Making Knowledge Matter: Supporting youth mental health through soothing imagery

Presenter: Professor Stella Chan

Host: Dr Hannah Vickery

webinars@charliewaller.org



About us

Charlie Waller was a dynamic, funny, kind and successful young man, with a close and loving family. To the outside world, he had everything to live for. Yet in 1997, at the age of 28, Charlie died by suicide. He was suffering from depression.

In response to this tragedy, his family founded the Charlie Waller Trust, to open up the conversation around depression initially, and to ensure that young people are able to understand and look after their mental health and to spot the signs in others.

Charlie sits at the heart of our story, our vision and our purpose.

Evidence based offer



Positive

We take a positive approach to mental health. We focus on prevention and early intervention and recognise the importance of offering hope.



Proven

Our consultancy, training and resources are all based on sound clinical evidence.



Practical

We give people practical strategies and tools to care for their mental health, and to support others in doing so.

Let us introduce ourselves…

Dr Hannah Vickery

CEO of the Charlie Waller Trust

Previously worked as a Clinical Psychologist within Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and as Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Reading

Prof. Stella Chan

Charlie Waller Chair in Evidence-based Psychological Treatment at the University of Reading

Fellow of Royal Society of Edinburgh (Scotland's National Academy)
Fellow of British Psychological Society
Winner of various Public Engagement and Research Impact Awards

Plan for today

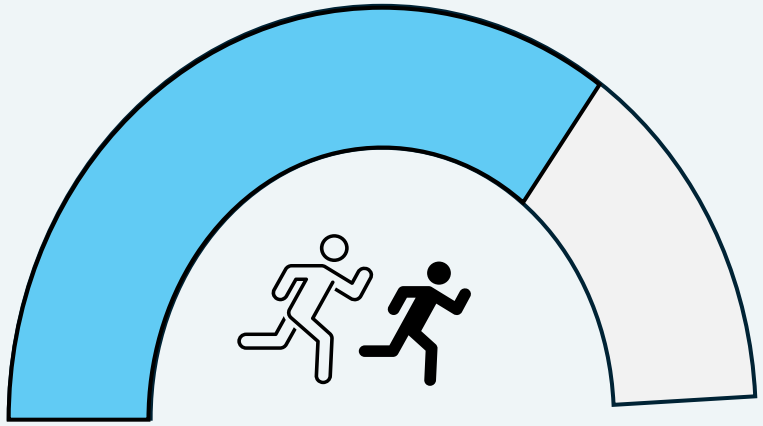
- The research behind Project Soothe
- How soothing imagery can support young people's mental health
- Practical ways to use soothing images
- Q&A with Hannah Vickery





MQ Mental health research

75% of mental illness **begins** before the age of 18



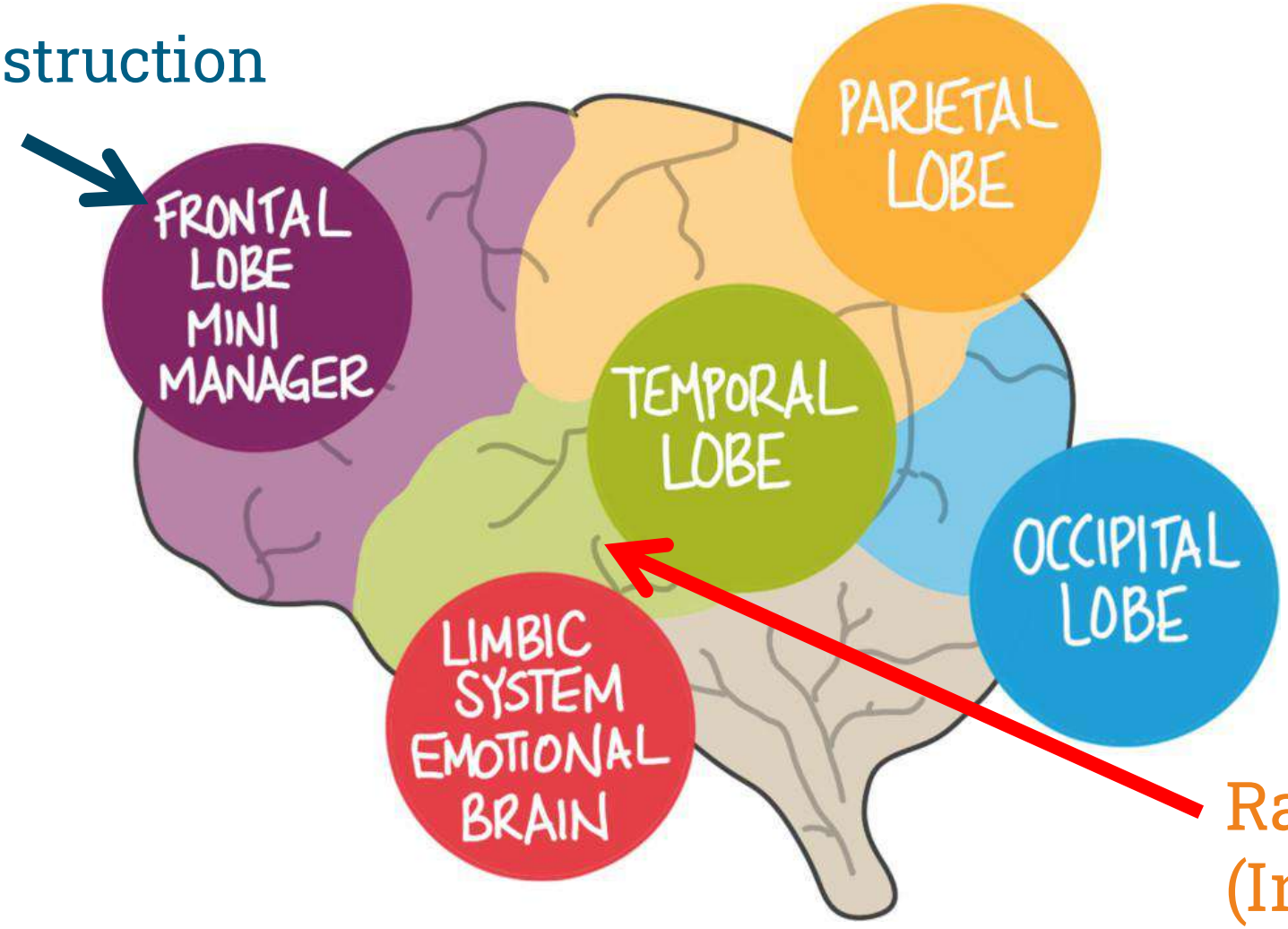
But only 26% of mental health research focuses on young people

