of interest was bringing together my experience as an illustrator and exploring how designed resources could support mental health, perhaps in the context of art therapy. My initial research aim was therefore to explore illustration-based visual communication resource design using art therapy principles to enhance mental health outcomes in young adults.

However, through further research, I realised my project was more inclined towards creative practices than clinical art therapy. Art therapy requires clinical frameworks and qualifications, whereas my work emphasises creative expression, visual narrative, illustration, and human-centred design. These practices support wellbeing but do not claim to provide therapeutic treatment. Since my journal is not designed for clinical intervention or diagnosed mental health conditions, I refined my focus to overall wellbeing — the early, approachable stages at which self-reflection and creative expression can help users build awareness and emotional resilience. Within this, I was particularly interested in how the principles of human-centred design and visual communication could be applied to enhance the effectiveness and engagement of creative journalling tools. To narrow down the project, I refined the audience to young Asians in New Zealand, shifting from ages 16–25 to 18–28. This change simplified the ethical approval process and individuals aged 18 and over are more likely to articulate their emotional needs

and to meaningfully engage with reflective journalling. As someone from an Asian background, I was also able to approach this work with greater cultural authenticity and insight into stigma, cultural nuance, and lived experience. My research question evolved several times throughout this journey, eventually settling as:

How might human-centred design and culturally sensitive visual communication be used to enhance creative journalling experiences to support the wellbeing of young Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand?



The Design Journey

As discussed earlier, cultural stigma, difficulty identifying and expressing emotions, and an inability to access culturally relevant resources often prevent young Asians from accessing formal mental health services. This observation motivated me to explore how design could facilitate informal coping practices in a more structured, accessible, and culturally sensitive way. The theoretical basis, described in the context section, influenced my design to focus on the user involvement, cultural grounding, and creative agency. Therefore, the aim was to develop a creative wellbeing journal that could serve as a safe, non-clinical space to reflect on and express emotions creatively.

This stage helped me to narrow down the project concept from a broad-based mental health journal to a culturally responsive, visually expressive, trauma-informed creative wellbeing resource. Therefore, an interactive journal that provides young people with a safe space to explore their emotions and take proactive steps towards reducing negative thoughts. It is designed for those who may find it difficult to talk to others or seek professional help. Through creative and reflective exercises, the journal encourages self-expression and supports overall wellbeing.

What are my early explorations?

In the early stage of design explorations, I began exploring colours, textures, layouts, format and visual styles through sketching, mind-mapping (fig. 25), and developing mood boards and thumbnails (fig. 26). In these early concepts I worked with traditional techniques and materials like oil pastels, watercolour, poster colours, chalk, and pencil colours. Through this I created prints of leaves, stones, flowers and digital illustrations in a range of visual styles. I chose to work with a physical journal format because it offers touch, allows users to own a personal copy, and avoids the digital monitoring or staring at the screen. This stage was a period of experimentation with visual language and guided prompts and deciding on layout structures, metaphors, natural cultural elements, fragmented shapes, textured surfaces, and abstract forms.





Fig. 25 Mind mapping

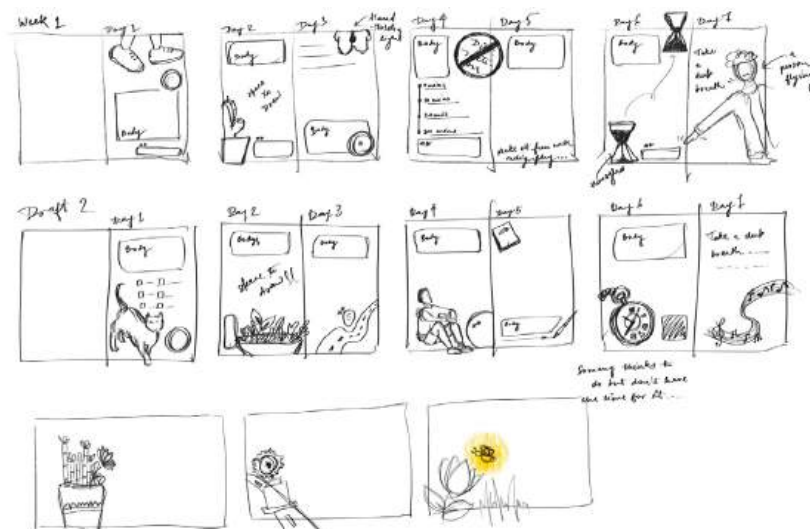


Fig. 26 Thumbnails

At the initial stage of visual development, I started with a boat illustration (fig. 27) in a simple illustration style, accompanied by a prompt asking readers to write down their favourite childhood memory. Followed by an eye illustration (fig. 28) depicting fear through a dark and intense illustration style. Neither of these styles had cultural relevance or personal meaning. I then moved towards symbolic visuals like showing movement of shoes and plants using a bright and contrasting colour palette (fig. 29). These designs felt cluttered and overall seemed western and didn't have an Asian touch to it. I also experimented with human figures and kept symbolic visuals like 'walking cat' using bright and saturated colours in a landscape A5 format (fig. 30). However, the human figures appeared emotionless and intimidating, which could discourage users from engaging. The landscape format was also not particularly user-friendly, especially for a journal; the use of bright and dark colours made it difficult to write or draw on the pages. All of these visual combinations felt unwelcoming, and overly structured, which restricted creative freedom. Then I tried traditional techniques like watercolours, oil pastels, coloured pencils, and chalk to create visual elements and textures by imprinting leaves, flowers, stems, and sand (fig. 31, 32). However, these felt too childish and did not resonate with the Asian culture aesthetics or reflect my own design perspective.

What is your favourite childhood memory?



Fig. 27 Journal design explorations.

What do you fear the most?



Fig. 28 Journal design explorations.



Fig. 29 Journal design explorations.



Fig. 30 Journal design explorations.

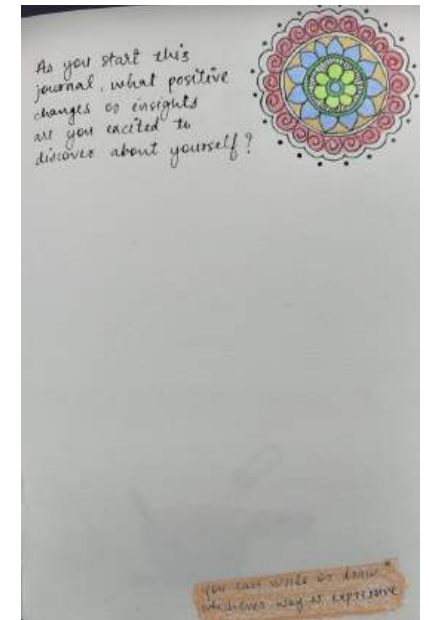
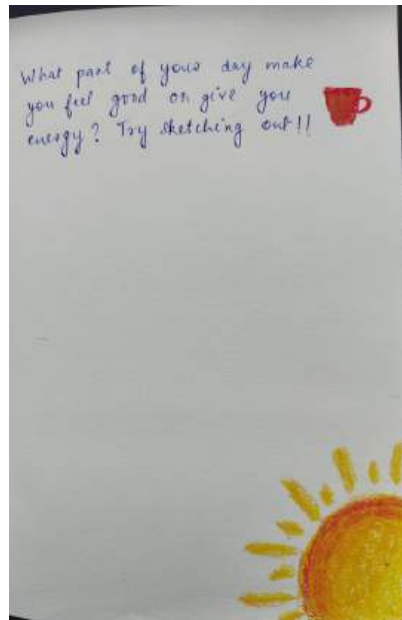
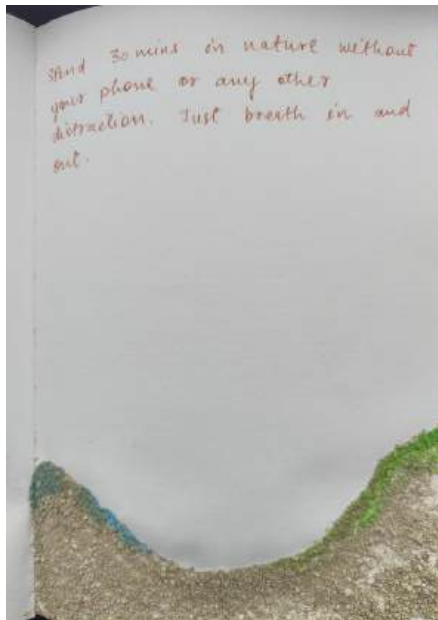
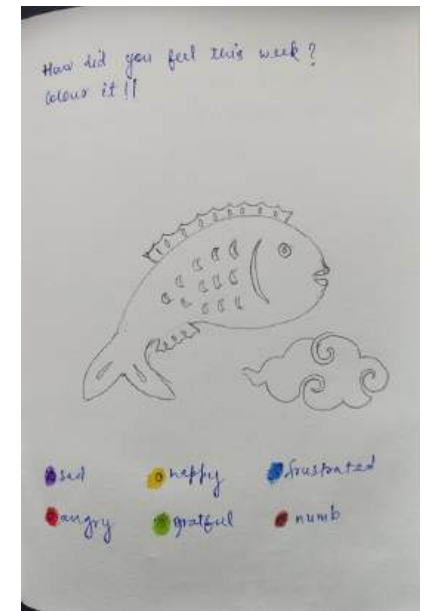
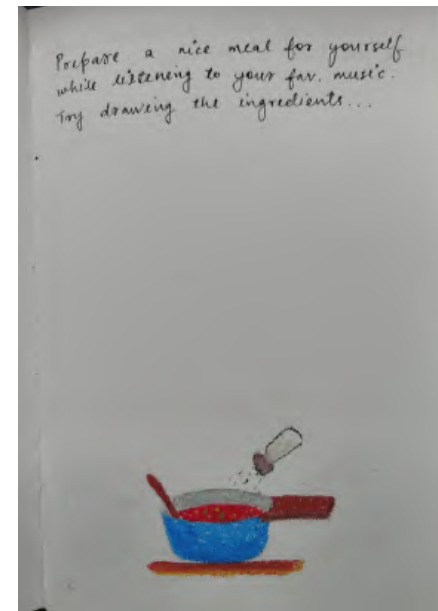
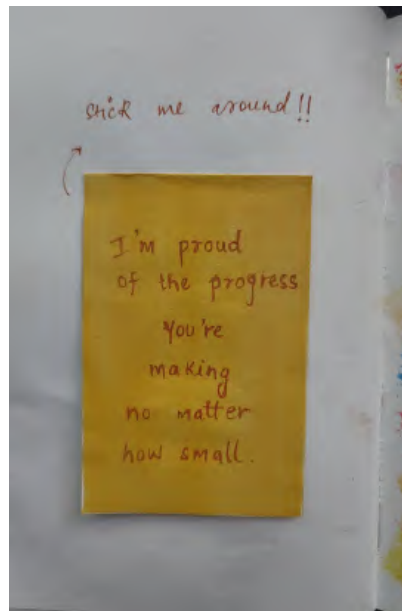


