

# State of Mind

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**wellbeing in everything we do**

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## **Chronicle 1.2:** Walking the high wire in high winds: Gale Force

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# Contents

1. About the Chronicles
2. State of Mind Chronicles introduction
3. Continuing the SoM high wire tale, as the cross winds build
4. Fever pitch
5. The challenge of programming under hurricane conditions
6. A State of Mind tornado
7. Further discussion of whether a SoM strategy can be seen as a resilience approach
8. Assessing how far COVID revealed 20SH as a company practicing and pressure-testing an 'adaptive resilience' strategy through SoM.

# 1. About the Chronicles



## **A Short introduction to the State of Mind Chronicles, what they are and how they were developed**

The State of Mind Chronicles were written and developed by Anni Raw & Associates, a team that are more than evaluators. Their evaluation style uses an ethnographic process which tells the stories from within. Working with story builders the narratives below were built up over a 4-year period, parts of the jigsaw then pieced together to make a whole. The Chronicles will come in 5 parts and hope to explore the State of Mind journey in depth, to offer clues, insights and questions to what State of Mind is and how it can evolve.

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If you have a more specific formatting requirement, please let us know by emailing [amy@20storieshigh.org.uk](mailto:amy@20storieshigh.org.uk), we will try our best to provide this for you.

## 2. State of Mind Chronicles Introduction

Arts and cultural organisations in the applied and socially engaged arts sector (UK-wide and more generally) are – with a generous nod to Mark Robinson's 'Tactics for the Tightrope' – once more walking the high wire in a high wind. As ever they are balancing challenges of role and contribution, social responsibility, artistic integrity, equality, equity, diversity, access and inclusion, organisational survival, alongside other gusts and headwinds... But they are doing so currently in ever more socially and economically complex times. The winds are at gale force! Useful responses to these challenges are always multiple, however the story of 20 Stories High's exploration of 'State of Mind'<sup>1</sup> shines a light on some interesting and timely balancing tricks, that may assist others through the storm...



The following think piece (in 2 parts, of which this is part I) is one of a set of 5 that chronicle the 'State of Mind' narrative, emerging provocations and insights. The method used for capturing the story is an approach we call 'story building'<sup>2</sup>, which involves reflective journaling by team members, observations and being present in the space and action, interviews at key points, and collaborating as a team to make sense of the emerging learning. This is a participatory action research (PAR) approach, underpinned by rigorous qualitative research principles, and aligns directly with the Centre for Cultural Value Evaluation Principles<sup>3</sup>.

1. State of Mind is 'A four-year strategic project, exploring our programme and processes through the lens of mental health and wellbeing'. State of Mind (2018-2022) is funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation
2. 'Story-building' (which is our construct) is a 'Participatory action research' (PAR) approach – a formative, collaborative and embedded process. It works with narrative (stories and themes gathered/emerging over time), ethnography (reflecting on / writing about embedded experiences), and reflective practice: with a 'reflect – discuss – evolve' evaluation cycle. Story-building is values-led, it ensures that widely diverse perspectives inform the evaluation findings – so that a multiple story can become a collective narrative of learning. It is rigorous, guided by high level qualitative research principles.
3. <https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/our-work/evaluation/evaluation-principles/>



### 3. Continuing the SoM high wire tale, as the cross winds build

This think-piece continues to trace 20 Stories High's deep exploration of the theme 'State of Mind' <sup>1</sup>, focussing on a two-year stretch that has encompassed tectonic shifts in our lives and social fabric, due to the continuing COVID pandemic, and a rising temperature in the 'culture wars' and fundamental social questions.

We proposed in Part I that the narrative of this journey may provide new perspectives on resilience approaches that are proactive and flexible, potentially central to the day-to-day balancing acts of this socially engaged theatre company.

Has 20 Stories High's attention to exploring and embracing mental wellbeing as a constantly changing, fluid and fluctuating, creative process, rather than a risk area to be managed, offered useful insights on weathering tumultuous contextual challenges? Does this constitute a resilience strategy of some kind?

Read on for part II of this chronicle of an approach and commitment to understanding the dynamics of states of mind, together as a creative, story-telling community.

