

State of Mind

wellbeing in everything we do

Chronicle 3: Care-full balancing

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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-building associates Joe Taylor, Paislie Reid and Anita Welsh, the narratives below were built up over a 4-year period, parts of the jigsaw then pieced together to make a whole. The Chronicles aim 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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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.¹ 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'¹ shines a light on some interesting and timely balancing tricks, that may assist others through the storm...



The following think piece is one of a set 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'², 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 Principles³.

1. See also Mark Robinson's use of this image in <https://www.tacticsforthetightrope.com>

2. 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

3. '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.

4. <https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/our-work/evaluation/evaluation-principles/>



3. Care-full balancing

This chronicle looks at care as a key theme within the State of Mind (SoM) story.

We think the idea of 'care' is relevant because the SoM exploration has been about understanding and balancing different needs, in the same way that 'care' works more generally. Through SoM, 20SH has chosen to explore in depth its ongoing responsibility to support the health, safety and wellbeing of others in the broadest possible sense, and then to set these out clearly in policy documents, company processes or ways of working, both managerially and artistically.

As evaluators we suggest that SoM has given the company's culture of care a stronger and more explicit framework: that SoM has led the company to (re)define, re-visit and hone its understanding of its duty of care for staff, young people, freelancers, partners and audiences. At the time of writing the company has adopted the strapline 'Wellbeing in everything we do.'

We chronicle here a central concern for care which underpins the SoM story - managing how different people's states of mind collectively interact. It highlights how the 20SH team has carefully (and caringly) navigated this tricky terrain, and outlines the tools and strategies the team has found useful for solving some of the problems in striking various care balances.

4. Managing how states of mind collectively interact

From its beginning (April 2019) the story building process highlighted a key question 'How is it possible to serve everybody's states of mind at the same time, and what's the hierarchy of needs between different people?' Amongst the staff members the early SoM work developed a deeper awareness of states of mind generally, and that mental wellbeing for everyone is a mix of 20SH dynamics and their life beyond. With deeper care comes increased responsibility, and in Autumn 2019 the Executive Director noted that through SoM *"I feel very very responsible for ensuring that staff team, participants and artists have the best possible experience in terms of wellbeing."*

While the sensitivity and empathy levels for each other were already high within the team, sensitivity to other people's triggers deepened the more the SoM focus continued to be the organisation's guiding compass. In the summer of 2020 new questions were surfacing for team members: Was a more open sharing of different people's state of mind needs having a SoM impact of its own – negative or positive? Team members reflected at this point that being open with colleagues about your own state of mind seemed to be an option for some but not for others, and also that the impacts of that openness from some (young people, team members, freelancers) sometimes inadvertently impacted negatively on others' states of mind. For example some were unsure about being *"invited to disclose or discuss in front of colleagues, line managers"* where *"they have to make decisions about what they feel able to say and what they want to keep personal. This takes some energy..."*. The mix of personal and professional here was also tricky for some: *"It's good for me professionally to know where my colleagues are at personally, but it's not good for me, personally, to know!"*



Under COVID conditions (Spring 2020) vulnerabilities became stark, and all relationships were under more pressure. Staff were wondering "*Where does support for our young people (in [Covid] crisis) end? And can/should we even be problem solving FOR them?*". This question was not limited to the pandemic period: there is always a question about the balance of how effective, in reality, the impulse to help will be. Story-building developed the term 'help-less care' to point to situations where the SoM cost to a team member outweighed the real-life value to a young person of 'helping' them, and this question of balance could be considered at any time: was this going to be 'help-less care'?

The care instinct was/is always there, but was it viable? In two key audio recorded conversations staff members were working through this intensity, focussing on feelings of responsibility for some young people in crisis, at risk of self-harm. 20SH had become certain young people's most trusted support, but this left some staff feeling the weight of that responsibility. "*We can't go 'alright see you later!' Do we need to have more of a brick in our hearts? That's not us, that's not the people that we are*". Trust had been carefully established between the pastoral worker and these young people, but that trust can also be a heavy burden. In a more general sense staff journals and discussions sometimes voiced fears that when the company was focussed on absorbing and managing the wellbeing needs of others in the 20SH community, team members' own SoM needs may at times become a lower priority. So the continuing focus on SoM sometimes raised stress levels within the staff team.