Fig. 31 Journal design explorations.

Fig. 32 Journal design explorations.

Peer review and reflection helped me to realise that there should be a balance between guidance and openness. This meant providing more creative space for the users to engage at their own pace and comfort, leading me to completely shift to digital illustration, allowing me to explore textures, visual styles, and culturally relevant elements that would prove more engaging and meaningful for the target audience.

What conversations informed my design?

I informally interviewed two Asian mental health professionals to strengthen the cultural and ethical grounds of the project. First, I interviewed Kaz Ng, an Asian mental health professional at Massey University, Wellington, she pointed out the significance of cultural sensitivity, evidence-based practice, and understanding the sociocultural factors affecting Asian communities. She recommended clarifying the journal's purpose and communicating it in simple and easy to understand language, especially to the users who may face language barriers. She encouraged linking creativity with emotional and physical awareness through reflection on thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and bodily responses.

Kaz further recommended incorporating real-life wellbeing practices into my journal, including sleep schedules, meals, social interaction, physical activity, and time spent outdoors, and ensuring that daily tasks remain simple and manageable. She emphasised the need to identify the difference between wellbeing and clinical mental health, maintaining ethical boundaries, and the consideration of a wide range of emotional experiences, such as sadness, anger, loneliness, and connection. She helped me to refine the prompts to reflect community needs more effectively and suggested integrating therapeutic strategies such as the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique, breathing exercises, and acrostic writing, which informed the development of prompts. She also advised considering what users perceive emotionally, behaviourally, and physically by journaling.

The second informal interview was with Aaron, an Asian mental professional based at Massey University in Auckland. He stressed the importance of balance and harmony in wellbeing practices and proposed prompts that are centred around motivation and daily purpose such as, 'What encourages you to get out of bed each morning?' He also recommended incorporating movement-based practices, such as Tai Chi as gentle forms of emotional regulation and mindfulness.



How did I develop my visual language?

Throughout the process I was trying to develop my own visual language suitable for an Asian-focused journal. After a lot of trial and error, informed by peer suggestions and research into Asian art, I decided to keep the elements that resonated with Asian cultural aesthetics and integrate Asian symbols, abstract art, and animal motifs, while creating a more inviting and comfortable visual by focusing on visual similarities within these cultures. This approach prioritised cultural sensitivity by emphasising commonalities rather than reinforcing cultural differences.

To make the journal more engaging and relatable for Asian users, I incorporated elements like, lotus, Chinese lanterns symbolising good luck, waves, clay pots, Japanese origami representing hope and good fortune, traditional patterns, Asian birds such as paradise flycatcher, alongside soft, earthy and calming colours to create a soothing, approachable, and culturally resonant visual experience. I kept visual components to a minimum so that the user could add their own drawings, writing and thoughts without feeling restricted by the design. This approach reduces pressure and reinforces the idea that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' responses.

In my visual journey, I consistently reflected on cultural sensitivity, approachability, clarity of visuals and layout, the relationship between prompts and their corresponding illustrations, accessible language, and overall practicality.

For example, in the prompt exploring impulsive decisions, I initially illustrated a young boy jumping into water wearing yellow boots and a raincoat (fig. 33). This reflected Western cultural aesthetics and failed to reflect Asian cultural context. In response, I recreated the illustration depicting a young boy barefoot, jumping into the water (fig. 34). Bare feet on wet ground is a widespread childhood memory across many Asian cultures, making it feel culturally honest and personally familiar. However, this felt overly literal as a visual depiction, lacking the emotional depth and layered meaning central to the journal's visual language. This led me to develop the concept into an illustration of a hand reaching outwards — a gesture open to individual interpretation (fig. 35).

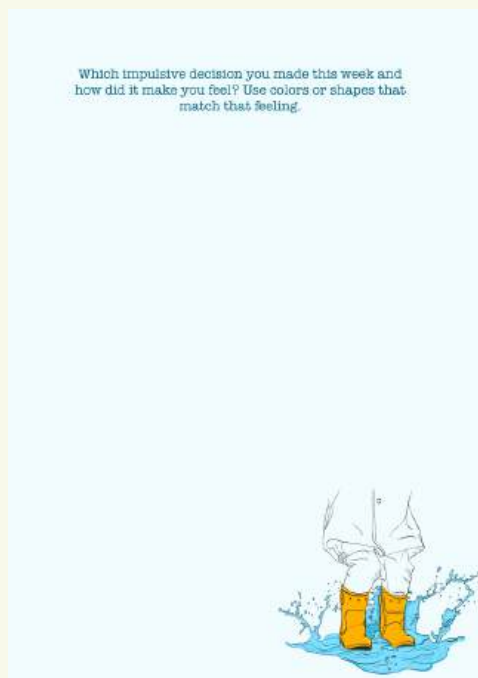


Fig. 33 Journal design explorations.



Fig. 34 Journal design explorations.



Fig. 35 Journal design explorations.

A similar process shaped the illustration for the prompt on visualising social energy. Initially, I chose the hemp plant (fig. 36) for its sacred and purifying significance with Indian spiritual traditions. However, the hemp plant also carries strong modern associations with drugs, which could be misinterpreted and undermine the purpose of the prompt. To maintain cultural grounding, the illustration was replaced with elephants (fig. 37) — animals widely regarded as deeply social, wise, and communal across many Asian cultures.



Fig. 36 Journal design explorations.

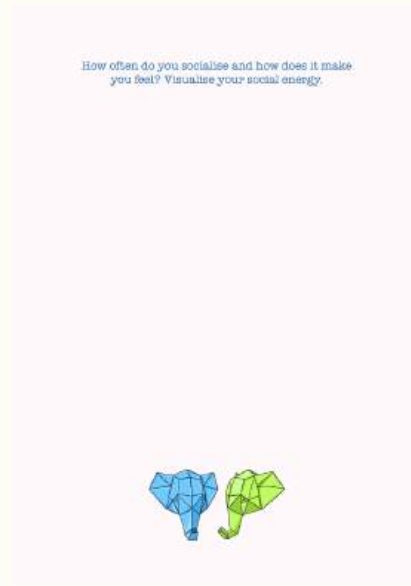


Fig. 37 Journal design explorations.