## 4. Fever pitch

1. Two years into the SoM <sup>4</sup> programme timeframe, as we outlined in Part I external factors crashed in to impact in complex ways on people's states of mind, and on the SoM agenda. We noted that the story building processes we had in place <sup>5</sup> captured how the 20SH <sup>6</sup> team was responding to the COVID crisis, and that the response to the disruption was marked by 'care' as a priority – "an embrace" of all those belonging to the 20SH community. We referenced Mark Robinson's work on the concept of 'adaptive resilience', and suggested this idea might be specifically useful for understanding our story: 'Adaptive resilience is the capacity to be productive, loved/valued and true to core purpose and identity whilst absorbing disturbance, adapting with integrity in response to changing circumstances and positively influencing the environment'. Mark Robinson – Blog: 'Thinking/Practice: Adaptive Resistance' 18.09.2020<sup>7</sup>
2. Meanwhile... during 2020 the outside world was reaching fever pitch in how people were coping with this time of international, national and local anxiety and crisis, and all emotional antennae were heightened:
  - "Culture wars"<sup>8</sup>, dividing communities in many nations, were being fed by the pandemic mood, increasing social tensions



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4. The acronym SoM is used to identify the funded programme of work under the title 'State of Mind', as distinct from the concept state of mind, which has developed its own momentum as a thinking tool – as is outlined in this think piece

5. See State of Mind Chronicles introduction paragraph – also footnotes 2 and 3 in Part I for more detail on this

6. 20SH used as an acronym for 20 Stories High throughout the State of Mind Chronicles

7. <http://thinkingpractice.blogspot.com/2020/09/adaptive-resistance.html>

8. The Culture Wars is a common reference to numerous dominant social and political issues currently dividing society into two (verbally, legally, sometimes literally physically) warring factions, grossly fuelled by social media algorithms, with divides often underpinned by class, age, background, and fundamental beliefs about truth and justice

5. Then in April 2020, Black US citizen George Floyd was murdered by police in the US, triggering rage, and the Black Lives Matter international/national/local tidal wave of action. The ways in which 20SH responded to the murder of George Floyd, the upsurge of consciousness and anger, and how this played out for people individually and collectively, suggest that the company was tested: it was a difficult time for the team. In the words of the company itself:

*"Following the murder of George Floyd, the call for immediate action to end structural anti-black racism echoed around the world." "... the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests were a turning point, a wake-up call."*<sup>9</sup>

6. At this profound moment several team members experienced a deep "shock to the core", doubt, and awakening. A SoM proactive resilience mode emerged as a response - the company challenged itself, allowing no space for complacency. Some team members reflected on this moment as a shock that they feared could undermine the profound trust built up over so long within the team. Deeply problematic feelings were shared – from shame, guilt and uncertainty to anger and disappointment

7. It was their SoM work that enabled individuals to be brave enough to broach the issue honestly, and explain these feelings, looking for positive actions to move forward together. This proactive resilience was characterised by care, imagination and action, both internally and externally. The role of an effective 'ally' was explored and interrogated within the team. A number of different projects and activities were initiated, here listed chronologically:

- One-to-one and group wellbeing support was offered to team members and artists, timewith specialist health care professionals, responding to specific individuals' needs
- Black artists facilitated dedicated youth theatre workshops (e.g. writing about experiencing difficult feelings
- Activist art works were specifically commissioned: 'Black with a Capital B' – 7 short films by local Black artists; and 'Black, Scouse and Proud' – a short film by Nathan Powell and Black youth theatre members

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<sup>9</sup> Source: 20 Stories High website



- Programmed 20SH performances (digital) by young Black artists were highlighted that focus on Black experience: 'Touchy 1: Jemell's Story' – rap and creative video exploring a personal story of marginalisation; and 'Buttercup' – a powerful original film for the BBC
- A specialist Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training programme was initiated for staff, board members and young artists
- Social media was used to share information and amplify Black voices
- New policies, partnerships, steering groups and advocates were initiated

8. This major cultural moment triggered increasing consciousness of and engagement with the company's impulse towards activism (e.g. anti-racist action, local community action) as a core narrative for the organisation. This journey is explored as the focus of State of Mind Chronicle 2.

## 5. The challenges of programming under hurricane conditions

9. Within the central company work strand of programming, a whole pattern of adaptive thinking had been needed, since COVID restrictions forced an immediate pause, and intense fears that the cultural sector in general was heading at hurricane speed towards a cliff edge.

