

# WSU-Stride online art therapy clinic

annual report

WSU-Stride is an ongoing partnership between Western Sydney University and Stride Mental Health. The collaboration offers creative therapeutic support to Stride carers and practice experience for WSU arts therapy students.



**WESTERN SYDNEY**  
UNIVERSITY



**STRIDE** For better  
mental health

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

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In the spirit of reconciliation Western Sydney University and Stride acknowledge and pay respect to the past, present and future Traditional Custodians and Elders of the lands upon which Western Sydney University and Stride are located. We honour the continuation in the present of the cultural, spiritual, healing and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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## BACKGROUND

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The WSU-Stride Online Art Therapy Clinic is a collaboration between the Western Sydney University art therapy training program and Stride Mental Health that links art therapy trainees with carers seeking therapeutic support. The WSU-Stride partnership was created from unmet needs in the community during the Covid 19 pandemic in 2021. People caring for family members with complex mental health difficulties at home found they could no longer leave the house in the way they were accustomed to doing. The isolation and responsibilities of full time caring were a challenge for many. At the same time, WSU students could not go to their field placements in the way they had been. An online art therapy clinic was born of these respective needs.

Stride Mental Health is an Australian mental health not-for profit community organisation and registered charity that offers mental health services to people of all ages in several states and territories of Australia. Their main services include accommodation, therapeutic support, and support coordination.

Western Sydney University's Master of Art Therapy is a clinical training program that teaches students how to engage in a therapeutic relationship using creative processes and visual art media with people who may need additional support in their lives. Students gain theoretical knowledge and practical experience required to work as an art therapist in a wide variety of contexts. As part of their training students are required to undertake clinical placements.

Originally conceived as an accessible approach to provide online art therapy during the pandemic, the ongoing usefulness and convenience of online art therapy in the carer's home environment became apparent. The opportunity to access supports without leaving the house was a relief for many carers and extended services to those who might not otherwise be able to access them. Students were able to widen their practical experience and develop diverse skills as trainee art therapists. Consequently, the partnership continues to flourish and is now an ongoing program that is popular with both carers and students.

An expanded report by Sally Grant, the former Online Art Therapy Clinic Coordinator on the program's development from 2021-2023 can be found here: <https://stride.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/WSU-Stride-EOSReport2022-v2-002.pdf>



## INTRODUCTION

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The Western Sydney University and Stride partnership continues to evolve as it expands to reach more carers utilising Stride supports and involve more students completing their Masters qualifications in Creative Arts Therapies. In 2024, the WSU- Stride Online Clinic secured ongoing funding for a part-time Online Clinic Coordinator. The appointment of this role has given the program the ability to develop further through careful consultation and planning.

Master of Art Therapy students were invited to offer online art therapy to a selection of Stride clients who are carers of loved ones with lived experience of major mental health challenges. Originally conceived as an accessible approach to creative therapy during the times of Covid, the program has developed into a popular supplementary placement for students and an accessible therapeutic support for carers. An overview of the program is outlined below.

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### THE WSU-STRIDE 2024 PROGRAM

#### Goals:

- Deliver online arts therapy sessions to carers using Stride services.
- Provide WSU students with a supplementary online placement
- Create an online art therapy group

**Materials:** Zoom, computer/phone, art materials

**Recruitment:** Stride advertised the program to carers cohort at the start of 1 H & 2H (university semesters). WSU art therapy students were also given information about the Stride supplementary placement opportunity at the start of 1H & 2H

**Students:** Eight students engaged in the online placement opportunity in 1H, three continued into 2H with different carers. Five new students joined the 2H cohort. A total of 12 students were involved in the WSU-Stride online placement in 2024

**Carers:** Ten carers were supported in 1H and another ten in 2H. Some continued through the year and others took a break. 18 carers engaged in individual and/or group sessions in 2024

**Sessions:** Up to 12 sessions were delivered each semester to each carer. 220 individual, and six group art therapy sessions were delivered to carers in 2024