Another example of this iterative approach can be seen in the prompt inviting users to paint freely on a canvas. I created roses in an oil paint texture (fig. 38), intended to stimulate creative expression. On reflection, this image contradicted its own prompt. Rather than opening the users to creative possibility, it subtly imposed a standard to meet. Then I simplified it to an empty frame decorated with traditional Indian flower motifs (fig. 39), preserving cultural warmth and aesthetic purpose. The frame holds the space without filling it — which is exactly what the prompt asks of the user.

Throughout the journal, I followed the same principle — moving away from imagery that directed and limited, and towards imagery that builds trust through openness to multiple interpretations.

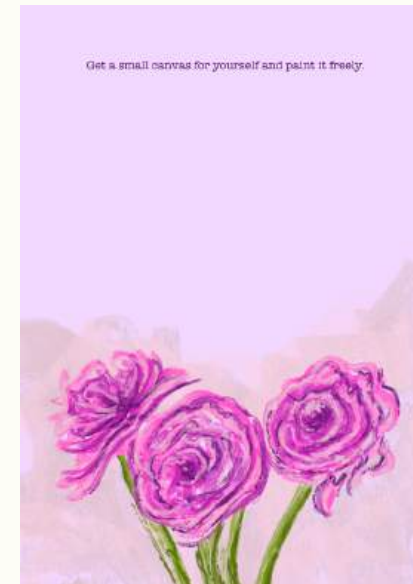


Fig. 38 Journal design explorations.

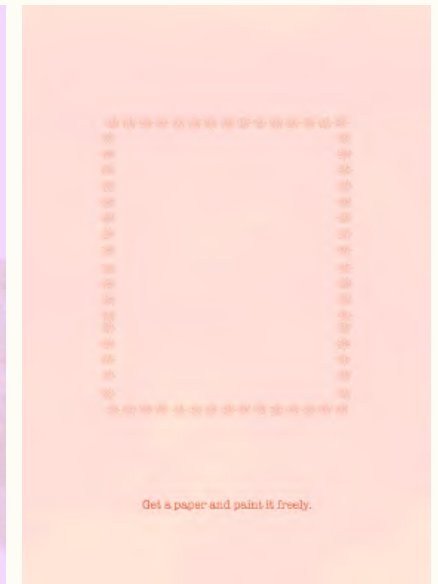


Fig. 39 Journal design explorations.

I have embedded metaphors throughout the visual language through elements like blossoms, flowing water, bowls of ramen, and light imagery, visually representing emotional release and healing. Koi fish (fig. 40), for instance, were chosen with the prompt exploring emotional responses to sadness — widely associated with perseverance and the ability to move through difficulty with grace. The metaphor 'As your pen moves, the weight in your mind turns to blossoms' (fig. 41) represents the idea that writing can transform heavy or overwhelming thoughts into something lighter, more meaningful, and hopeful. By visualising this metaphor, I aimed to illustrate how journaling can act as a gentle release — one in which difficult emotions slowly evolve into clarity, growth, and self-understanding. Alongside these visual decisions, colour and typography played an equally important role in shaping the journal's overall feel.



Fig. 40 Journal design explorations.



Fig. 41 Journal design explorations.

What are my colour and typography choices?

Elliot's (2015) study on the psychology of colours was a strong influence on the development of the journal's visual identity. I have tried various colour palettes and received informal responses from my peers to evaluate the emotional reactions. High contrast, bright schemes were perceived as overstimulating, while dark colours were observed to be emotionally distancing. Consequently, I developed a colour scheme of soft earthy tones, gentle pastels, and warm neutrals informed by research on four Asian visual traditions: Indian, Chinese, Filipino and Korean. These traditions commonly use rich, warm and vibrant colours to convey emotion, spirituality, and cultural identity. Observation of both traditional and contemporary works within these cultures revealed that colour is an important tool in narrative and emotional expression. Based on these common features, I decided to keep a colourful visual identity with reduced saturation to the purpose of a wellbeing tool. Rather than bright colours, which might be overwhelming, I softened cultural palettes into more neutral, natural, and warm tones to evoke tranquility, security and emotional comfort.

I used subtle colour variations between pages in order to reflect emotional changes without overwhelming the eye. This style contributed to the development of a culturally familiar, visually engaging, and emotionally supportive environment to users. Colour was therefore not just a decorative element, but a meaningful tool to support wellbeing and foster connection with the user. This principle, articulated by Tim Coyle, guided every colour decision throughout the development of the journal.

“Communicate, don’t decorate.”

Tim Coyle (*Visualising Mental Health*, 2019)

I decided on typography in consideration of readability, emotional tone, and the distinct function of various parts of the journal. I started with a personal exploration of my own handwriting in both cursive and capital letterforms (fig. 42-44), to create an authentic and intimate voice throughout the journal. While this approach was personal, it was difficult to maintain text size across the journal, resulting in inconsistency and compromised readability.

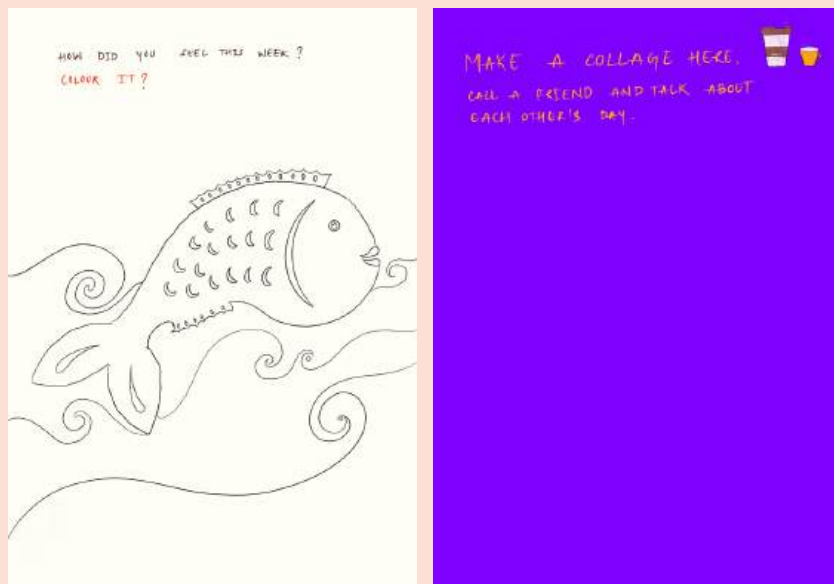


Fig. 42 Journal design explorations.



Fig. 44 Journal design explorations.



Fig. 43 Journal design explorations.

I believe this led to a more thoughtful typographic system, in which I used different typefaces for different sections. For the journaling pages, I used an American Typewriter because it gives a subtle calligraphy effect. It evokes the mark of a pen or brush on paper, connecting meaningfully to the calligraphic traditions across many Asian cultures. Personal handwritten letterforms were incorporated as secondary typographic elements, selectively as subtext or gentle emphasis where appropriate. This preserved the intimate, handcrafted quality that initial exploration had. For the theory sections, opening lines, and wellbeing information, I used Boston font for its warmth, softness, and readability.

This typographic system guides the reader through three different yet related registers: the warmth of Boston, the calligraphic expressiveness of American Typewriter, and the raw personal intimacy of handwritten lettering.

How did I create prompts?

The prompts were drawn from a wide range of sources, including wellbeing books (fig. 44) like *Stuff That Sucks* (MHF, 2015) and *Piki Te Ora* (MHF, 2024), reflective journals like *Start Where You Are* (Patel, 2016), creative books such as *Wreck This Journal* (Smith, 2019), mental health articles, research papers, motivational videos, and my own lived experiences. I critically analysed how these resources construct emotions, questions, and activities and then adapted these approaches to be culturally sensitive, accessible, and strength-based for young Asian users. This process allowed me to refine the existing ideas into prompts that are relevant and meaningful within the cultural and social context of the journal.



Fig. 44 Reference Books

Personal experiences also contributed to the development of the prompts. As an example, one day after making an impulsive decision I developed the prompt: 'What impulsive decision did you make this week? How did that make you feel?' Similarly, open-ended questions such as 'What is on your mind?' encourage users to reflect freely without limitations. Drawing from real lived experiences and emotional situations helps ensure that the prompts feel human, relatable, and grounded in everyday life rather than abstract or overly theoretical.

I have also incorporated the strength-based language focusing on the abilities, resources, and potential of individuals rather than their weaknesses. The prompts focus on 'what is strong' rather than 'what is wrong', while still recognising the challenges. It fosters resilience, self confidence, and solution-based thinking, while reducing stigma through person-first and empowering language. For example, instead of pointing out challenges, the prompt asks: 'Express when you felt the most confident' This encourages one to think about their own coping strategies (Prehn, 2024).