10. When the pandemic struck, the 20SH team was immediately working out how national COVID lockdown would impact on 20SH creative output – e.g. reimagining formats for the summer youth theatre show, not cancelling, which would be the easier, more reactive response. 'CHOKKA' was produced under lockdown conditions, audio recorded on site where each young person was isolating. The original live performance ideas and script were reconceived as a multi-voice digital podcast:



**CHOKKA**



*"With original beats, flowing melodies and poetry to stretch your mind and heart. CHOKKA follows the journey of 16-year-old Jem who is coming to terms with the world around them. How they fit into a community in which they feel other and what happens when love punches them in the gut"*



The audio 'podcast' mode for digital dissemination was new for the company, and yet was embraced and problem solved collectively as a new creative challenge. This demonstrates a form of 'adaptive resilience'.

See 'Fever pitch,' and note 7 above

11. Aware of local people's need for distraction, connection and laughter the company devised a purpose-designed doorstep theatre show 'Knocking-On', co-created with artist Brodie Arthur, to take to residents in Liverpool 8 as a cultural offering, while so many venues and meeting places were closed and households could not mix. This creative reimagining process has continued throughout the Pandemic period, with fresh thinking and adaptive re-visioning of more than two years' creative programming.

12. It was an effort, but mid-Covid the team was trying to meet in person again for youth theatre, whenever safely possible –

*"so many layers, and yet trying to maintain playfulness.*

*"The effort seemed worth it: e.g. (autumn 2020)*

*"The young people loved being creative again!" "Feels like we've reawakened youth theatre, and it's urgent to help the young people help themselves to explore their own stories and trauma."*

But the cost on staff energy was high: the organisational work and emotional energy, and the risk to everybody, created a tipping point in December 2020. Using SoM channels team members flagged up an overbalancing, in which young people's needs were becoming too prioritised, with their own needs lost somewhere in the mix.

13. At the same point in the story, the development of already planned 20SH original performances (public shows for touring) was also severely disrupted. The shows 'Touchy' and 'Buttercup' had already begun R&D processes before the pandemic hit. Both these shows were dealing with emotionally difficult or at least potentially very sensitive material: 'Touchy' was commissioned as part of a Wellcome Collection national study exploring touch, and this piece focussed especially on the meaning and experience of touch for young adults, which opened up a direct link to potentially powerful emotions of all kinds for makers and audiences alike. The focussed SoM care taken during the making of Touchy was very clear. The 'Touchy' development continued despite pandemic restrictions, with online R&D phases, creative and professional development and 1-2-1 sessions with the performers, and check-ins with the creative and production teams throughout. Clark Baim's 'Drama Spiral'.<sup>10</sup> approach to helping people find appropriate safety when making theatre about their own traumatic or painful experiences was first introduced to the company by artist wellbeing practitioner Lou Platt during the intensive work on 'Touchy'.

14. Through all this work the format of the productions was re-envisaged as digital, since live performance and touring were such uncertain and unmanageably risky strategies under COVID restrictions. Moving away from familiar performance formats into the digital world was a complex process, taking on other risks and stretching everybody's imaginative application of their skills, as well as providing stimulation and excitement. The experience demonstrates how contradictory states of mind can coexist—within a team, but also within individuals.

15. Ultimately, 'Touchy' was transformed into five individual short works using film drama, music and animation:

*'A mash up of theatre and music video—interweaving beats, drama, poetry, animation, visuals and original music. We follow the journey of six characters as they navigate their way through the tactile highs and lows of young adulthood.'*

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<sup>10</sup> The Drama Spiral is a tool created by academic and applied theatre practitioner Dr Clark Baim, and can be found in his book "Staging the Personal: a guide to safe and ethical practice"





The final short films were released weekly in May and June 2022, and the work was then reenvisioned a further time to create 'Touchy-Live' as a unique one-off live performance in February 2022. Throughout the ever-changing creative 'Touchy' process the cast of six young freelance artists and 10 freelancers in the creative team were on their own sometimes intense professional and personal emotional rollercoasters, with 20SH as their anchor point and support. The need to constantly flex and change plans, responding with care and kindness to all these individual state of mind shifts was intensely demanding and sometimes overwhelming for the 20SH team; whilst the final products brought immense pride and joy for all involved.