#### Outcome:

- Carers reported that they found the students' sessions supportive and helpful.
- Students reported a rich learning experience that improved their practice.
- University assessments confirmed students were meeting learning outcomes.
- The art therapy online group sessions were popular
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**Growth:** Carers completed questionnaires at the end of their sessions. These, along with student feedback, have been used to develop the 2025 program. Numerous carers and students are interested in signing up again in 2025

## PARTNERSHIP PROCESS

The collaboration between the two organisations has sustained the program throughout the years of the Covid pandemic through to its current reiteration. The WSU-Stride partnership thrives on clear and consistent communication between the services and with invested stakeholders. These attributes, along with the continued enthusiasm to provide creative therapeutic support for carers and a deep learning experience for students, has maintained the success of the program throughout 2024. The program has developed into a popular supplementary placement for students and an accessible therapeutic support for carers.

Danielle Carson has reflected on the burgeoning success of the program and her excitement in it continuing into the future: *“We make a good team...the carers really enjoyed their sessions”*. The richness of the program is due to the work completed in previous years. It continues to go from strength to strength. The below diagram shows the emerging cycle of the programs.

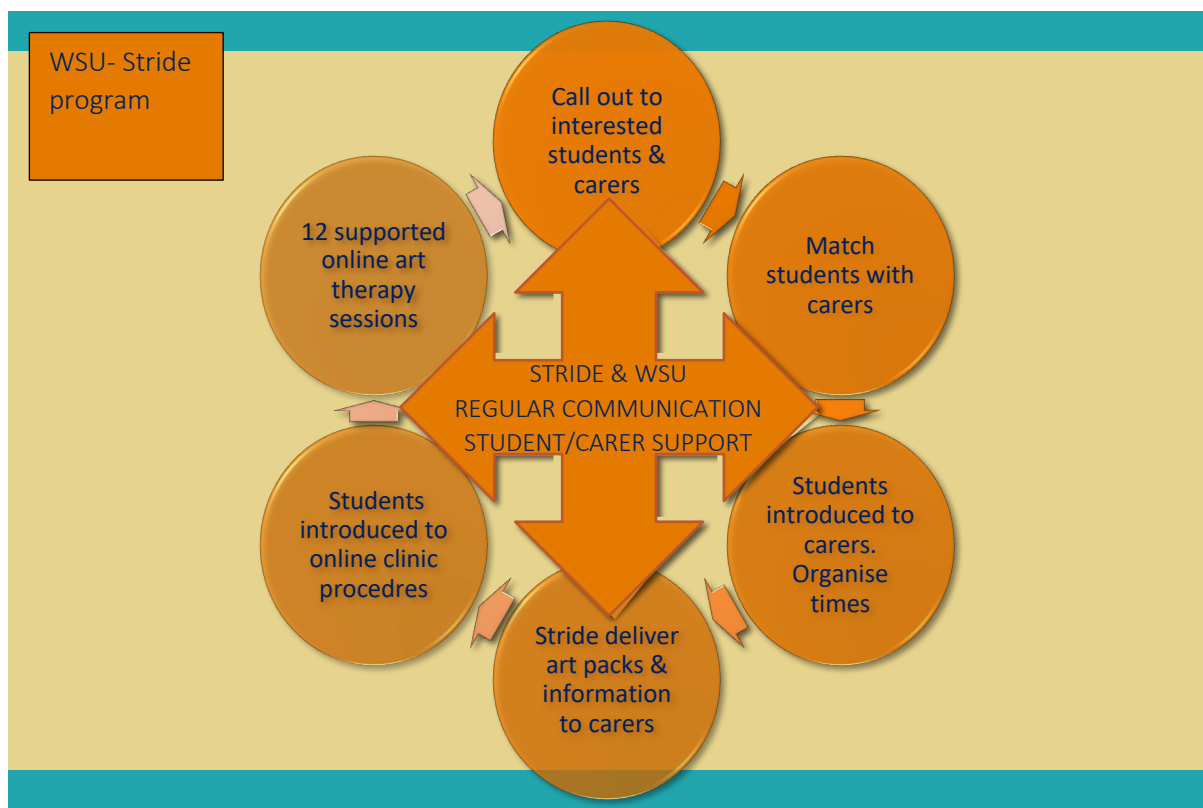


FIGURE 1 PARTNERSHIP PROCESS CYCLE

## MATERIALS & TECHNIQUES

Materials were provided by WSU and delivered to the carers by the Stride team. Carers were given an art pack that included paper, pencils, pastels, paints, watercolours, clay and collage materials so they had some choice in what they used each session. The students provide directive, semi-directive or freeform art activities and themes during the sessions, along with a range of techniques for the client to choose from. Choices depended on what approach felt most comfortable to the client in that session.

This year some students added the Zoom whiteboard as a mode of engagement along with various other techniques for creating art in collaboration with the carer. The whiteboard is a novel creative approach incorporating technology and giving the carers more choice in engagement with an online platform.

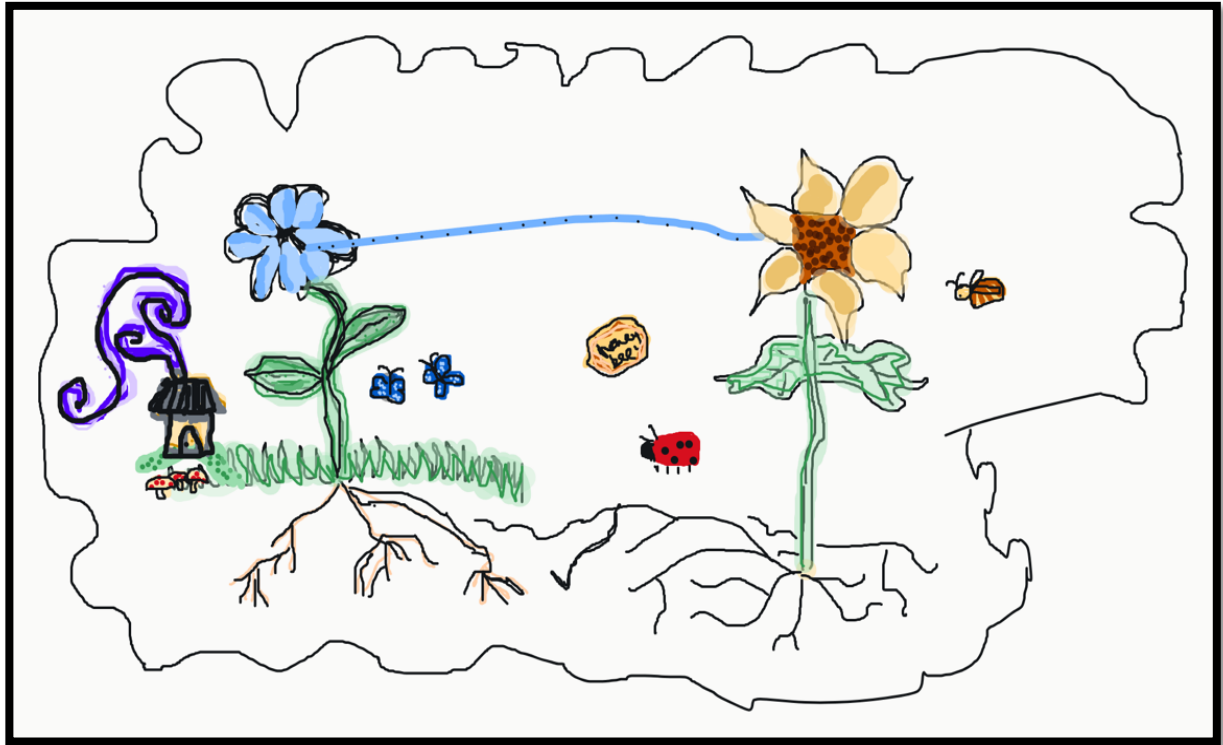


FIGURE 2 COLLABORATIVE ONLINE ART MAKING MINIEN HATTINGH AND CARER

## THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The students who signed up for the supplementary placement with Stride felt they had gained a rich learning experience. The art therapy sessions with Stride clients provided a rich experiential environment using the Zoom platform. There was some surprise about how little the screen inhibited the creation of a safe confidential space that supported their clients.