Testing the Journal

Overview of the Journal

The resource I designed is an interactive wellbeing journal (fig. 45) that included:

- Reflective and strength-based prompts.
- Creative exercises such as drawing, collage-making, calligraphy, mind mapping, colouring, and doodling.
- Visual metaphors and culturally resonating imagery.
- Daily wellbeing challenges and grounding exercises.
- Information on wellbeing and mental health.

The journal was later tested with the target audience to evaluate its usability, cultural resonance and emotional impact.

Inner Canvas therefore avoids clinical or diagnostic language, focusing on the strengths and assets of the individual, as engagement with mental health may occasionally evoke feelings of discomfort or distress, especially in young people. I intentionally avoided prompts like 'When did you last cry?' Directing the prompts in a positive direction. For example, 'What are your childhood memories?' became 'What are your happy childhood memories?' This approach employs softer, encouraging, and creative prompts that do not place pressure on self-reflection. The prompts aim to establish a safe and supportive environment where users can explore their emotions, recognise their resilience, and engage with their wellbeing in a positive and empowering way.



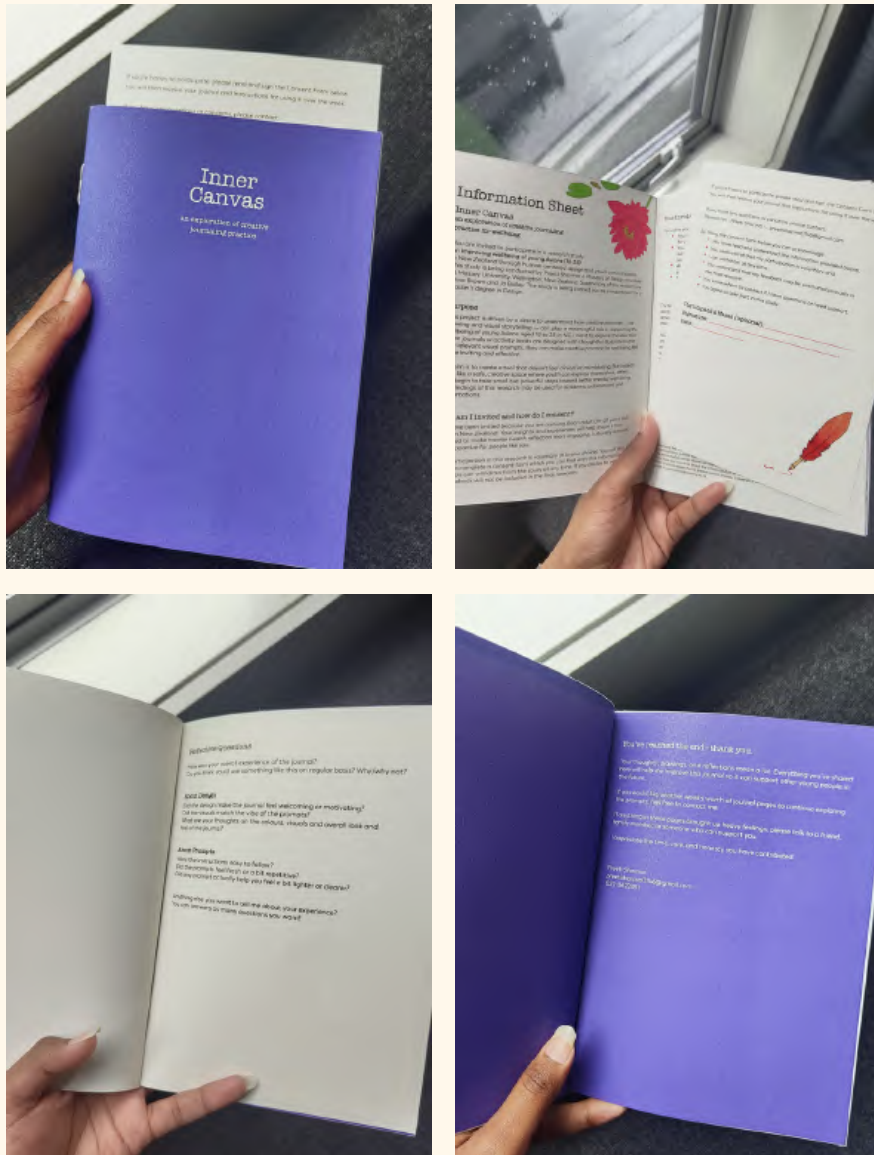


Fig. 45 Photos of printed journal for user testing

Participants

In total, 11 young Asian adults, aged between 18 and 28 years, living in Aotearoa New Zealand were sent the journal. This age group was selected because it represents a period during which mental health challenges are prevalent and also to abide by the ethics requirements of the University.

Participants were drawn from personal networks within the Asian community, including friends and their connections, who were informed about the project and volunteered to take part. Participation was entirely voluntary. This method facilitated culturally conscious interaction and helped establish trust. While this method restricts how widely the findings can be applied, it is suitable for an exploratory qualitative study focused on generating deep, meaningful insights rather than statistical representation.

Procedure

The participants were provided with the wellbeing journal and invited to interact with it at their own pace and comfort level for a minimum of one week. They were encouraged to engage with the prompts in their own time and space, allowing for natural and genuine engagement with the design.

The participants were informed that they could provide answers in any way, there are no right and wrong answers for this, and that they were welcome to engage through writing, drawing, collage-making or any other form of creative expression. Participants did not have any obligation to share their responses to the prompts; feedback on their experience was all that was required. They were also welcomed to participate for another week, if they wished.

After the completion of the one week journal, participants were asked to give written or verbal feedback about the process, their reflections and the visuals. Reflective questions focused on accessibility and usability, emotional impact, cultural relevance, and interaction with the prompts and visuals. The findings are discussed in the user testing and feedback section.

“I am not providing a solution, instead this is an attempt towards better wellbeing”

Ethical Considerations

The ethics application was approved as low risk, as the user testing involved participants responding to my designed resource rather than disclosing personal mental health information (see Appendix A). Since mental health and wellbeing are sensitive issues, I ensured the emotional appropriateness, autonomy, and dignity of the participants throughout the project.

Ethical considerations before user testing were:

- Information sheet (see Appendix B)
- Consent forms (see Appendix C)
- Anonymity
- Emotional Safety
- Avoidance of clinical language and use of strength-based language
- Culturally sensitive journal content (fig. 46)
- Voluntary participation
- Can withdraw at any time
- Massey University Human Ethics approval
- Reflective questions (see Appendix D)

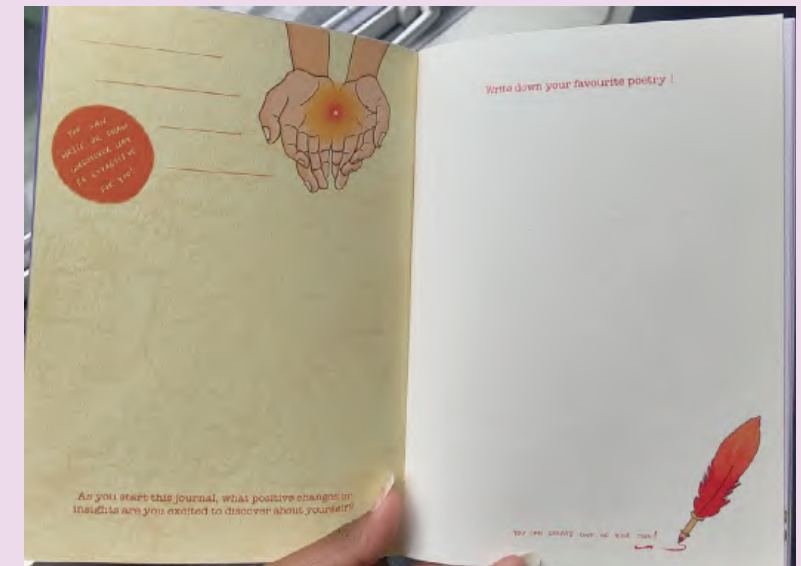
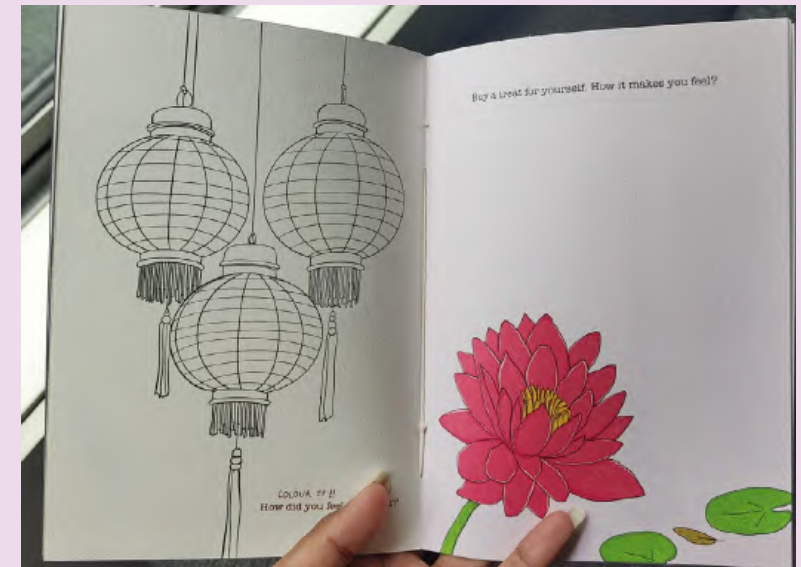


Fig. 46 Photos of printed journal for user testing

The involvement was entirely voluntary. Each participant was given an information sheet and consent form outlining the purpose of the study, their rights, and available mental health support services. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time and that they were not required to share personal journal entries or creative responses.