- Depression and anxiety are among the most common
- Suicide is the leading cause of mortality among youth.
- Neurodivergent children being particularly vulnerable.
- Good news: Treatment is better than no treatment
- Bad News: Only ~30-40% of people reach full recovery.
- Treatment effectiveness has remained largely unchanged over the past decade

Centre for Mental Health
Realising a better future

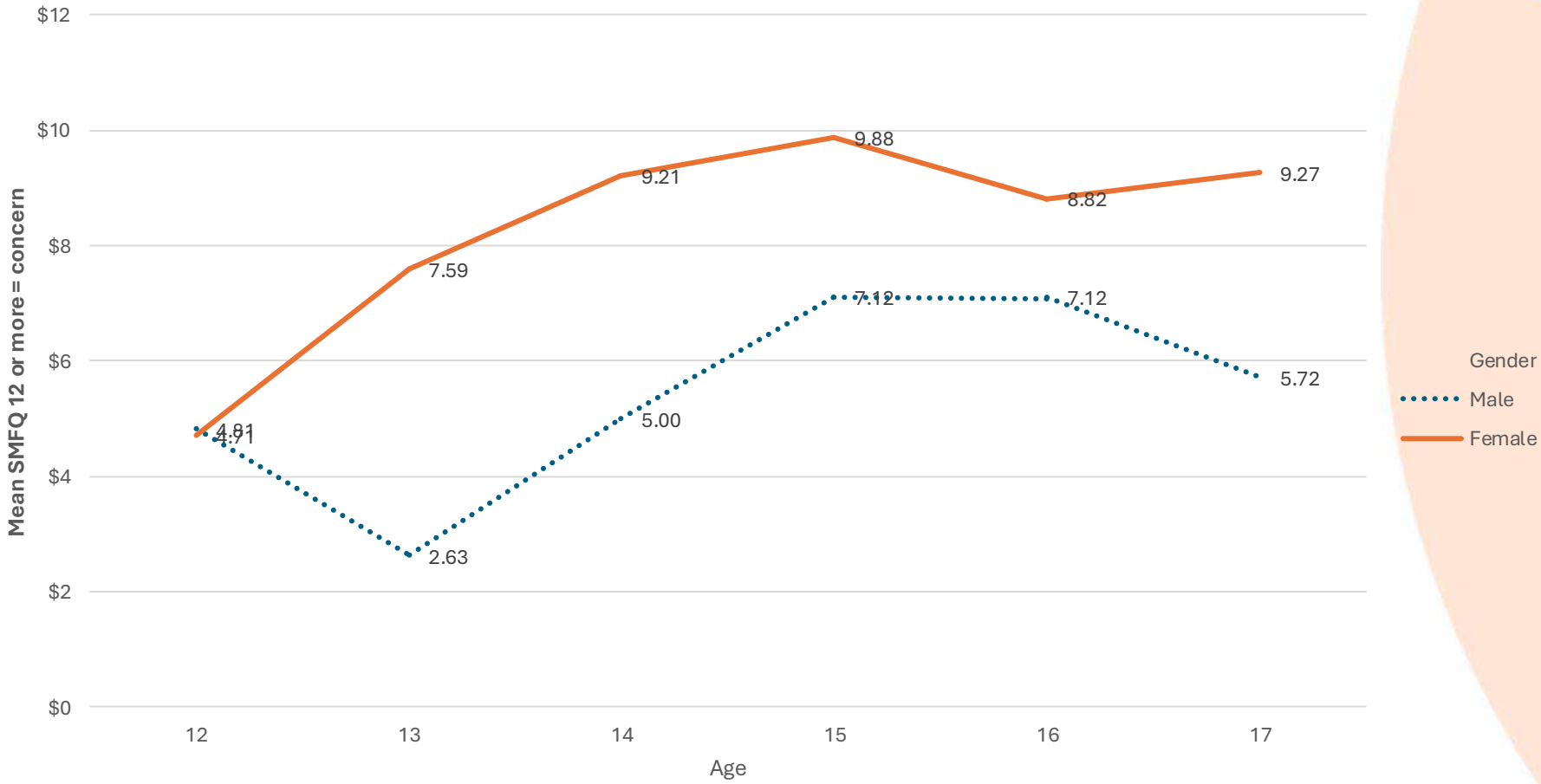
Teenage Brain is different (not difficult!)

Under construction



Raw Emotions (Innate)

Increase in Depressive Symptoms and Gender Differences (N=425)



Tariq et al 2024 Wellcome Open Research

Depression, Anxiety and Wellbeing

Biological & Lifestyle

- Sleep (Actigraph)
- Cortisol ('stress hormone')
- Physical Activity
- Smoking, Alcohol Substance use
- Dietary habits
- Eating Attitudes

Social & Interpersonal

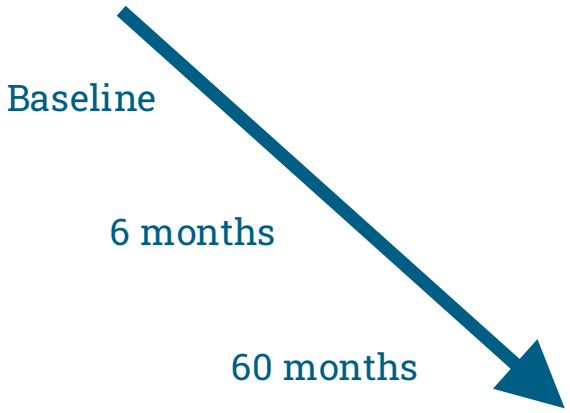
- Parental support
- Social groups
- Social media use
- External shame
- Bullying and Cyberbullying

Demographics

- Age
- Gender
- Socio-economic
- Neuroticism
- Family History

Cognitive & Psychological

- Rumination
- Dysfunctional attitudes
- Neural-cognitive biases
- **Stress**
- Resilience