To counter the impacts of their deep empathy instincts, and to safeguard the staff members' own states of mind, the team needed to identify boundaries, and strategies for maintaining those boundaries. These included: provision of clinical supervision through a programme partner; working and liaising with school improvement safeguarding leads; sharing concerns with another colleague; agreeing ways forward with a line manager; directing the young people to professional specialist mental health emergency call lines, services, and apps became established practice from this point (summer 2020 onwards). A flo-chart of actions was developed for staff to help them navigate which option to use in which situation. These support systems helped staff to identify the right moment to switch from hands-on responsibility to signposting people to specialist professionals who could help young people through a mental health crisis.

At the same point the company was working on the development of two new shows under COVID restrictions, Touchy and Buttercup, both dealing with emotionally difficult or at least potentially very sensitive material. As detailed in Chronicle 1.2, during this intensive creative period (November 2020 to May 2021) the company was engaging with SoM in work with freelance artists, partnering with very different outside agencies, and considering how audiences might be affected by the content or artistic handling of material. 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. The executive team programmed in a State of Mind Month (September 2021), dedicated exclusively to careful, collective SoM thinking, to inform next steps.

5. Taking stock - looking towards solutions

The SoM Month began a more solution-orientated phase of the SoM project. Staff members tried to explore realities together as openly as possible – resulting in further reflection in the months that followed, which led to concrete actions. Team members began trialling new tools; translating learning and principles into more formal processes, procedures, and policies; and capturing all ideas identified during State of Mind month in an actions spreadsheet. Some guiding principles emerged from State of Mind month which have begun to steer solutions to some of the questions and challenges in balancing needs. These principles can be summarised as: -

- Realising and accepting the ongoing challenges in how we handle limits to the 'care' and support the company can offer, and where and in what states (e.g. in a mental health crisis) lines can realistically be drawn.
- The company makes theatre and art (this is also the promise to young people).
"We have a collective responsibility to stay on track."
- State of Mind is a collective approach. It is about how states of mind collectively interact (including through difficult times) rather than fragmenting support into isolated 'cases'.

The team then developed tools, solutions and strategies informed by these principles, that continue to support the organisation to work in safer ways, operationally and artistically.



6. Operational tools, solutions & strategies for more care-full working

Operationally the caring emphasis since the State of Mind month (September 2021) can be seen in the team paying more focussed attention to the mood, vibe and general qualities of spaces (here a 'space' can refer to a meeting, a planning process, a making or rehearsal process, a group or one to one, online or in person session). This continues through into the ways the company works to balance the priority to create safe spaces for all stakeholders.

Through the story building process examples came through of the executive team regularly questioning *"what's the space like, how do we manage it, what do we bring into it, what do we leave out?"* The focus is on staff members, but also on work with other artists, organisations and partners. *"We need to ask each other what our requirements are before we go into a space – we are used to doing that with external partners or when we bring people in etc, but not very good at asking each other [this] when we are working together."*

See Delve Deeper #1 on page 15

The story-building process suggests strategies were used - to curate 'care-full' spaces, in which conversations and relationships can be managed whilst prioritising that balance of all SoM needs: (1) language as a clarifying tool, (2) education and training; and (3) a commitment to remaining open and curious.

(1) Language: From an early stage the team started to acknowledge the value of developing a shared SoM language, giving everyone 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."* Following State of Mind Month company members paid extra careful attention to how language was used to refer to aspects of the company's work. In this phase the staff team made explicit shifts in language used for strands of work and policy titles (most notably equality to equity, and the addition of Activism to EDIA – noted in Chronicle 2). Language became a clarifying tool. Staff adopted shared motifs, often born out of team CPD e.g. *'clarity is kindness'* - grown from the Brené Brown phrase *'clear is kind, unclear is unkind'*⁵ - and *'I am being a tree person'* - someone who is removed from the intensity of a project and able to offer fresh perspective.

5. Brown, Brené, Dare to Lead, *Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts*, Penguin, 2018

At times being less connected enables a less complex analysis. These two are particularly good examples of tools which helped company members to develop a language to say things which might have previously been difficult to say. For example once the team has all agreed that 'clear is kind', if a team member hears something that feels unclear to them, and which perhaps raises questions or anxiety, they can call on that agreement: e.g. *'In the spirit of clear is kind, can you take me through that again?'* This is a smooth (care-full) way to approach awkward hurdles in communication, that depersonalises these difficult moments. This pattern of arriving at shared terms for useful but tricky ideas, to do with how to relate to each other more mindfully, seems more intuitive than conscious. It is perhaps connected to comfortable use of metaphor (e.g. poetry, distilling ideas into a phrase that carries other meanings) amongst people who are used to working creatively.

