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Photography x Mental Health - Breaking the silence and raising awareness [video]





If today most of our world is photographed and displayed on social media, why not capture mental health in just one picture? Better yet, ten. The exhibition Photography x Mental Health is another initiative of Made By People Lab and happened in Amsterdam.

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A picture is worth a thousand words. It is an old English idiom, but it could not be more appropriate for such a contemporary topic as mental health. In modern societies, mental health issues are on the rise. However, the silence and level of discomfort around them are not slowing pace. What is it about the subject of mental health that triggers feelings of distress, shame and inadequacy? Why are the effects and social consequences so enshrined in secrecy? Why not just have an open, frank and honest conversation about it?



However, to raise greater awareness, sometimes we might need more than  words. Made By People Lab, part of A City Made By People network,  challenged ten photographers to explore the topic of mental health through their personal story or that of a subject. Their names are Anna Leonte, Aron Süveg, Dawnie Brown, Iris Duvekot, Jan Arsenović, Kevin Rijnders, Richard Rigby, Sophie Ebrand, Tarona Leonora, and Willemieke Kars.

Amsterdam - Photography x Mental Health Experience - Made By People Lab



PHOTOGRAPHY X MENTAL HEALTH

A couple of weeks ago, [SAI](#) hosted [Photography x Mental Health](#). The launch was on Thursday, 24th May, and the exhibition ran throughout the weekend. Enough time to achieve its prime goal: start a conversation. The profits went to aid the work of [MIND](#) mental health foundation.

Outside, Haarlemmerdijk was not too busy, except for the regular traffic of bicycles in different directions. At the entrance of the design atelier, the pictures were immediately visible, hung on two opposite walls. The whiteness of the room enhanced the colours of the photographs and its visual impact. Normal people. Unknown faces. Human expressions. Underneath, or right beside the images, a short description. Each picture had a title: “Twisted Elegance”, “Beauty in Darkness” or “Into the Light”.



Guest speakers

Amongst the various attendees, two guest speakers: Willem Smit, from the [MIND foundation](#), and Steve Wallington, one of the co-founders of [The Photography Movement](#). Ged Hawes hosted the evening. He started by explaining the purpose of [Made By People Lab](#) and the exhibition. The key objective is to mobilise citizens and make them more aware of issues that affect a significant part of the population, such as mental health.

Willem Smit was the second to take the floor. [MIND](#) focuses on youngsters and prevention. Later on, in a conversation with A City Made By People, Smit highlighted the role of social media in creating false expectations. “In the case of the younger generation, social media has a big influence in projecting how people should live their lives. But what you see on social media does not always reflect how others feel”.

Next guest speaker: Wallington, who brought some numbers. Did you know that by 2030 depression will be the second highest cause of disease in middle-income countries and the third highest in low-income countries? And that more than 90% of people who commit suicide have a diagnosable mental disorder?

Wallington carried on and introduced [The Photography Movement](#), a project he launched with Scott Shillum last year. Through a curated programme of exhibitions, workshops and talks, the movement encourages people to capture, compose and share pictures that show how they feel. “People sharing their stories. That’s what makes the difference. That’s what we’re about”, said Wallington.



Lastly, the photographers [Tarona Leonora](#) and [Richard Rigby](#) talked about their works and their personal stories. For instance, Leonora was very candid about her problems with depression and growing up in a culture where mental health issues are simply not discussed. As to Rigby, he shared the story of the 19-year old Danilo, the subject in this photo (“The Manilla Metro Story”). Poverty, grief and overcoming adversity in a single image.

Photographers, pictures and words

Although a picture paints a thousand words, the latter tells the story behind the image. We talked with some photographers and their models to learn about their source of inspiration.

Tayaeb - Psychosis

Photographer: Kevin Rijnders

Subject: Tayaeb

Tayaeb: *“We came up with the idea of making my inner experiences into a picture, in a figurative way. This photo represents ‘a new life’. By covering part of my face, I’m saying goodbye to the old side of me. I am deciding to focus on the new me, the new phase I’m going into”.*

Kevin: *“There should be more of these exhibitions. Most of the time, photo exhibitions are about one photographer showing his/her work. But this one adds a new layer. It is about mental health. If we could do this more often, there would be more awareness, which is much needed.”*



Into the Light

Photographer: Dawnie Brown

Subject: Nicole

Dawnie: *“The model is actually one of my close friends. The image shows how she feels about anxiety and panic. It’s not only about doom and gloom. You can also take positives from it”.*

Nicole: *“The main thing for me, about this picture, is that there is hope. There is a way out of anxiety”.*

Dawnie: *“These type of exhibitions help to share experiences and show that people are not alone when it comes to mental health problems. There are a lot of*_{sm}*”*

people suffering in silence”.

Twisted Elegance

Photographer: Tarona Leonora

Subject: Dominick Tavares

Tarona: *When I look at this picture I think about duality, being stuck in between two worlds. The idea of having two emotions happening at the same time. It could be joy, but also sadness. So, I think that duality really fits here, and it was also my intention in this shooting: to depict it. The photo is part of a series.*

As I see it, fear is the catalyst of duality. It causes depression, discomfort, uncertainty. You're always thinking “what if” and “how”. Fear also creates doubt. A lot of things are, in my opinion, fuelled by fear: fear of not being able to give an answer, fear of not being successful, fear of not living up to expectations and most importantly, fear of not being who you were supposed to be or become.



Self-Portrait

Photographer: Jan Arsenović

Subject: Jan Arsenović

Jan: *This photo is about anxiety and being stuck in your defence mechanism. Although it is supposed to protect you, it can also obscure your vision and disable your movement.*

I've been struggling with mental health issues for several years. I have a lot of anxiety. It's always been like that, but it got worse after moving to a new country.

What actually made me go to my GP and ask about getting therapy this year was a YouTube video. So, the more we talk about mental health issues, the better.

Even in the Netherlands, there is still a stigma attached to mental health and seeking help from a professional. But I come from Serbia, and it's even worse there. So, for me, this is already a very liberal society when it comes to it. But I do know it can be better.

Afterthought:

Photography is as silently loud and mysteriously visible as mental health issues.



Words by Carla Vicente

Images by Hamzah Kashash

After-movie by Jan Arsenović & Sarah Picolet

Thank you Carla for this amazing write-up of our first Photography x Mental Health exhibition. A special thank you to our partners SAI, TOMS, The Photography Movement, all photographers & Warsteiner for providing the beverages.

Prints are available for a limited time here! All the profits go to the MIND foundation. #acitymadebypeople

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