Stigma delays help-seeking by 10 years



Ten-month analysis of Reddit forums also highlighted public hostility and internalised stigma in adolescents.
Dixon-Ward & Chan, 2021. British Journal of Clinical Psychology

Non-clinical interventions are key

- Timing: Early and preventative
- Approach: Non-stigmatising and engaging
- Target root problems: Stress reduction
- Shared responsibility: Individual coping skills vs environmental stressors

Photographs for Wellbeing

PROJECT Soothe

ProjectSoothe

/projectsoothe

ProjectSoothe.com

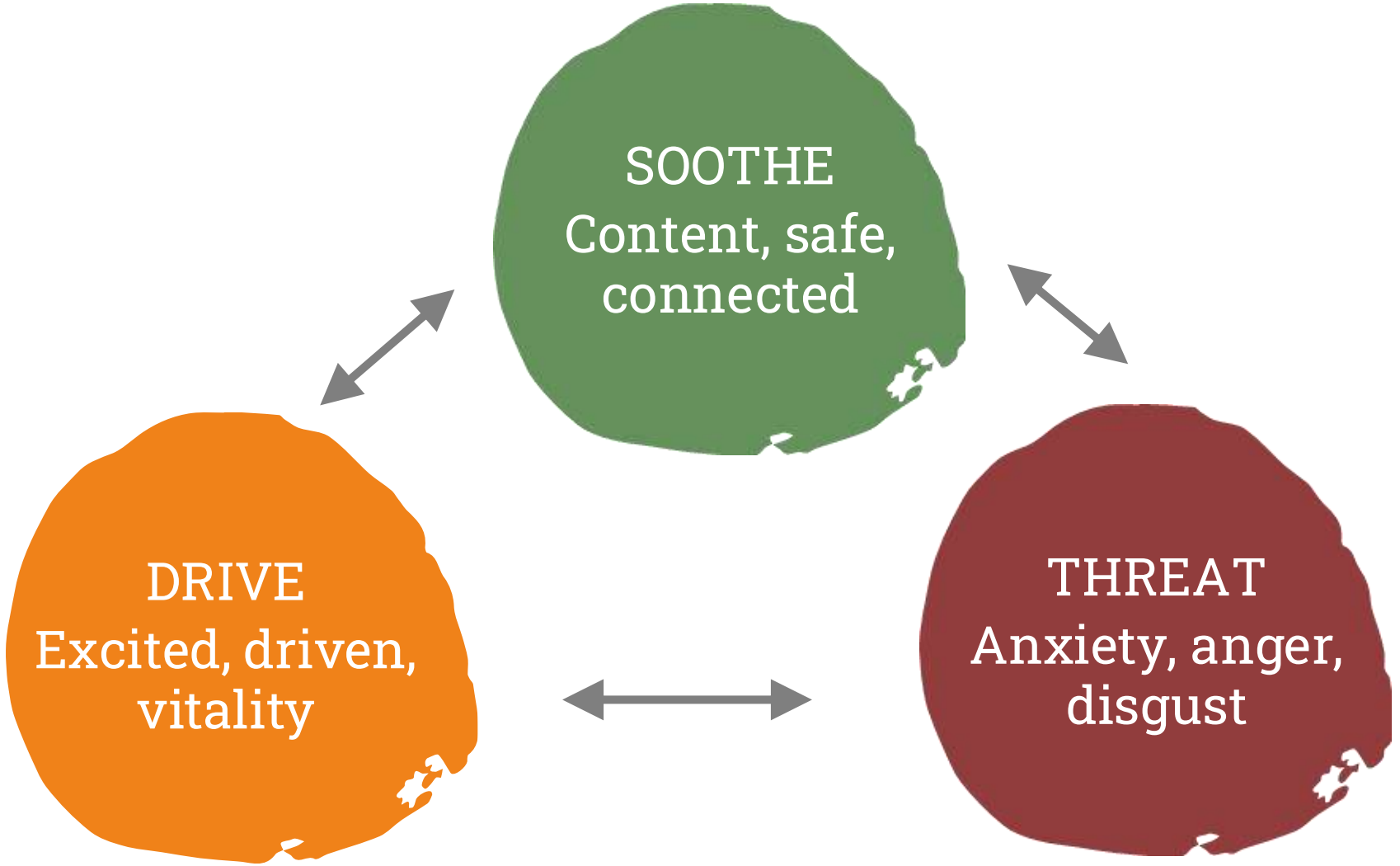
wellcome

The Leverhulme Trust

BRITISH ACADEMY
for the humanities and social sciences

E·S·R·C ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH

Concept of Soothe in Compassion-Focused Therapy



Everyday Experience of ‘Soothe’

From responses by 176 participants: ‘Soothe’ is related to:

- Interconnected states of feeling calm, relaxed, at ease, constituted by the feeling of inner peace, safeness and contentment;
- Physical sensations;
- Nature-connectedness;
- Both solitude and social affiliation

Mok et al., 2019. Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice

Increasing use of mental imagery in Psychotherapy

But some people just couldn't, or it's not 'safe' for them to create mental imagery.





My Personal Inspiration

When your hobby is good for you – it becomes your lifelong ‘therapist’