(2) Education and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) - commitment to learning and then action

Through the SoM programme training and support was put in place which increased awareness and peer support, and provided a space for the SoM theme and for the team to question practice:

- Access to existing courses from partner organisations (e.g. Mental Health First Aid) and advice from other companies (e.g. during the covid pandemic the Actors Touring Company shared some principles they borrowed from the Canadian Government – *Working Remotely during Covid-19 Principles*. The team soon adopted these principles using *'The Canada Rules'*⁶ as a shorthand).
- A programme of clinical supervision under the guidance of a mental health and CAMHS practitioner and consultant clinical neuropsychologist from another partner organisation. Clinical and specialist counselling input for the team had a significant impact : Talking about trauma in a scientific way *"I feel stimulated and empowered to start researching things independently."* This gave everyone a language to articulate and *"share intense experiences non-emotively and without having to give a whole life-story"*.
- Individual and group support and reflection sessions with Artist Wellbeing Practitioner Lou Platt⁷, a contribution which Lou describes as *"creating a container – or a net – that can hold the community"* as well as individuals' dilemmas, reflections, and the entire process, safely.



6. *'The Canada Rules'*:-

1. You are not "working from home", you are "at your home, during a crisis, trying to work"
2. Your personal, physical, mental and emotional health is more important than anything else right now
3. You should not try to compensate for lost productivity by working longer hours
4. You will be kind to yourself and not judge how you are coping based on how you see others coping
5. You will be kind to others and not judge how they are coping based on how you are coping
6. Your team's success will not be measured the same way it was when things were normal

7. See Lou's website: <https://www.artistwellbeing.co.uk/>

- Introduction (by Lou Platt) to the 'Carriage Planning' concept to support planning during the Covid pandemic. *"Lou identified that we were losing our anchors, and that long term planning felt emotionally exhausting. She suggested we try planning for approx. 6 weeks at a time... And near the end of this ... evaluate, check in and plan for the next 6 weeks. This was a life saver especially for the Youth Theatre"* (Artistic Director journal).
- Lou's training in the use of Clark Baim's Drama Spiral (more on this in the next section), and in other ways to protect people from or to diffuse the impacts of accumulated secondary trauma (i.e. from other people recounting traumatic experiences) on the body, mind, nervous system.
- Facilitated internal and team discussions on power and influence (including the governance of third sector organisations); policy development; roles and responsibilities
- Board updates and discussions - maximising the input of Dr Priyanka Pradhan, Consultant Clinical Neuropsychologist.

(3) A commitment to remaining open and curious: The company's choice of active language and the commitment to ongoing learning suggests that its approach to care will be a continual reflective learning process. How the company 'does' care will always need to shift and morph, be revisited, reframed and translated into different ways of working. This will be true in relation to both artistic making and the operational processes that sit behind or alongside that. As well as the structural tools and strategies we have begun to outline, there is also a strong commitment to remaining open and curious, in recognition of the fact that the process of refining solutions will never be completed: *"Where do we go to next, what's our next bit of learning? How do we keep on going so it doesn't feel like we have done this, learnt it, implemented it... but [instead] keep on staying curious"* (Artistic Director, June 2022)

Through its approach to State of Mind the company is attempting to find a balance between intuitive and structural ways of dealing with the potential overloads and pitfalls that come with the complexities of care. This is another balancing act in the practice of caring.

See Delve Deeper #2 on page 16

7. Artistic tools, solutions and strategies for more care-full ways of making creative work

In the same way that the company has developed tools and strategies to support safer and more 'care-full' operations, it has also continued to explore safer and more care-full ways to tell and receive stories, to make work with and for others. This is the very core of the company's artistic practice.