To minimise the risk of triggering distress, the journal avoided the use of clinical or diagnostic language and employed gentle, strengths-focused prompts to encourage users to reflect and express creativity. Visual and written materials were reviewed by Supervisors, peers, and mental health professionals to ensure they were culturally sensitive and emotionally appropriate for young Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured and all the feedback was stored in a secured place and used exclusively for research purposes. Continuous supervision and peer review provided additional assurance of ethical integrity and wellbeing of participants throughout the research process.

The Response

Throughout the project, I created multiple prototypes and refined them through constant feedback and user testing. Ranged from low-fidelity paper printouts in the early days to more sophisticated, professionally printed ones in later iterations. These prototypes were shared to undergo both formal and informal testing to evaluate usability, visual clarity, emotional tone, and cultural relevance. Responses from these phases informed iterative improvements to the journal's structure, content, and visual language.

For user testing, 11 participants aged between 18 and 28 from the Asian community were provided with the journal to use over a period of one week in their personal space. While some of the participants offered detailed responses, others provided brief verbal feedback, and some did not complete the journal or gave feedback. This difference highlighted the challenges in maintaining active involvement in voluntary wellbeing research.

Nevertheless, the feedback provided valuable information about the prompts, visuals and activities that were most appealing, supportive, and culturally relevant, as well as the overall experience of the journal. The journal's gentle voice, visual symbolism, and creative freedom were some of the components which were well-received by the participants.



Emotional Impact and Reflection

Participants consistently described the journalling experience as relaxing, warm, and self-reflective. Some felt a reduction in emotional stress through the journal, while some described it as a gentle version of therapy — one that may feel more accessible to people who hesitate to seek mental health support. One participant noted:

“But I did enjoy it a lot and it helped me to think more deeply and sort my time a bit more.”

A number of participants mentioned that the journal encouraged deeper thinking and helped them clear their minds, expressing that they would use a resource like this on a regular basis especially to write down negative feelings. The week-long experience of documenting personal life felt meaningful and inspiring. One participant commented that the journal helped them to

“track the way we live, because sometimes life goes too fast and we forget to stop and actually enjoy it.”

Overall the experience was rated highly by the participants, with one describing it as

“5/5 and creatively stimulating.”

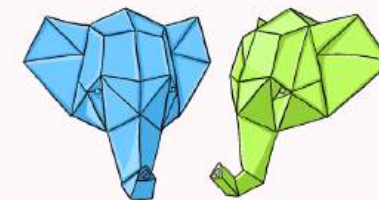
Visual Language

The visual design was an important factor in making the journal engaging. The design was described by the participants as joyful, gentle, inspiring, relaxing, and welcoming. The lighter tones and vibrant colours were perceived as soft and refreshing, creating a calm mood that supported the journal's purpose of creating a safe journalling space. Participants also mentioned that they loved the way everything was laid out.

Illustrations were valued and considered encouraging and some participants expressed they would like to see more cute illustrations and proposed using more colour variations in the journal. Others noted that the colours and visuals acted as an inspiration for colouring and drawing activities. One participant noted,

“The journal motivated and encouraged me to buy colouring books.”

The illustrations were perceived to match the tone of the prompts. The layout was also perceived positively, and the participants mentioned that there was plenty of space to write and be creative.



Interaction with Prompts

The prompts were described as varied, easy to understand, fresh and creative. One participant said,

“The prompts were very easy, which made the whole experience perfect.”

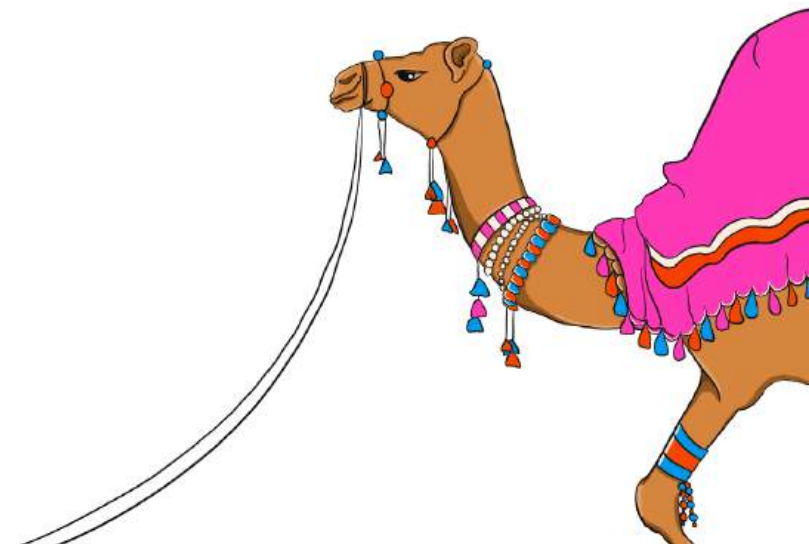
When drawing responses to activities were repeated, participants perceived this as intentional and necessary for reflection. Some felt prompts like the 20-minute walk were very much like a conversation, which they found comforting.

Notably, participants did not perceive the journal as a task, but rather as an act of self-care. Some expressed interest in journaling regularly, noting that the experience gave them freedom to do things for themselves and be able to express their emotions without hesitation. It was also suggested to revise one of the illustrations to better reflect the “buy yourself a treat” prompt, recommending to use food imagery, or illustration of jewellery for girls. While this suggestion was noted, the illustration was not revised in the final version, as the existing visual was open to interpretation beyond a single cultural or gendered reading and it was perceived well by the other participants.

Usability and Accessibility

All participants described the instructions as straightforward, clear, and easy to follow. Participants also mentioned that the activities were neither demanding nor time-consuming, which helped in maintaining the engagement throughout the week.

The experience was described as fun, interactive, relaxing, calming, and stimulating — indicating that the journal successfully balanced structure and creative freedom.



While the overall feedback was highly positive, participants also gave constructive suggestions. These suggestions from both professionals and participants directly influenced development of prompt wording, visual language, and the structure of activities, which led to a more accessible, supportive, and culturally responsive final design. Together, these findings suggest that thoughtful, culturally responsive design can genuinely support the wellbeing of young Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Conclusion

This project started with a question that felt both personal and necessary: how might human-centred design and visual communication support young Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand to enhance their wellbeing in a way that feels culturally relevant?

Mental health is still a difficult topic to discuss in most Asian communities and this project was not aimed at resolving that. But, it did attempt to provide something more accessible — a journal that felt familiar, warm, and culturally grounded rather than clinical or distant. Through culturally sensitive prompts, drawings and visual activities, the aim was to create a gentle space for reflection and emotional expression that drew on the visual richness of Asian traditions and the use of creative practices.

The overall response from participants was positive. The majority found the creative format less intimidating and the prompts more accessible than anticipated. That felt like a meaningful outcome for a project centred on accessibility and cultural sensitivity.



As for a masters project, I used a small sample size and the participants were drawn from personal connections, where responses of these participants may be biased and limit the findings. The one-week testing period seemed challenging for some participants, which limited engagement and overall impact. However, as an exploratory, design-led study, I prioritised depth, contextual understanding and iterative learning. Additionally, as most of my peers were not from an Asian background, which limited their feedback in providing culturally specific insights.

The journal has space to expand, and the responses indicated that there are a lot of opportunities to pursue in future — more illustrations, broader cultural references, and prompts that reach a wider range of emotional experiences. There is space for more work, and that feels exciting rather than discouraging.

From a design perspective, *Inner Canvas* was a true reminder that empathy and cultural awareness are not optional but the foundation requirement. Designing for a community requires listening, staying humble and the ability to allow the work to be influenced by the community it serves.

Looking ahead, there is real potential to expand this project — testing with a more diverse group, collaborating with mental health professionals and community organisations such as Asian Family Services, and exploring e-journaling with interactive prompts as a means of increasing everyday accessibility.