The students appreciated the supplementary placement opportunity to upskill using an online environment whilst building confidence in their art therapy practice. Each student commented that they had felt the online placement had augmented their field placement and helped them gain a broader understanding of delivering art therapy.

Through regularly providing opportunities for self-care for carers during online art therapy sessions, the students grew in their own self-care practice. They began to intrinsically understand the importance of a therapist's capacity to take care of themselves in order to maintain rich creative engagement with their clients. Below, the artwork *Residue Dogs* is an example of art made by student Minien Hattingh to process a session.

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## ONLINE ART THERAPY GROUP - A STUDENT REFLECTION

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By Minien Hattingh

*The flat-lay modelling clay nourishing tree, intrigued and excited carers. They were tasked to create their favourite tree in sections. The roots and what kept them grounded. The trunk as support and nurturing system, branches as inner strength, leaves as achievements/proud moments.*



FIGURE 3 Residue Dogs by Minien Hattingh

*The boundary theme was useful in creating an external object to secure and reinforce carers' boundaries: a boundary doll out of plastic bags and yarn. The yarn ball was used as a feeling ball to say no to each other and no, together, promoting group cohesion and solidarity. The word, "No" echoed*

*through the screen, becoming a two-letter verbal empowerment command. The dolls became vehicles for holding and honouring boundaries along with boundary mantras we practiced together.*

*Creating soundscapes and guided journeying in the virtual space proved to be a success. Carers enjoyed the relaxing sounds and the imagery their minds conjured up. For the soundscape I used my real-time voice to guide carers through a forest to their inner sanctuary, alongside a pre-recorded compilation consisting of my djembe drum, singing bowl, rain stick, bell and other sound effects, delivering a cross-cultural component.*

The online art therapy group served as an evidence-based therapeutic asset in fostering connection, deeper self-knowledge, self-nourishment, confidence, aiding mental health, relaxation and regulation. Carers' in-session feedback was positive, and sessions were something they looked forward to after a long and stressful day. Carers variously described to students and support staff how sessions enabled these carers to harness their innate creativity and develop an identity as a creative person. For some, through self-discovery and re-discovery, hidden parts of themselves became known once more.

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## THE CARER EXPERIENCE

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The carers from Stride provided positive responses in their post-session questionnaires. They were asked about their experiences at the end of their 12 (on average) sessions by staff from

Stride. Each offered insight into how the sessions affected them as well as providing detailed responses on what they had gained and what could be tweaked to enhance the program. One carer responded to the question asking if there had been any noticeable benefits to the sessions with: *"Being able to stay at home! Not having to get somewhere on time. I set up the space for art making!"* Another said: *"[I] struggle with social anxiety. It was nice to talk to someone new [and the] caring role is isolating."*

Having time for themselves along with the convenience of the online support was appreciated by most of the carers:

*This is my first experience doing this and the art therapist was very warm and welcoming, and it was very fun...It gave me an hour out of the week where I could sit down and do something for myself. Something not based just on the caring role....*

Danielle Carson, the Stride service leader said that this year had been a very positive one with many carers signing up to the program in both semesters. She commented on how well the trainee art therapists supported their clients. One carer commented: *"Great art therapist!!! Outstanding! Really enjoyed the sessions."* Another said: *"[I] really looked forward to the appointments."*

The vast majority of the carers said they would like to continue accessing the program when it starts up again in 2025. Most chose individual sessions as a preference, but others said they would like both individual and group art therapy sessions. Their feedback forms included these comments:

*I just think it's a nice relaxing thing to do during the week and its quite mindful and you're concentrating on what you're doing, its expressive and just something for you- for yourself and nobody else. I suppose its relaxing, no pressure, do what you feel.*

Most carers who took a break from art therapy this year indicated they would likely be interested in joining the program again in 2025.