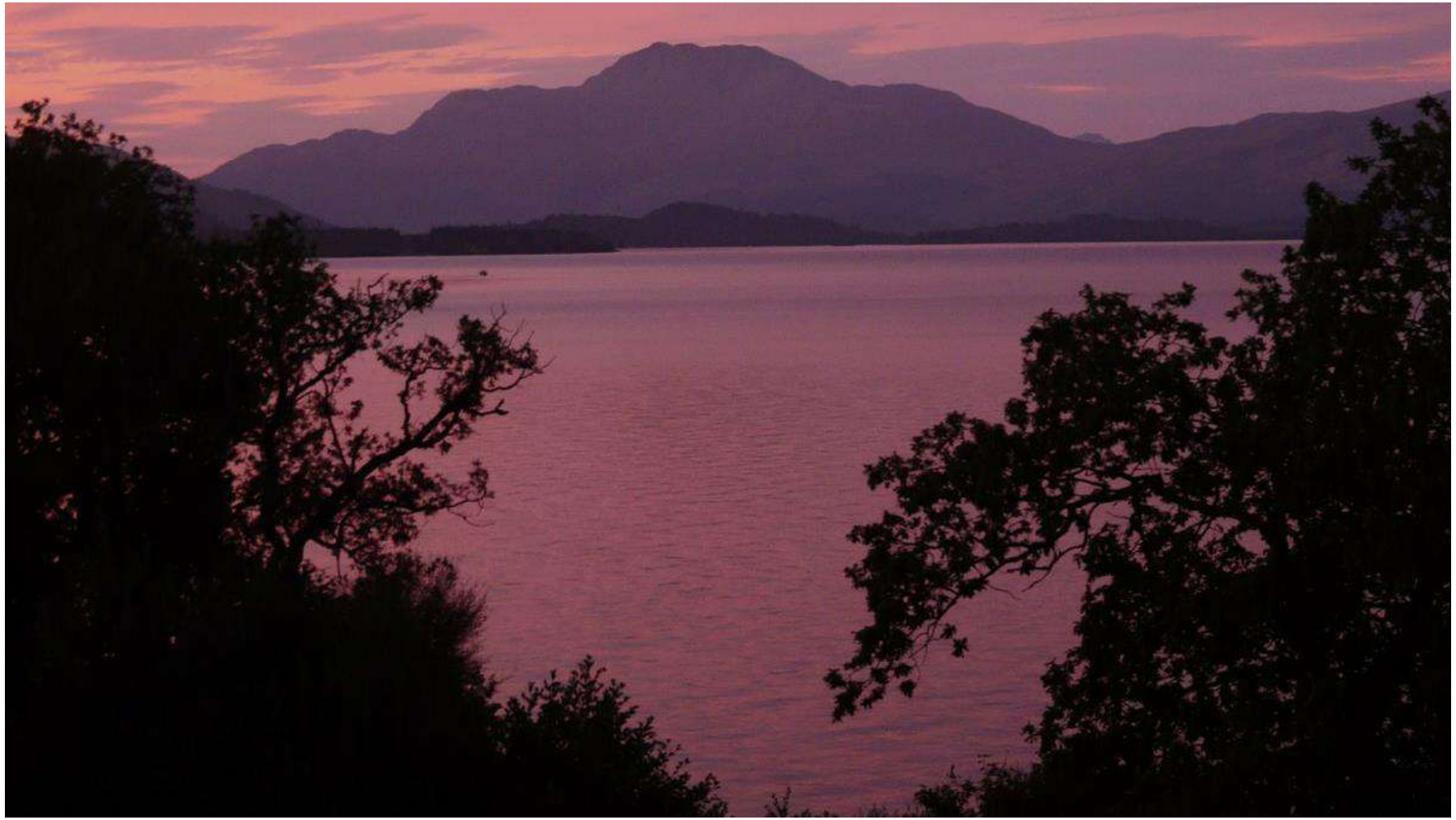


What have we collected over the last decade?



- More than 800 images submitted from or rated by over 40 countries
- Soothing or not depends on image content and psychological processes

MacLennan et al., 2024 Wellcome Open Research; Allan et al., 2024 Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice



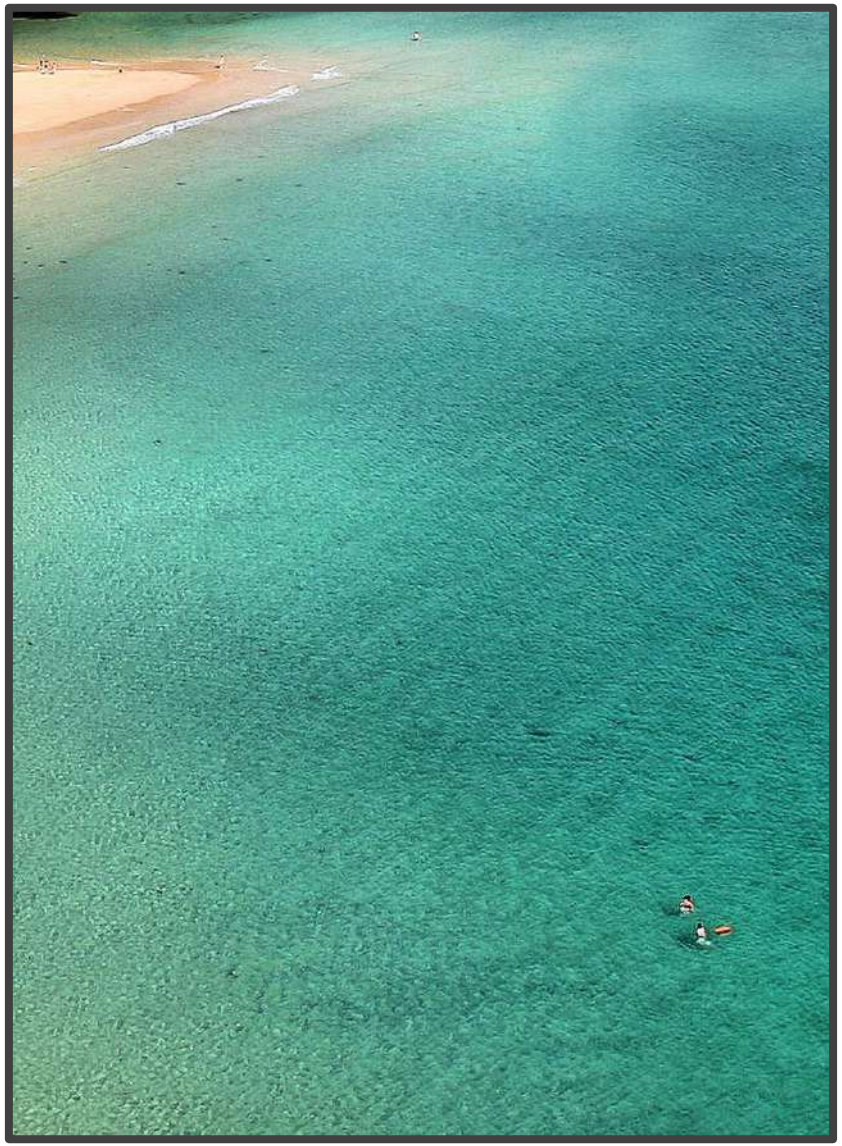




Soothing

"I love the colours and there's textures in the water and that's nice too."