This project was never just about the journal, but something that communicates to the young Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand that our experiences and cultures matter, and that our wellbeing is worth designing for.

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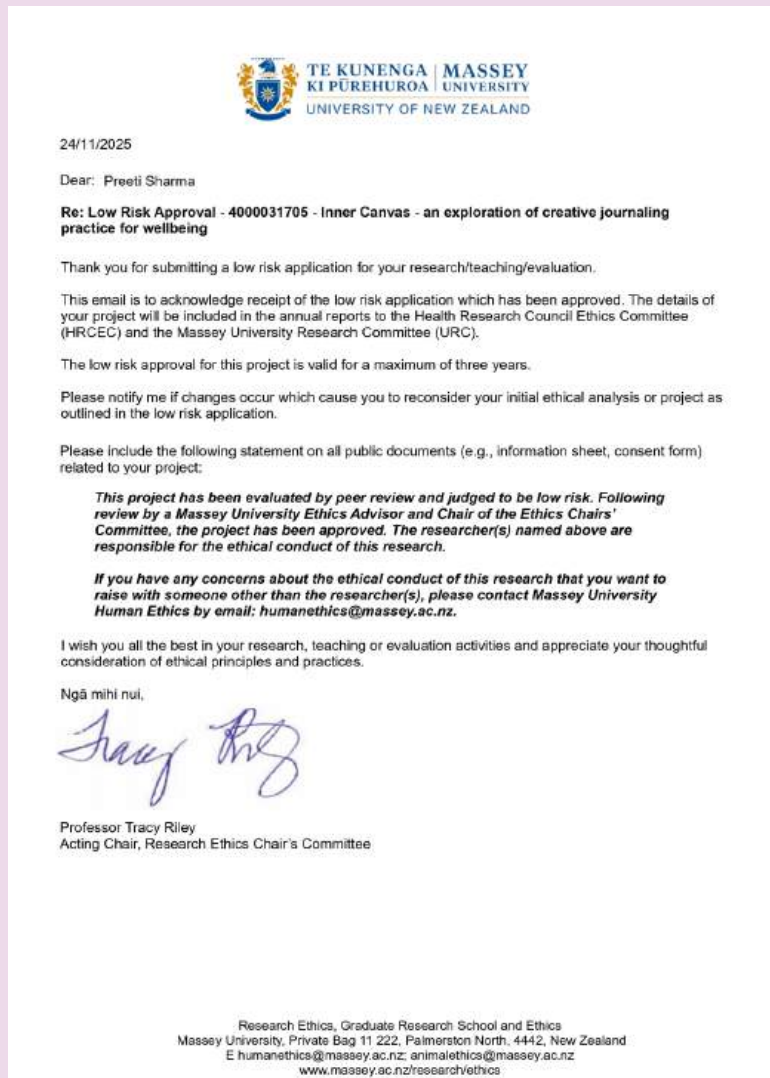
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Appendix

Appendix A Ethics Approval



Appendix B Information Sheet

Information Sheet



Inner Canvas (working title)

an exploration of creative journaling practice for wellbeing

You are invited to participate in a research study on **improving wellbeing of young Asians (18-28)** in New Zealand through human-centered design and visual communication. This study is being conducted by Preeti Sharma, a Masters of Design candidate at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand. Supervisors of this research are Anna Brown and Jo Bailey. The study is being carried out as a requirement for a Master's degree in Design.

Purpose

This project is driven by a desire to understand how creative practices — like drawing and visual storytelling — can play a meaningful role in supporting the wellbeing of young Asians aged 18 to 28 in NZ. I want to explore the idea that when journals or activity books are designed with thoughtful illustrations and age-relevant visual prompts, they can make creative practice for well-being feel more inviting and effective.

My aim is to create a tool that doesn't feel clinical or intimidating. But instead feels like a safe, creative space where youth can express themselves, reflect, and begin to take small but powerful steps toward better mental well-being. The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations.

Why am I invited and how do I consent?

You have been invited because you are a young Asian adult (18–28 years old) living in New Zealand. Your insights and experiences will help shape a tool designed to make mental health reflection more engaging, culturally relevant, and supportive for people like you.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice). You will also be asked to complete a consent form which you can find with this information sheet. You can withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide to withdraw, your feedback will not be included in the final research.

Your Involvement!

If you give your consent to participate :

- You will be given a 7 days creative wellbeing journal designed by me for young Asians in Aotearoa.
- You'll use the journal for one week, 10-15 minutes per day interacting with the prompts, creative activities and daily wellness challenges in your own time and space.
- After one week, you'll be invited to share your feedback about the journal — either in writing or as a verbal conversation.
- You won't need to share your personal journal entries. Feedback will focus on how the prompts, visuals, and overall experience felt as an asian and your reflections on the design — what worked well, and what could be improved or added.

The feedback on the journal will be published in a Master's thesis. Volunteers' identity will be kept confidential and anonymous. Feedback will be reported in general terms (e.g., "Participant 5 said..."). All data will be stored securely by the researcher and will not be shared with anyone outside the project.

You may reflect on personal thoughts or emotions while using the journal. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, you can stop or skip any activity. You may enjoy the creative journaling process and find it helpful for reflection or self-expression. Your feedback will also help improve the design of a culturally meaningful wellbeing tool for other young people.

Support Services

If you need to talk to someone, you can reach out anytime to Asian mental health support in NZ is available through Asian Family Services, which offers a confidential helpline at **0800 862 342** and can provide support in multiple languages.

Call or text **1737**, 24/7 national helpline for mental health support from trained counsellors for free.



Appendix C Consent Form

If you're happy to participate, please read and sign the Consent Form below. You will then receive your journal and instructions for using it over the week.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact:

Researcher : Preeti Sharma — preetisharma0146@gmail.com

By filling the consent form below you can acknowledge -

- You have read and understood the information provided above.
- You understand that my participation is voluntary and
- I can withdraw at any time.
- You understand that my feedback may be used anonymously in the final research.
- You know whom to contact if I have questions or need support.
- You agree to take part in this study.

Participant's Name (optional): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____



Appendix D

Reflective Questions

Reflective Questions!

How was your overall experience of the journal?

Do you think you'd use something like this on regular basis? Why/why not?

Did the design make the journal feel welcoming or motivating?

Did the visuals match the vibe of the prompts?

What are your thoughts on the colours, visuals and overall look and feel of the journal?

Were the instructions easy to follow?

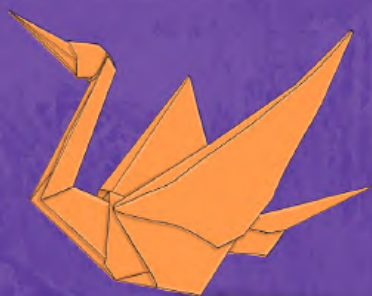
Did the prompts feel fresh or a bit repetitive?

Did any prompt actually help you feel a bit lighter or clearer?

Anything else you want to tell me about your experience?

You can answers as many questions you want!

Inner Canvas



Wellbeing Journal

By Preeti Sharma

Inner Canvas

Leave Your Mark Here!



Throughout this journal there's no right or wrong response. Feel free to respond in any way you like and let your creativity flow.

Place your pen
on the dot,
close your eyes,
and let your
hand follow
your breath.



Go for a 20 min walk without
any distractions.



CAPTURE
5 RANDOM
WORDS INSPIRED
BY YOUR
WALK:

As you start this journal, what positive changes or
insights are you excited to discover about yourself?

Buy a treat for yourself. How does it make you feel?

Let your
colours spill
here.



Prepare a nice meal for yourself while
listening to your favourite music!

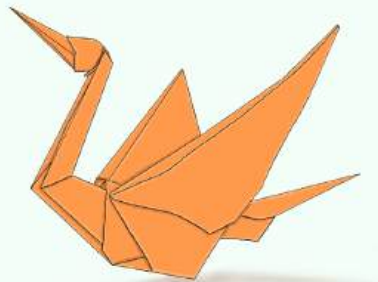
DOODLE YOUR INGREDIENTS !!



COLOUR IT !!
How did you feel this week?

What's the best thing happened to you this week?

Draw your week's journey
however you like.



Write a friendly note to yourself!

Identify or draw the little moments/
things that boosts your mood.

Make it fun with
Calligraphy



VISIT THIS PAGE
WHENEVER YOU NEED
A LITTLE COMFORT!!

Focus on your breathing and identify:

5 Things You See

4 Things You Feel

3 Things You Hear

2 Things You Smell

1 Thing You Taste

Call a friend and let this page hold your friendship energy by making a collage here!

YOU CAN ALWAYS DRAW!