The challenges for the carers included finding time, intermittent internet connection and getting the lighting right, as well as getting started if no directives were offered. These challenges will help in preparing the clinic in 2025.

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## STUDENT AND CARER SUPPORT

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The sustained student and carer support offered by WSU and Stride has maintained the growth of the program throughout 2024. The students received weekly clinical supervision either individually or in a group with other students participating in the Stride program. Clinical supervision is provided by WSU to ensure the program offers a rich supported learning experience and maintains a safe and therapeutic online environment for the carers. Both the students and carers received assistance from the service lead at Stride, Danielle Carson when required. Both organisations have been dedicated to ensuring a layered learning experience for the students and a positive involvement for the carers who sign up to the program. Danielle reflected:

*It is a rich learning experience for both the carers and the students as they each have additional supports provided outside the art therapy sessions. It's a wrap around*

*support... a model of support Stride advocates for and one that can keep growing in away that meets the carers needs.*

The clinic has a unique ability to offer online art therapy at the convenience of the clients. The flexibility of the program ensures that the sessions fit within the schedules of the carers and can be easily adapted to specific requirements. The program is adaptable to students' and carers' individual needs. The carers receive tailored support from the students, and the students receive support from the clinical coordinator.

Art making is an important part of supervision for the students. The reflective process allows safe exploration of their practice as trainees, and a creative platform to communicate some of their online placement experience. The artworks created often help to visualise their work and offer some clarity to their practice.

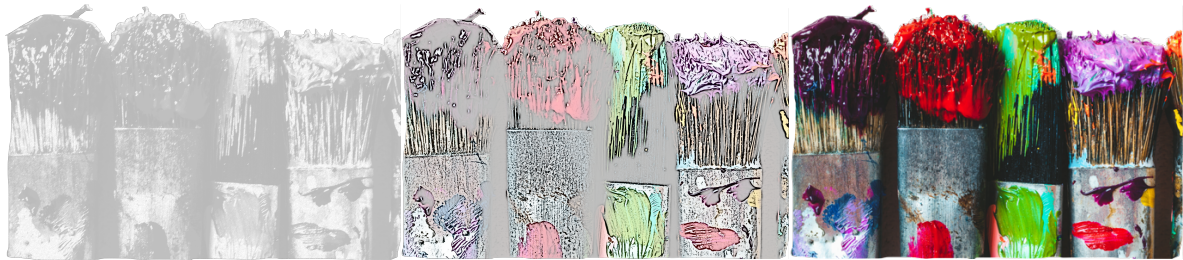


FIGURE 4 CLARIFYING THE EXPERIENCE OF THE STUDENT THROUGH ART MAKING



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## DEVELOPMENTS IN 2024

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### ART THERAPY GROUP

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Art therapy groups can be a novel way for people to connect and share experiences using creativity. After the success of an onsite art therapy group at Stride in Hurstville in 2023, Stride and WSU worked together to design online art therapy groups alongside the usual individual sessions. The carers were keen for an online group that they could attend at the end of the day without



FIGURE 5 ONLINE GROUP ART THERAPY FLYER

leaving home. One of the WSU students, Minien Hattingh, created a proposal for six sessions of group work with the goal of including group art therapy in the annual online clinic program. This was achieved. Based on feedback from the clinic's 2022-2023 carer questionnaires and the success of the face-to-face group at Stride Hurstville, Danielle Carson supported a WSU student to facilitate an online art therapy group. The group took place in the second half of the second semester in 2024. The group had 3-4 carers per session. Each session had a specific theme inspired by some of the carers' specific reflections on their experiences of art making on the program over the last two years. The flyer was designed by Minien Hattingh and sent out to carers so they could choose if and what they would like to attend. Each week Minien would remind them of the theme for that week.