"You can see what's happening on the beach while you're away from it all."



Not Soothing

"The people swimming are so far out. It creeps me out!"

"I think about all the things that could go under me..."

Soothing or not soothing?

Psychology and Psychotherapy
Theory, Research and Practice
the british psychological society

RESEARCH ARTICLE | Open Access

A qualitative exploration of change processes relevant to compassion-focused therapy that occurs when people view both soothing and non-soothing images

Stephanie Allan, Chris Morea, Keren MacLennan, Matthias Schwannauer, Angela L. McLaughlin, Netta Weinstein, Stella W. Y. Chan

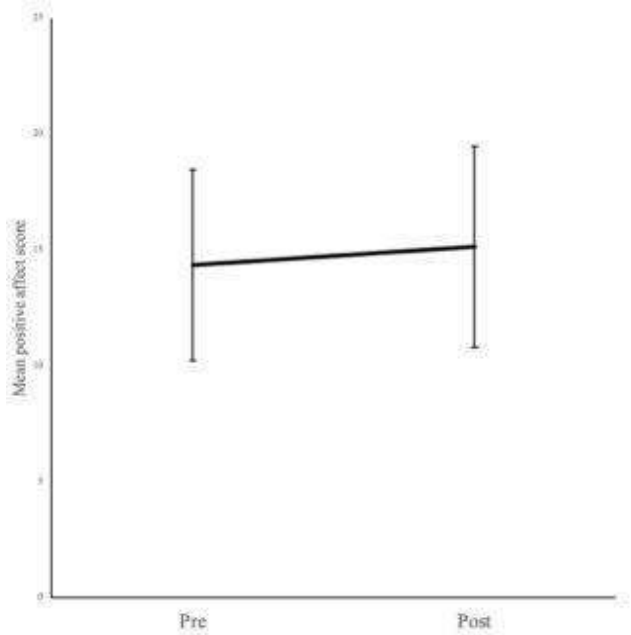
First published: 20 January 2025 | https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.12566

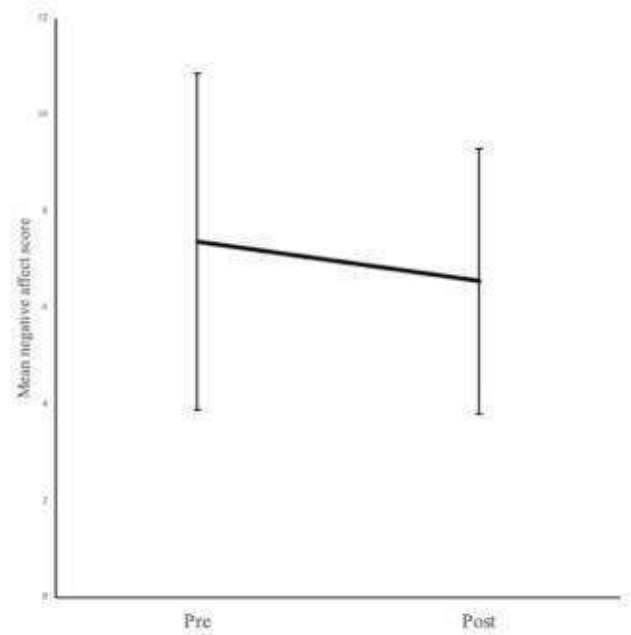
Two themes:

- Image Content (e.g. Nature)
- Cognitive-Psychological Process (e.g. Memory)

Mood Improvement After Viewing 25 Images







MacLennan et al., 2023. Wellcome Open Research

Key Findings

1. Replicated in five studies across different populations (adults, adolescents, autistic individuals, carers, and Chinese university students).
2. More mood improvement seen in those with more severe mood symptoms (really promising news).
3. Adding music or literary quotes didn't boost the benefits, but mindful breathing exercises may help.
4. Future studies will focus on longer term effects.

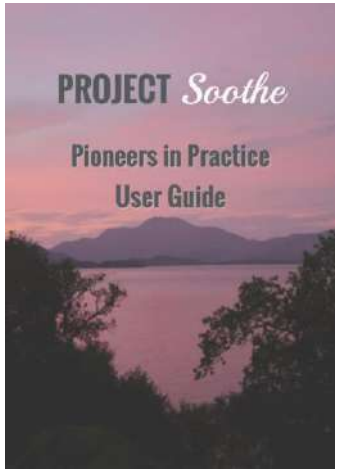
MacLennan et al., 2023; 2024, Wellcome Open Research; Allan et al., 2024 Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice; Tariq et al., 2025. Current Psychology; Witten et al., 2022. British Journal of Clinical Psychology; Ryynanen et al., 2024. Wellcome Open Research

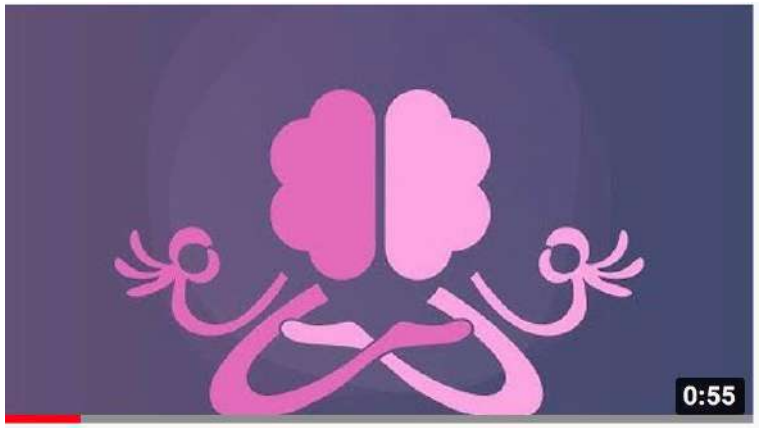
A decade of Community Partnership Projects