Express when you felt the most confident.
Visualise it here!



If your recent emotions were colours, what
would they look like?

COLOUR THEM HERE!!

Write down your favourite poetry!

Mix
random
colours
here.



OR YOU CAN CREATE ONE OF YOUR OWN!

Create a visual list of what self-care means in your daily life.



Write down the things you wanted to say to a person for a long time.

IF YOU WANT TEAR AND THROW THE PAGE !!



What's on your mind?

COME BACK
TO THIS PROMPT
WHENEVER YOU
FEEL LIKE
IT.

Write or draw 3 things you did right today.



YOU CAN ALWAYS WRITE MORE.

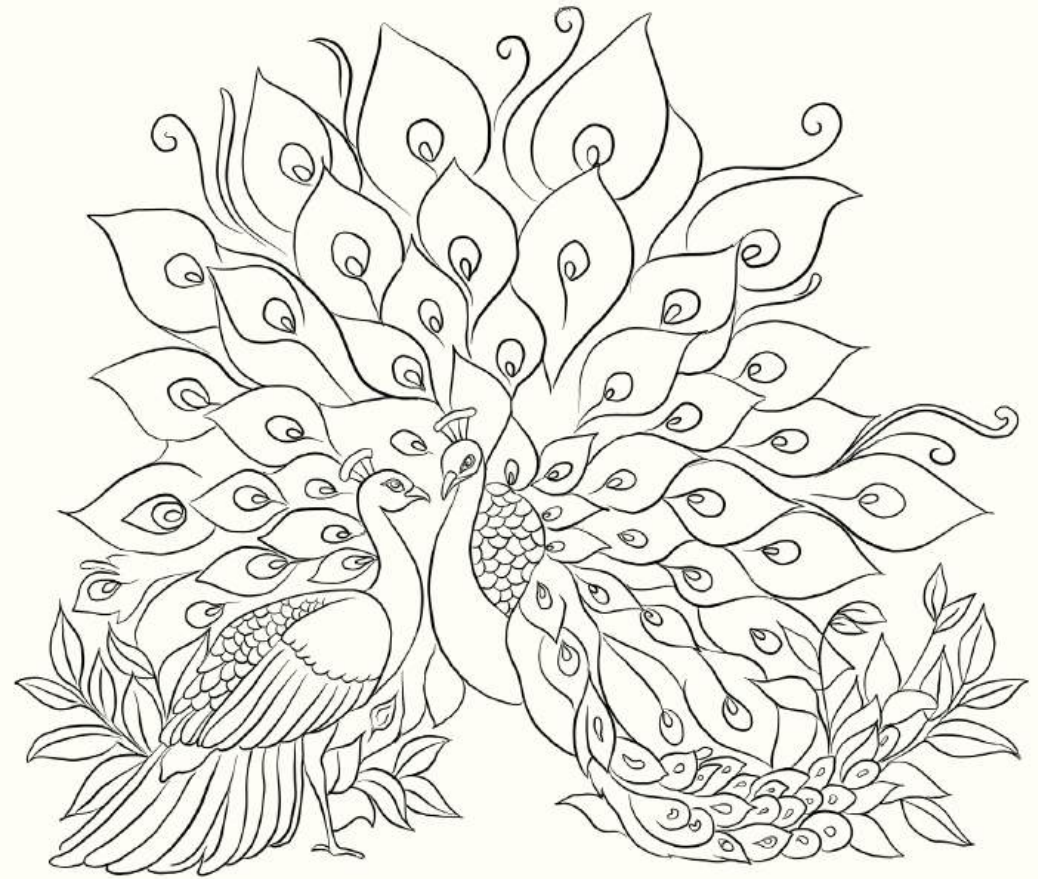
Which animal do you relate to most and why?



Draw or list things you'd love to get better at, not to be perfect at but to enjoy the process.



What sound, smell, taste, or moment from
your past makes you feel nostalgic?



How have you been feeling lately?

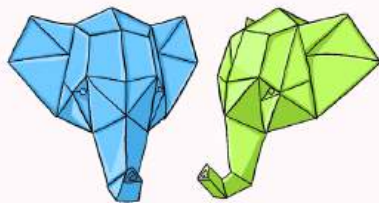
COLOUR IT HERE !!

Draw
something with
your other
hand.

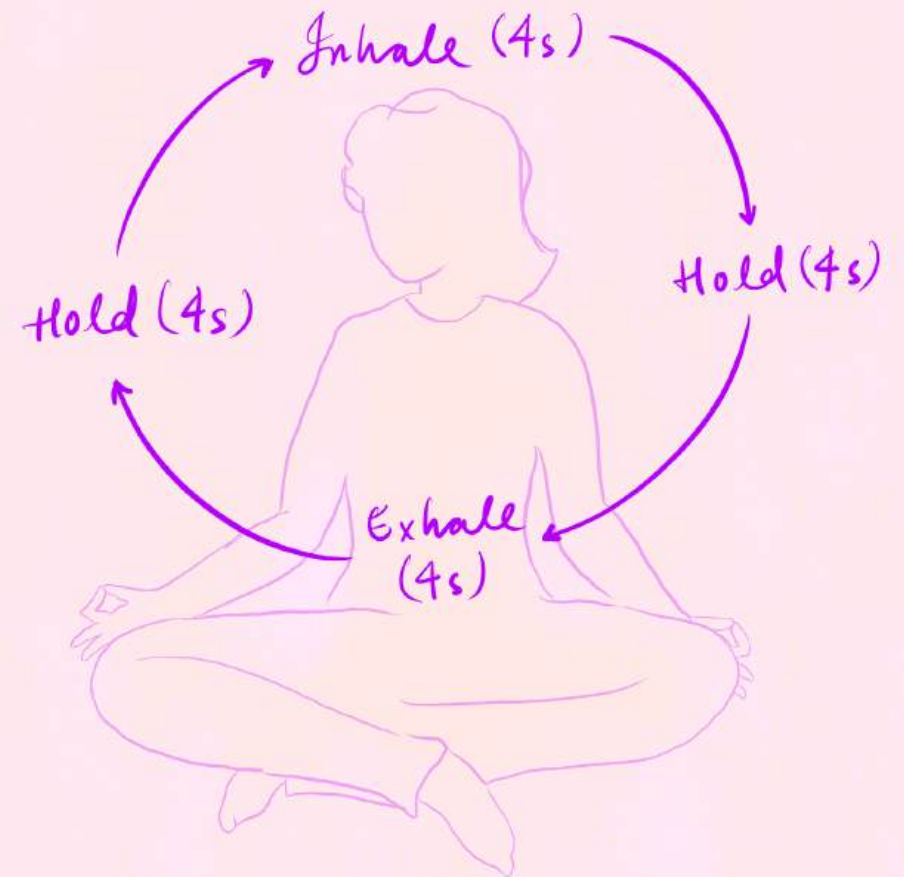
Imagine yourself as a superhero. What powers would you have? How would you look? What would you do?



How often do you socialise and how does it make you feel? Visualise your social energy.



Today, let's just focus on breathing in and out for 10 minutes and observe it gently.



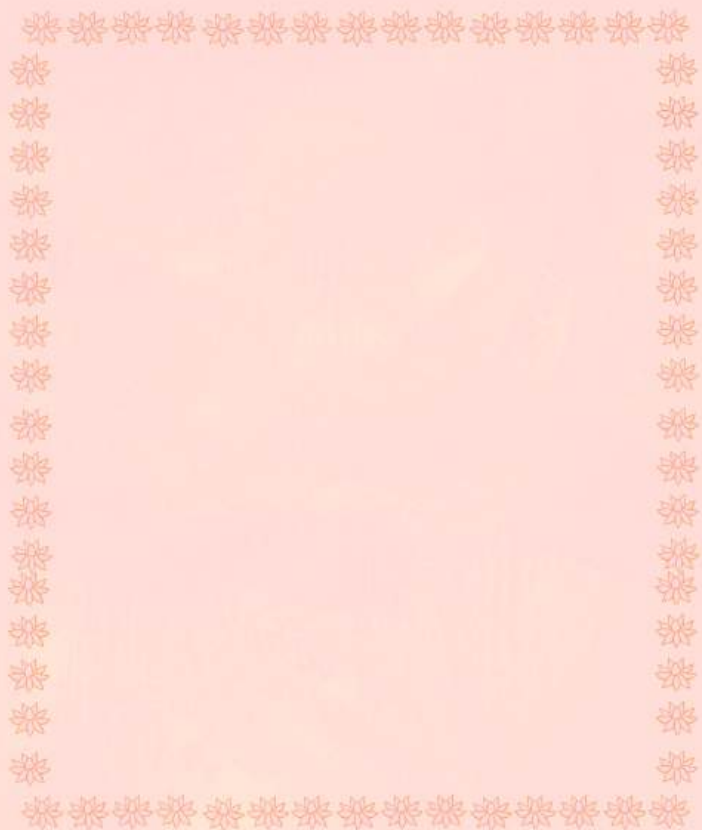
What are the arguments you have with
yourself most of the time?