Clark Baim's 'Drama Spiral'⁸ approach to helping people find appropriate safety when making theatre about their own traumatic or painful experiences was first introduced to the company by Lou Platt⁹, during the intensive work on the show 'Touchy'. Lou has given staff the skills and confidence to use the Drama Spiral in both their professional and youth theatre show making processes. The company's first use of the tool with young people was in Summer 2021 through the development of the Youth Theatre's 'Nu:Me'. Comprising a collection of individual stories with a hopeful and positive tone, the show played more with fictionalisation than direct personal storytelling. It experimented with puppetry, theatrical and cos-play costumes all representing a distancing safety strategy. The company's Artistic Director directed Nu:Me and finds the Drama Spiral very valuable. It enables staff to keep checking in with those young people who *"wanted to tell or share some things and after exploring them through the Drama Spiral they said actually I don't want to, I can fictionalise it."*

The Drama Spiral has helped the company navigate the risks of making autobiographical work that may leave audience members or performers feeling unsafe. The Artistic Director is now keen to explore how the tool can help the company explore further *"the responsibility we have to family and friends who come to see and support the work"*. This focus on the audience or the 'receivers of stories' is one way that the company's care offer, or their sense of their duty of care, is evolving in artistic terms.

8. 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"](#)

9. See note 7 above for Lou's website address



The introduction of the Drama Spiral has been welcomed by staff in pastoral roles too, as it helped them shape a more bounded pastoral offer. While the context is the performance making process, the tool has also contributed to supporting staff to handle some of the 'balance' dilemmas of the earlier phases of SoM – e.g. needing to identify appropriate ethical limits in how available they could be for young people in difficulty, while ensuring the young people were safe at these times. Using the Drama Spiral helped pastoral staff to anticipate when such moments might arise, and to create a different pathway for the young person at risk. Through SoM the team is increasingly expert and well equipped to have these sorts of conversations, and to make decisions about appropriate actions on and off stage.

8. In Conclusion

This think piece has chronicled some complex care efforts underpinning the SoM story (e.g. balancing young 20 Stories High community members' states of mind with company members' states of mind); how care balancing was explored during the company's State of Mind month (September 2021); and how it then informed operational and artistic changes. In describing some of the tools, strategies and solutions the company has explored to understand and consciously manage various care balances, we have occasionally referred to them as making the company's work more 'safe'. But we also need to draw attention to the complexity of the idea of safety in this context. By definition, the company's work is not seeking to be aesthetically safe: the themes are often edgy, provoking deeper thought about important experiences of being human. Their creative process embraces risk rather than 'playing safe' in the way it tackles big issues head-on. We suggest that the line that the company is so expert at navigating is the ambiguity of safety and risk. 'Space' is a connecting idea here, creating and curating spaces in which the company can take risks safely.

We propose that the company's committed, 'care-full' attention to 'spaces' demonstrates very well the linking of care to creativity, as part of 20 Stories High's State of Mind work. This includes spaces that allow for empathy, and being open to other people's stories, and the ways 20SH works across different kinds of 'spaces' in people's lives. These kinds of 'spaces' include physical and virtual, thinking and action, and making / artistic. There is also constant attention (care) given to how different kinds of activities or functions fit together in people's lives - activism, care, creativity, personal or home life. All of these aspects of working together also need and create different 'mental spaces' of action and reflection, which change all the time. These 'mental spaces' are also different 'States of mind.'

20SH's understanding and practice of care also connects the company's work to ideas and very live themes in the health arena. Some leading experts highlight a worrying use of 'care' as an umbrella concept. Practitioner Dr Sanah Ahsan (clinical psychologist) advocates for preventive social care, and for social action as the antidote to a –

*"purely medicalised, individualised understanding of mental health [which] puts plasters over big gaping wounds, without addressing the source of violence. They encourage us to adapt to systems, [thereby] protecting the status quo. It is here that we fail marginalised people the most: Black people's understandable expressions of hurt at living in structurally racist society are too often medicalised, labelled dangerous and met with violence under the guise of "care." Black people are more likely to be Tasered, sectioned, restrained and over medicated than anyone else in our mental health services today."*¹⁰



The company's commitment to both creativity and activism (see Chronicle 2) strongly aligns with these ideas about mental health and care, by encouraging young people to look at and think about their conditions and broader societal structures as part of their understanding of mental health and wellbeing. 20 Stories High, through its SoM work, has begun to expand the idea of states of mind, wellbeing and care, to work on them as a continuing process, that is strong enough to embrace the risks involved in working for change in so many urgent areas.

10. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/sep/06/psychologist-devastating-lies-mental-health-problems-politics> Accessed 12.09.22

Delve Deeper #1

State of Mind's focus on the collective and interdependence resonates with academic theories on performance¹¹ in relation to care and especially the idea of 'the self' as part of a collective and the social self -i.e. in relation to others, which underpins a lot of this thinking about care through creative practice.

Key thinkers inside and related to the field of applied theatre include James Thompson, Kathy Bishop and Helen Nicholson. Helen Nicholson's research highlighted the same growth in sensitivity as the 20SH team noticed - generally amongst a group of people when care is a clear ethic; and that this knocks on to a wider awareness of all kinds of relationships in their lives, including greater awareness of your own impact (ecologically as well as socially). For Nicholson, if transformation does take place it is a gradual, cumulative process, the result of *'learning and negotiation with others, a progressive act of self-creation and openness for others made possible by the acceptance of the insufficiencies of self.'*¹²

This conceptualisation encourages ideas about ways of being and behaving as an individual that encompass suffering and crisis and promote an openness to difference or otherness. Some Sociologists are becoming increasingly interested in the analytical potential of a concept of care that *"foregrounds human interdependencies, relational ties and the needs of others as the basis for action in analysing work, such as creative work, which is neither directly not obviously associated with care provision."*¹³ So we can see that new thinking in the 20SH team arising from State of Mind connects with these care theories, but more importantly it also demonstrates how they can be operationalised and put into practice.

11. Jen Harvie describes as a 'concern with the way neoliberal capitalism infiltrates and reconfigures structures, practices, and subjectivities.' Jen Harvie, Shannon Jackson and Richard Sennett have investigated how contemporary art practice is managing to escape, repair, or offset the effects of neoliberal dominance....Neoliberal doctrine champions the 'supreme worth of the individual above all else' arts instead 'honouring our social interdependence.' Shannon Jackson sees performance as an 'art of interpublic coordination and as such a reminder that no one can ever fully go it alone.' Jackson sees that there is 'a working ethic that most of us take from theatre that, "main characters" are never autonomous but interdependently supported by others.' Later she goes on to say that this ethic 'both activates and depends upon a relational system.' This is well reinforced by those writing from contemporary and experimental theatre practice, such as Anne Bogart, who states that: 'the theatre is the only art form whose subject matter, the content, is society itself ... the theatre has to do with the interconnectedness of people.'

12. R. Sennett, in H. Nicholson, *Theatre Education and Performance*, Basingstoke, UK, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 158.

13. A. Alacovska, *From Passion to Compassion: A Caring Inquiry into Creative Work as Socially Engaged Art*, *Sociology*, Volume 54, Issue 4, August 2020, Pages 727-744

Delve Deeper #2

Academically, some performance thinkers frame openness as a distinct quality of arts and care practice. From a community arts perspective it connects with Eugene Van Erven's thinking about the relationship between empathy and openness:

*"Being open to other people's stories and predicaments is the key to this and the human capacity for empathy is crucial in this process. My hypothesis is that community art helps to build empathy across divides of all kinds and does so in the very places where these are most deeply entrenched and most painfully experienced: low income and under resourced urban and rural areas north and south."*¹⁴

From the world of Applied Theatre, Helen Nicholson and James Thompson use the word 'reflexivity' to refer to this sense of remaining open and curious. Whilst reflective practice is about being aware in the moment, thinking and trying to understand what's going on, by thinking back to 'reflect,' 'reflexivity' is about looking at your own impact and yourself in the mix. Helen Nicholson talks about reflexivity as 'an on-going process—a continual journey'¹⁵ and James Thompson describes an inevitable sense of bewilderment associated with reflexivity as applied theatre practitioners engage with, acknowledge, and never seek escape from the complexity of human relationships, attempting to move beyond what they already know. Nicholson and Thompson establish reflexivity as a process of ongoing learning about both the practice of applied theatre but also about the self and other in social contexts. Again it is useful to observe how some of the SoM learning resonates with academic theories and ideas but we bring them into the discussion here to demonstrate how 20 Stories High is addressing and progressing them through practice.

14. <https://eugenevanerven.wordpress.com/2021/01/12/empathy-and-community-arts-1/>

15. H. Nicholson, *Applied Drama*, Basingstoke, UK, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 166.

State of Mind

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