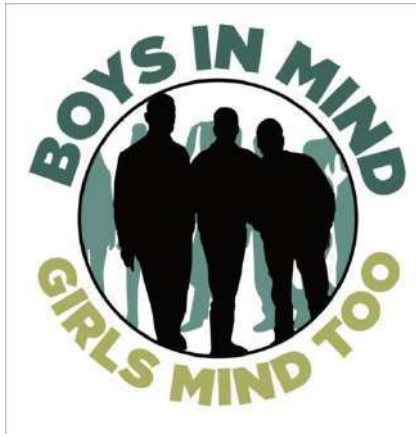


9 Teams of Young Citizen Scientists (70 CYP)











Soothing Imagery School-based Interventions

Train the Trainers model

20 Nurture Assistants piloting Project Soothe in Wokingham schools

Trauma-informed artists supporting children from refugee background at the Wokingham Resettlement Project

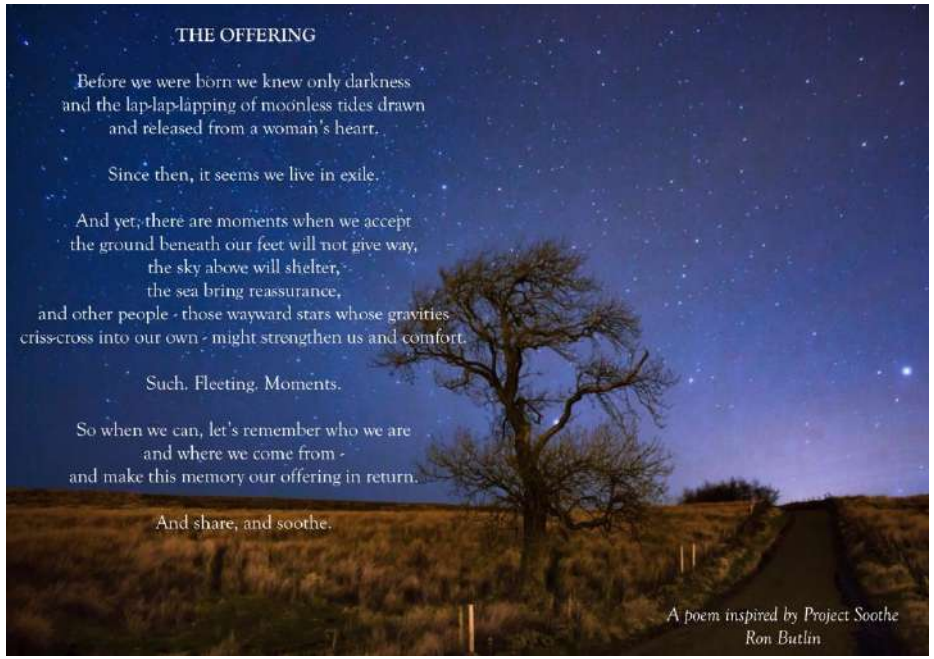
20 teachers and 100 Young Ambassadors piloting interventions in Hong Kong

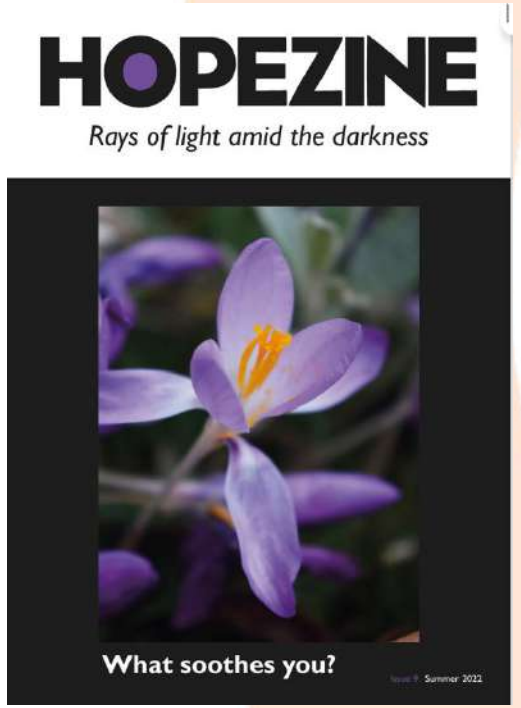
I. Creating own collection, interactive exhibition, conversation



II. Pairing with words







[Project Soothe Poem]

[Wellbeing Magazine: Hopezine]

[Project Soothe Comic Book: The Soothing Adventures of Bea]

III. For Sharing (peer support)







IV. Art & Craft





Watch the video:
Project Soothe at Combe Down school
https://youtu.be/WsalBIvkgq4?si=XOuO8SYTjdufijuP

V. Nature Connection





Key soothing areas are the Rock Garden, the Chinese Hillside, the Pond and the Edible Gardening area. Three out of four of these areas include water features.