What do you feel like doing when you are
sad? Write or draw your response.



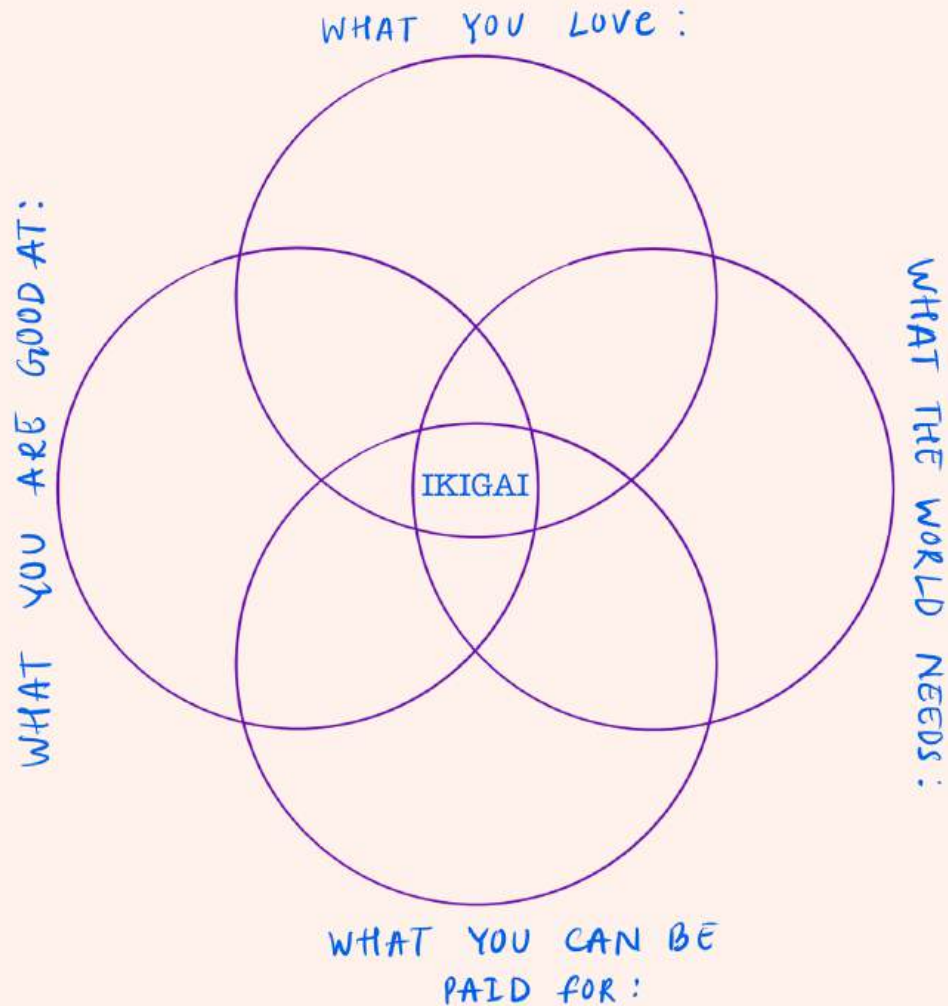
What behavioural shift you have noticed in
yourself in the last month?



Get a paper and paint it freely.



Write down three points for each circle.



Ikigai, is a philosophical term that refers to what gives your life value, meaning, or purpose.

Leave your
fingerprints
here.

Write your name and what does every
letter means for you?



An acrostic name poem is a personal and creative piece of
writing that uses the letters of a name to begin words or
phrases that describes a person.

How are you spinning these days?

COLOUR IT HERE!!



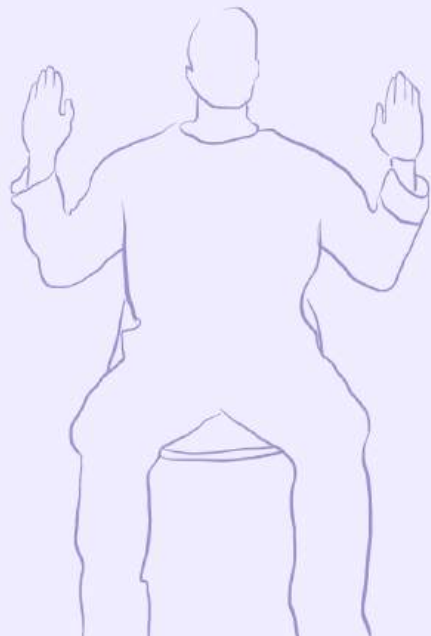
Make a mess on this page.

Which impulsive decision did you made this week
and how did it make you feel? Use colours or shapes
that match that feeling.



Let's practise the sitting QI flow exercise.

1. Sit tall on a chair.
2. Gently inhale as you lift your arms to shoulder height.
3. Exhale as you lower them slowly back down.
4. Repeat with relaxed shoulders and slow, steady breath.



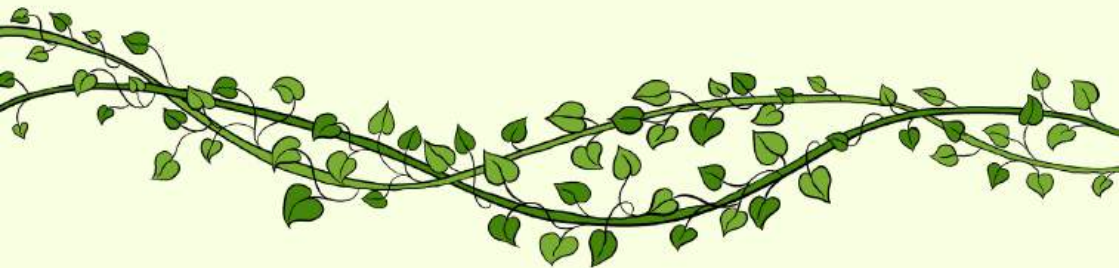
Create your own 'priority tree', what are the roots, trunk, and branches that support your life?



Buy or grow a small plant
for yourself.

TRY WATCHING IT REGULARLY!

Make an
impression
here.

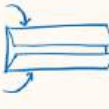
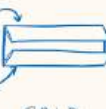


Try making an origami basket.

Capture your dreams here
in a creative way.

1. 
2. 
3. 

FLTP THE PAPER
4. 
5. 
6. 

FOLD AGAIN
7. 
8. 

UNFOLD
9. 

ROTATE
10. 
11. 

REPEAT 7, 8.
12. 

UNFOLD
13. 

POINT ALL CORNERS INWARD
14. 

MAKE HOLES AT ALL FOUR CORNERS
15. 

USE RIBBON THROUGH THE HOLES AND TIGHTEN IT.



Try stitching into this page and see
where it goes.

Make a collage of your happy
childhood memories.

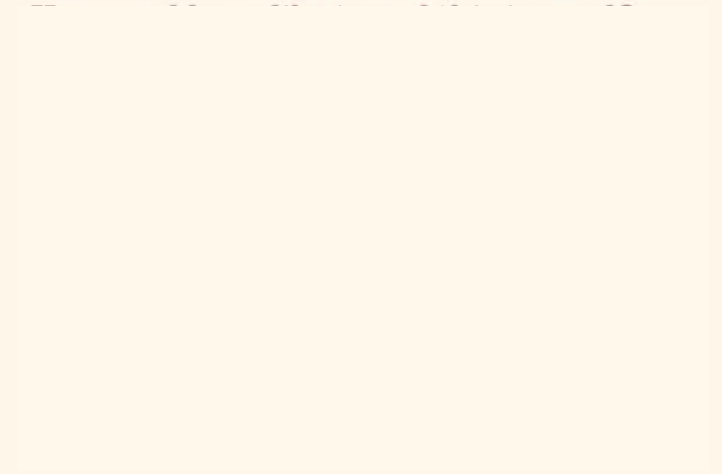


What's the moment you'll never forget?

What is the kindest thing anyone has ever done for you? Or you have done for someone?



How would you like to end this journal?



THIS IS
YOUR
BREATHING
SPACE!!

If you need support

Whatever you're carrying, you don't have to hold it alone.

1737 — Call or text, free, anytime, 24/7
Trained counsellors ready to listen, day or night.

Asian Family Services Helpline
0800 862 342 — Monday to Friday, 9am–8pm
Offers confidential support.

As your pen moves, the weight in
your mind turns to blossoms.