16. 'Buttercup' was in a writing and R&D process when the pandemic began. While live performance and touring options for the show closed down under COVID conditions, a new opportunity arose to partner with film production company Tigerlily Productions, and create the piece as a BBC Arts commissioned film. As with 'Touchy', 'Buttercup' required the creative team to work in unfamiliar ways, which sparked powerful questioning within the team in how to maintain SoM values within a wider cultural sector. After an intense period of work, and intensive nurturing of the states of mind of the young artists at the centre of the production process, the award-winning film 'Buttercup' was released for public streaming in April 2021 - "Weaving words of survival and solidarity: from a little girl in a bedroom in Kinshasa to a bold young poet in Liverpool".

## 6. A State of Mind tornado

17. The SoM significance of these shows made them important examples in the 20SH SoM story, and they help to give a fuller picture of the powerful SoM weather system. They serve as examples of how SoM processes supported the creative adaptability that the COVID 19 pandemic demanded for programming output. But... importantly they also chronicle how the company was engaging with SoM when working with freelance artists, partnering with very different outside agencies, and considering how audiences might be affected by the content or artistic handling of material.

During this period, from November 2020 to May 2021, the company was at the eye of a State of Mind storm: balancing internal team overwhelm, external (legal and professional) demands, and freelancers', youth theatre members' and even audiences' SoM needs.

18. Plans and company systems had to adapt to accommodate and manage the balancing of all these, as the needs supported in one direction impacted on other team members, in a spiralling that was very hard to contain. Two concrete SoM outcomes of the 'Touchy' and 'Buttercup' experiences have been

- i) self care resources created to support audience members' states of mind if triggered by the content in the pieces, and
- ii) new partnership agreement processes, to preempt potential culture clashes so that 20SH is able to maintain its focus on SoM when working with other organisations.

19. Meanwhile, the first live show by 20SH youth theatre since before the COVID pandemic was the summer 2021 production 'Nu:Me', which also marked a SoM-initiated change for the team. Comprising a collection of individual stories with a hopeful and positive tone, the show played more with fictionalisation than direct personal storytelling and experimented with puppetry, theatrical and cos-play costumes all representing a distancing safety strategy. The Nu:Me show marked the beginning of the youth theatre team explicitly adopting Clark Baim's 'Drama Spiral'<sup>11</sup> (first used by the company during the intensive work on 'Touchy') for ongoing work. This Nu:Me approach evidences the developing SoM proactive, flexible (or adaptive) resilience measures designed to protect the makers, performers and audiences against potential re-emerging or secondary trauma, when presenting and performing their own lived experiences.

20. Following an intensive 18 months of the SoM programme, in September 2021 the company dedicated a full month of reflection, expression and discussion to the State of Mind theme, with the entire team's collaborative involvement. The team contemplated the findings of a deep diving interim evaluation report, and listened to each other's perspectives on all the aspects of the company and its work touched by the discoveries of three years of SoM exploration. The month was a 'pause' button, a rare, intense and focussed space away from everyday company business, and was highly valued by company members. A working group then produced an action plan for implementing all decisions made during the SoM month, and 20SH began an implementation phase, putting into everyday practice the insights and wisdom from the SoM programme to date. As well as creating the selfcare resources for audiences and partnership agreement templates, this plan included maintaining spaces for 'open, honest, mindful, brave conversations' within the team, and numerous other actions, several of which will be outlined in later State of Mind Chronicles.

21. Where are we now? In the final year of the SoM programme itself, team members and members of the wider 20SH community have begun to activate, and reflect on how the company is implementing, the learning they discussed in depth collectively during the SoM month. This phase of the story is captured in State of Mind Chronicle 5.

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<sup>11</sup> See note 10 above



## 7. Further discussion of whether a SoM strategy can be seen as a resilience approach

We return now to the discussion opened up in Chronicle 1 Part I, on whether this SoM journey has provided new perspectives on a proactive, flexible or 'adaptive resilience' approach, essential in the day-to-day balancing act of any socially engaged theatre company. Has 20SH's attention to exploring and embracing mental wellbeing as an ongoing, fluid and fluctuating process, rather than a risk area to be managed, offered useful insights on weathering tumultuous contextual challenges? Does this provide tips on building a resilience strategy with care and flexibility at its heart?