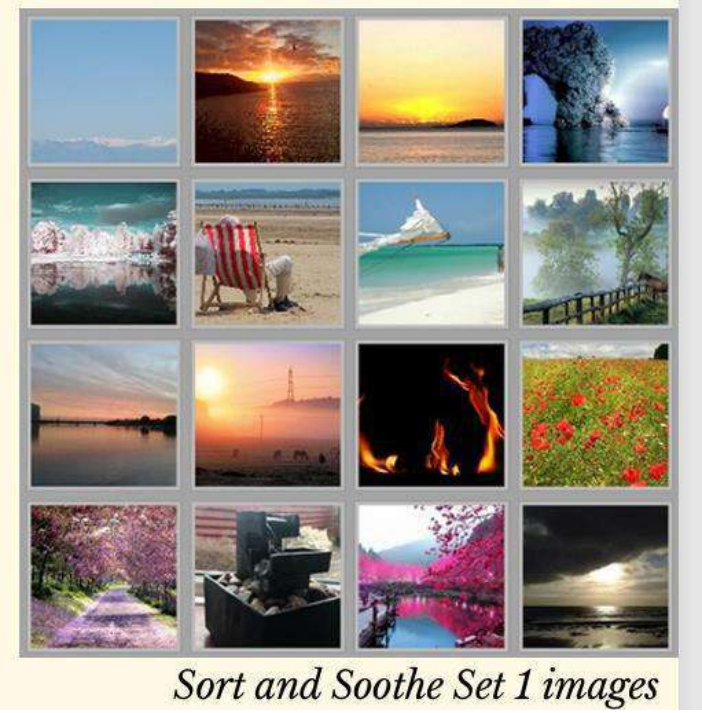
VI. Multisensory Experience

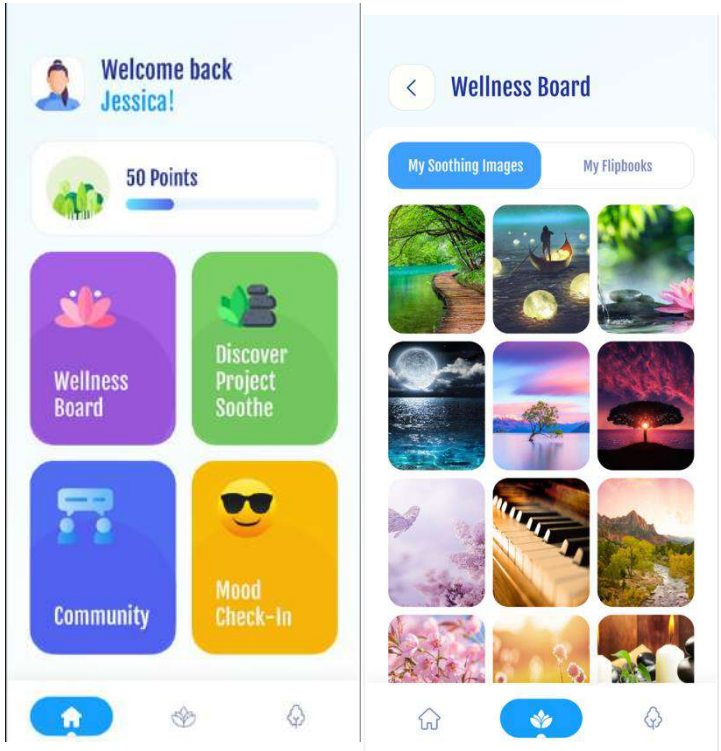
The Individual Time Out sessions will involve each young person spending 10-15 minutes in the themed room.

The theme will be: Garden, Forest, Seaside, and Summer.

The room will display Project Soothe posters, designed to soothe all five senses: sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste

VII. Gamification











Badges: Laughter/ Courage / Journalling

Activities: Positive Postie/ Fairy Feeling Forrest/ Support Signals/ Connection Campfire

Girlguiding

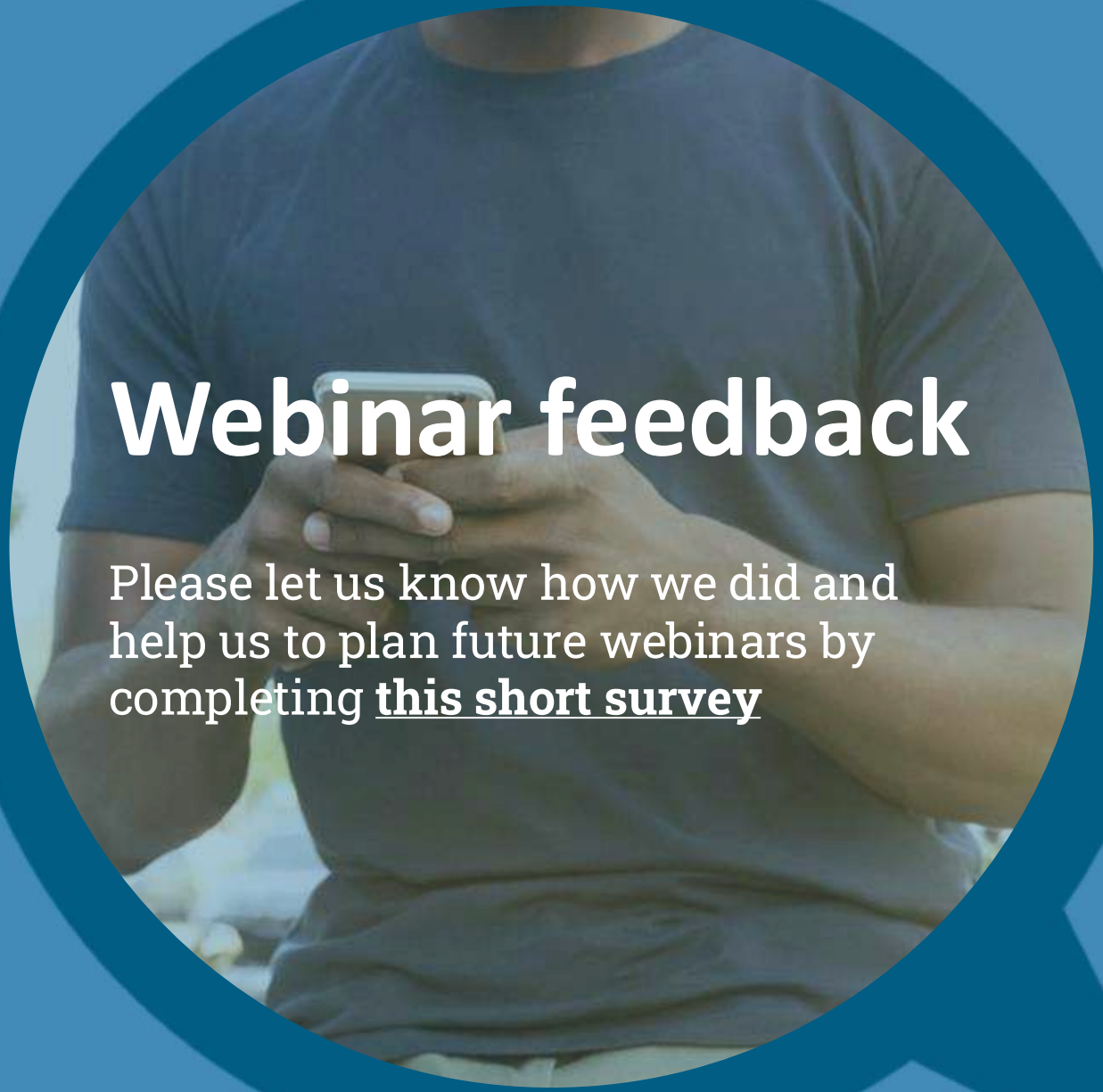
Summary: Project Soothe Users

- All ages – from primary school children to elderly with dementia
- Cross-cultural – transcending language barriers
- Lived experience of mental health or traumatic experiences
- Carers
- Professionals – mental health practitioners, teachers etc
- Neural diversity – e.g. autism
- Learning disabilities

Summary: Project Soothe applications

- Words – poems, narratives, storytelling
- From producing, receiving, to sharing
- Multi-sensory – vision, sound (music), touch and other senses
- ‘Safekeep’ –e.g. personalised album, branded ‘souvenirs’
- Physical or digital use
- Nature related e.g. forest bathing, soothing trail

There is no formula here: Give it a go and you can’t go wrong!