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### ANNUAL AWARD FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING THAT HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THE PUBLIC GOOD.

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The WSU-Stride online art therapy clinic collaboration was acknowledged at the School of Social Sciences Planning Day. The partnership program won in the category: Annual Award for Teaching and Learning That Has Contributed to the Public Good. This achievement of the program was celebrated by all involved including Associate Professor Sheridan Linnell, Danielle Carson, Sally Grant, Suzanne Perry, Martin Roberts, and Dr Emma Gentle. Dr Joy Paton, who has also had considerable involvement in supporting the growth of the partnership said: "Congratulations to all of the Clinic team for the part you've played in establishing and/or maintaining this great initiative!"

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### ONGOING FUNDING

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The WSU-Stride partnership received ongoing funding for the WSU online arts therapy Clinic Coordinator position. The role is based at WSU campus and online. Dr Emma Gentle was appointed to this position in June 2024.

## LOOKING FORWARD

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The online art group is now a fixture in the annual clinic program and can be accessed by carers during the second semester to either complement the individual work undertaken in the first semester or as an alternative to individual sessions.

In 2024 the program achieved its goals of increasing student and carer numbers, and of offering an online art therapy group to Stride carers. WSU-Stride are currently in discussion about how to expand the clinic to include more carers and more students. However, it is important to keep the high standards that have been set so the quality of the work is not compromised. With this in mind, the clinic will be offered to 16-18 students and carers over the course of 2025, including both individual and group online sessions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Throughout 2024, the carers and students who participated in the Online Art Therapy Clinic showed continued commitment to the therapeutic process. The continuous improvement of the program relies on carer and student engagement. The carers from Stride took part in the feedback process where they offered valuable reflections on their experiences with the clinic. The WSU students offered continual feedback throughout their time on the program. This commitment to the clinic enriched everyone's experience.

The clinic continues to grow because of the dedication of Stride and WSU staff. Together, they have created a thriving program. Associate Professor Sheridan Linnell and Suzanne Perry worked with Stride Manager Sarah Holmes to instigate the WSU-Stride collaboration during the Covid years. Sheridan has continued to offer her wisdom and support to the online clinic in various roles including as Clinic Lead, a role that Martin Roberts stepped into for 2024. Danielle Carson, Service Leader at Stride has been integral throughout the course of the program's development. Her passion for her work with carers has lifted the program to what it has become today. Jessica Harris-Ward, Service Support at Stride, ably supports the program with Danielle. Suzanne Perry and Rupa Parthasarathy now share the Clinical Placement Coordinator role for the Master of Art Therapy, which includes actively recruiting interested students to the Online Arts Therapy Clinic each semester.

Sally Grant, the former Online Clinic Coordinator, ensured the clinic was supported throughout 2022 and 2023. Her dedication to the clinic and the support she offered students provided a secure platform for the online clinic to continue to flourish.

With ongoing funding in place, the WSU-Stride program has the stability and increased opportunity to respond to the needs of carers at Stride. WSU students will continue to gain additional opportunities to practice their art therapy skills online. The clinic will commence again in February 2025.



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## CONTACT

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If you would like more information regarding the clinic, please contact Dr Emma Gentle,

Online Clinic Coordinator: [e.gentle@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:e.gentle@westernsydney.edu.au)

If you are a carer and would like to participate in the art therapy services offered through the clinic, please contact Danielle Carson, Service Leader at Stride: [daniellecarrson@stride.com.au](mailto:daniellecarrson@stride.com.au)

This report was written and designed by Dr Emma Gentle, WSU-Stride Art Therapy Online Coordinator, in consultation with Danielle Carson, Sheridan Linnell, Joy Paton and Martin Roberts, and with contributions from Minien Hattingh.

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