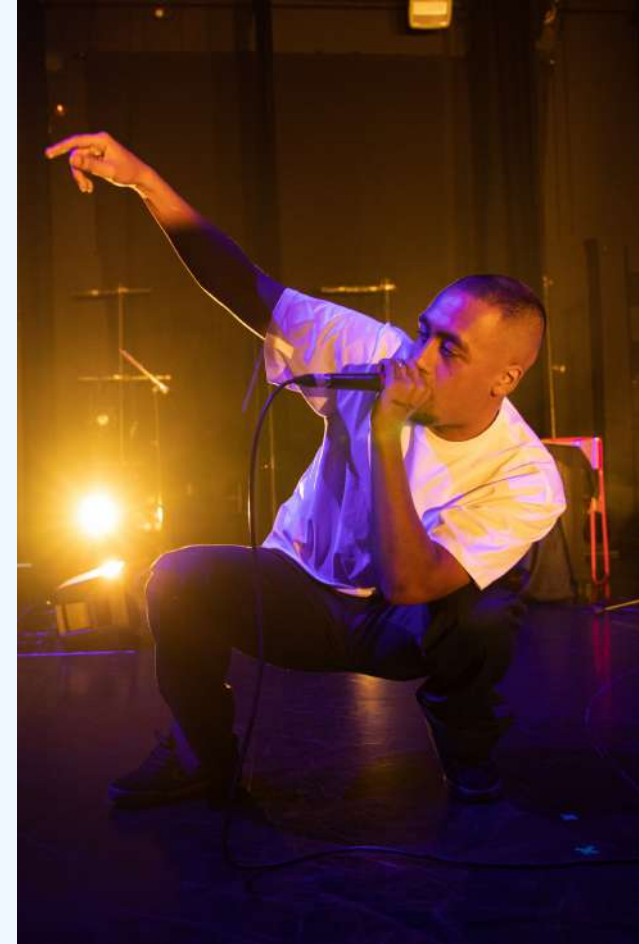
22. The evaluation's reflective practice 'Story Building' process <sup>12</sup> has mapped the adaptability of the company's creative imagination, and appreciation of diverse and changing states of mind, as well as its operational adaptability. There is a sense of beginning to find solid ground, through engaging with the SoM territory consciously. Team members repeatedly said that without the focus on SoM that was already rooted and established, they couldn't imagine what would have happened to the company during this time. Team members highlighted:

- The value of a shared SoM language, moving from implicit to explicit, with the permission and space to reference SoM. It *"has become the language of the company that has huge meaning attached to it, but we don't need to go through the meaning every time now. We have a code word."*
- That there is a shared commitment to SoM values – it has "made us take far more seriously the impact of our work on ourselves as a staff team." - That the reflective practice culture – journaling – raises consciousness of all aspects.
- The impact of clinical and specialist counselling input for the team: Talking about trauma in a scientific way *"I feel stimulated and empowered to start researching things independently."* This process was encouraged and explored during the SoM month in 2021. SoM gives everyone a language to explore, articulate and *"share intense experiences non-emotively and without having to give a whole life-story"*.

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<sup>12</sup> See note 2 above

23. Specialists have offered the team 'models' for addressing challenges as they come up (e.g. the work with artist wellbeing practitioner Lou Platt), engaging with tools, techniques and thinking developed by other specialists – e.g. Clark Baim's Drama Spiral, and Lou's use of related exercises from this system e.g. 'fishing rod' to carry out this work with 20SH young people<sup>13</sup>, and training in other ways to protect from or diffuse the impacts of accumulated secondary trauma (i.e. from other people's experiences) on the body, mind, nervous system. Team members have also highlighted that no one tool or approach suits everybody, and a range of options is important (using diversity to meet diversity).



## 8. Assessing how far COVID revealed 20SH as a company practicing and pressure-testing an 'adaptive resilience' strategy through SoM.



24. Examples and reflections already appearing in the story told so far can begin to answer this question: starting with 20SH's responses to the initial COVID-triggered stresses, which were confronted head on using SoM – (the complexity of stresses was noted by team members, as early as 16.3.20)

- Responding to COVID pressures through SoM, the company was confident of the value of taking "time to breathe and observe knowing that the world of theatre and young people's theatre will never be the same". During the initial COVID fortnight the team talked about ongoing personal disorientation, with deep reflection: "But we feel well connected", with lots of time 'checking in.' "Things are changing so rapidly – we want to be responsive, but take space to be responsible" (March 2020). This combination of taking time to breath and observe while concentrating on team connections has continued throughout the pandemic