Webinar feedback

Please let us know how we did and help us to plan future webinars by completing **this short survey**

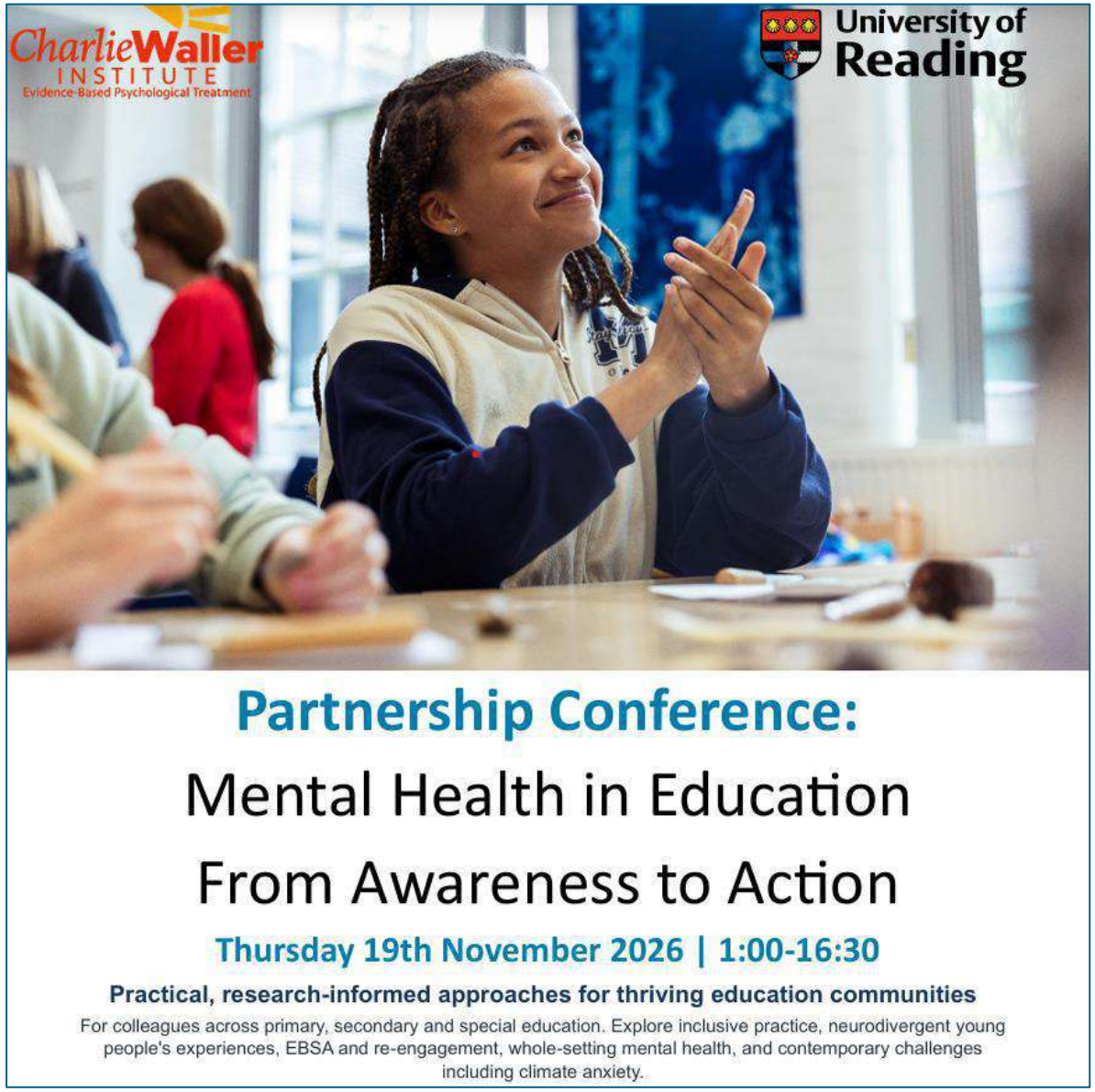
Charlie Waller

Give us your feedback

Follow-up Q&A

The Charlie Waller Trust
hello@charliewaller.org

Upcoming Event



Key websites

- Project Soothe www.projectsoothe.com
- Project Soothe for Youth https://youth.projectsoothe.com/

Other websites of interest:

- Reading Resilience Network https://research.reading.ac.uk/reading-resilience-network/
- Ways to Wellbeing Project https://research.reading.ac.uk/reading-resilience-network/project-1/
- Resilience Rucksack Project https://research.reading.ac.uk/reading-resilience-network/resilience-rucksack/
- Emotional Vulnerability in Adolescence (EVA) Project https://research.reading.ac.uk/reading-resilience-network/eva-study/

Key publications

Project Soothe's Pioneer in Practice User Guide, via

https://www.projectsoothe.com/category/pioneers-in-practice/

Project Soothe Young Citizen Scientists Flipboo, via https://youth.projectsoothe.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Project-Soothe-YCS-Flipbook-3.pdff

Resilience Rucksack Flipbook, via https://research.reading.ac.uk/reading-resilience-network/resilience-rucksack/

Help us continue supporting young people

Your support allows us to provide vital resources, guidance, and opportunities and build a brighter future.



To donate £10 text
CWT to **70085**



To donate online visit
charliewaller.org/donate

Scan to make an impact

More webinars:

The Adolescent Brain: What you need to know

Wednesday 2 December 12:00 – 13:00

Previous webinars include:

- Making Knowledge Matter: Low Mood in Young People
- Making Knowledge Matter: Sleep and Mental Health
- Understanding and Managing Anxiety in Under 12s
- Supporting Children's Emotional Wellbeing
- Understanding and responding to loneliness in a changing world

Mental Health Resources

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