13. State of Mind Chronicle 4 focusses on the SoM programme in relation to 20SH's community of young people



- Under COVID pressures the company found adaptive solutions to accommodate diverse responses and needs within the 20SH community. SoM wellbeing sessions with artist wellbeing practitioner Lou Platt drew out strategies for 'taking care' – e.g. 'carriage planning' (short term, with continual rechecking) so as not to overcommit or become overwhelmed. Time was given (even amidst huge time pressures) to the collective, creative search for how to reimagine all upcoming shows – continual reflection, team meetings, creative adventures - not becoming stuck with the problem
- Staff team states of mind were affected by George Floyd's murder, and team members' diverse responses, through their different identities and life experience, created a vulnerable, precarious but productive space. Supported by SoM patterns, the moment became a trigger for action, rather than remaining 'triggering' in a paralysing sense <sup>14</sup>
- The whole 20SH community has been involved in ongoing training in equity/diversity/inclusion, listening, learning how to be effective, appropriate allies. SoM has helped build emotional resilience (for example in combatting the paralysis and distancing effects of "white fragility") so that discussions could be fluid.

Working with SoM ideas helped to allow for the complexity and creativity needed for real, effective resilience: in one artist wellbeing team session, the facilitator Lou Platt introduced the motif of a pendulum, to explore states of mind. The motif is useful - to observe how focus and emotional states keep moving: "The movement is important, and what's crucial is to observe is if the pendulum gets stuck.

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<sup>14</sup> See Chronicle 2 for a focus on SoM & the activist work accelerated by the company following the murder of George Floyd



Ask what you need, to release it back to movement." This image fits well with the fluidity and duality of team contributions, the mix of emotion and practical strengths. It gave explicit permission for everyone to acknowledge and value the swings people were experiencing between personal and professional preoccupations, the inner/outer world swings, the doubt/confidence and stillness/action swings evident in the team's discussions. This fluidity is also echoed in the term 'State of Mind' itself, a term that emphasises time – fluctuating moods, temporary states, rather than a more static idea of achieving an end-state of 'wellbeing'.

For Mark Robinson in 2020, 'adaptive resilience' was "the capacity to be productive, loved/valued and true to core purpose and identity whilst absorbing disturbance, adapting with integrity in response to changing circumstances and positively influencing the environment". For us, the term 'State of Mind' in itself seems to encapsulate very well the fluid, adaptive aspects of the resilience approach 20SH has achieved, through its SoM strategy; and we suggest that 'State of Mind', the 20SH way, seems to offer an interesting, vibrant and pressure-tested, form of this 'adaptive resilience'. SoM is a proactive adaptive resilience strategy with the emphasis on the collective, that indeed draws its strength (its head and heart) from its focus on learning how states of mind collectively interact through difficult times, and produce ongoing resources for the future.

The Chronicles that follow explore other aspects of SoM as a strategy, different kinds of resources that it may offer, and other insights for people interested in walking the cultural sector high wire, in very high winds.  
A Raw, April 2022, in collaboration with 20 Stories High

#### A. Raw, April 2022, in collaboration with 20 Stories High

*These chronicles are one outcome of a deeply collaborative and rich story building process. Huge thanks and acknowledgements to all those in the 20 Stories High community who have shared their perspectives and reflections so honestly, without your voices these chronicles would not exist. Thanks also to all who have offered thoughts on the text, especially Dr Madeleine Irwin, Leanne Jones, Lee Corner and Lucy Graham. The story building process for SoM is supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation State of Mind programme grant. Find out more on [20storieshigh.org.uk](http://20storieshigh.org.uk)*

#### **Follows:**

**Four more Chronicles, exploring the SoM story through lenses on young people and mental wellbeing/SoM; the meaning of 'Care' and balancing needs in this context; links between SoM and activism; and mapping the final stage of learning from SoM**

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<sup>16</sup> 'White Fragility' is an exploration of a common emotional response from a white person to a fear of their own responsibility for the racist impact of their privileges - due to their own white experience - on people of colour; and how their resulting real connection to these deeply negative impacts can disrupt or destroy positive action, and can ultimately reinforce racism. See *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo, and *White Fragility - Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*

<sup>16</sup>. For more on this, see Chronicle 3

<sup>17</sup>. See footnote 7 above, and SoM Chronicle 1 part I, for more information

# State of Mind

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