

“We need to create a system that allows them to keep flourishing”: Anna Kydd of The SHM Foundation on why silver-bullet solutions fail in global mental health

Holly Wise
October 9, 2025

Holly Wise: Please introduce yourself and tell me what is distinctive about your approach in the field of youth mental health. What is something that others might find surprising about your work?

Anna Kydd: My name's Anna Kydd. I'm the director of a charitable foundation called The SHM Foundation, which is the charitable arm of a consultancy firm. The connection that we have with Enlight and others is our flagship program called Ember Mental Health. I set it up seven years ago, looking at how we can support community-based mental health initiatives across the globe.

We have worked as mental health practitioners ourselves, and could see how challenging it was to scale mental health initiatives. What you're finding is that although we're talking about mental health more, we're not investing that much in mental health. The emphasis or the area that we're tending to put money into is the tech side of things and less on community and people.

There was an obsession, or there still is, in my view, with looking for the silver bullet solution: Let's find the five silver bullet solutions to the global mental health crisis. Let's heavily invest and roll them out, and we'll all be happy.

We felt that doesn't work in mental health. When you're looking at mental health, it's so contextual. It's so specific to where you come from and the communities that you're in and we strongly believe that the silver bullet solution is not an approach that one can take.

What we wanted to look at was: what does it look like to support innovation at the community level, and does innovation exist at the community-based level? What we

found out was that there's a huge amount of innovation happening. During our latest call for funding, we had over 1,800 applications of people running initiatives all over the world in their communities on mental health. Historically, they have lacked support and funding. Although stigma is reducing in some spaces, there is still stigma associated with supporting that kind of work. For instance, we work with an initiative in Madagascar that works with incarcerated youth. That's an incredibly difficult project to get funded. We're now funding that innovation and thinking about the ecosystem or the connective tissue that is needed to support an innovation at that level.

It's quite different from how we see scale in other sectors. We see scale as supporting hundreds, a thousand, if not a million, initiatives at that level.

Holly Wise: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work?

Anna Kydd: Not only are we funding initiatives that often have never been funded before, we are giving unrestricted funding and flexible funding.

Having those flexible funds is really key in mental health because the needs in the communities are constantly changing. It doesn't work to say: Here are funds for only this, but not that.

We have a team of over 25 who work with every organization. My team is very interdisciplinary, so we have members in my team that are experts in measuring impact. We have people who know about social enterprises. We have graphic designers. We work with each organization to support them on their journey of where they're going next.

We're seeing that organizations are becoming a lot more robust and sustainable through our work. They have the skills to help them think about where they go next in the network and that is transferring to having an impact on the ground.

We've only just started funding this organization in Madagascar, but they now have flexible funds that are allowing them to adapt their tools. They have games, for instance, that they use in prison to help young people talk about their mental health, but in a way that's quite playful and creative.

We also have a Wellbeing Fund that we use to support the well-being of all of our initiatives. I have a head of well-being within my team who is taking time to get to know these organizations and understanding what could make a difference to them for their well-being.

What we found is that many of the people running these mental health initiatives are not looking after their own well-being. For instance, we support an initiative in Ethiopia, where the founder of the organization was always the spokesperson having to tell her story of lived experience, which is really tough sometimes. The organization was at the point of closing down because she was at burnout, essentially. She managed, through therapy provided by the Wellbeing Fund, to articulate to her team that that was tough,

and could other people sometimes speak up or talk? That has allowed the organization to become a lot more robust.

Holly Wise: What is the process they go through to access the Wellbeing Fund?

Anna Kydd: Everyone has access to the Wellbeing Fund. They spend some time with us talking about some of the things that they're going through, and then we give them a menu of options of things that could work for them.

Holly Wise: Take me back to the beginning of when the Wellbeing Fund was conceived and how it came to be.

Anna Kydd: We set it up in COVID. We had a moment as a team where we were like, "Oh my God, you can see how stretched people are," because suddenly the workload had doubled for many of the organizations we were working with. COVID was a time where it felt more comfortable to innovate.

The first thing we did was give everyone a small stipend and say, "We just want you, as a team, to use it towards your well-being." That was fascinating because people used it in such different ways. There are people who used it for subscriptions to salsa classes. There are people who bought chess sets, people who bought gym equipment. Team lunches became quite a thing. It was such a boost to the morale of those that we were working with.

We started to grow and we started to offer therapies and methodologies that we are working with.

We work, for instance, with a woman in South Africa who's developed an art therapy technique called Tree of Life. It's become quite famous. You essentially draw a tree, and you talk about your roots and where you've come from, but then your future direction. She developed it for orphans living with HIV. She knew that they weren't able to have one-to-one therapy, perhaps, in the way that other systems may. She realized that this works really well with teams and lots of different groups.

We worked with her to adapt it online, and now she's delivering Tree of Life workshops to our other partners. She now comes to deliver Tree of Life therapy in London that gives her an income to keep her initiative running. Now, well-being is more than just providing well-being to those teams. It's actually become a potential income generator for those partners.

Holly Wise: Can you describe something that you've tried in your organization that didn't work, but that you learned from?

Anna Kydd: We manage a pooled fund, and we have different funders that contribute to the fund. We've learned not to just look for the money, but really the funders have to be incredibly aligned to our values and our philosophy to philanthropy.

When we say trust-based, we really mean trust-based. Sometimes I come across people using the word trust-based, but it's actually incredibly restricted. That's a learning from us: take our time, even if it means that perhaps our fund is not \$20 million.

Holly Wise: What is at risk if the values aren't aligned?

Anna Kydd: What is at risk is that we become funders we have critiqued, which are stopping innovation from flourishing. When you have these very restricted funds, it can be incredibly challenging for small organizations. They're seen as risky because some of the things that have been put in place around due diligence don't work for this sector.

We will come across funders who will say: We would love to support this, but these organizations, they have to have an income of X. There's no way that any of these organizations are going to have that income. You are really limiting where you can fund.

Holly Wise: How big, typically, are the teams that you're working with?

Anna Kydd: They can range from 10 to 30.

Holly Wise: Aside from funding, are there any challenges that you've faced in the past or are currently facing that you haven't been able to solve yet?

Anna Kydd: People still struggle with my narrative that we need to support a huge amount of innovation. It's not something that people feel comfortable with. It seems to be ingrained in the way that we've looked at the social sectors and innovation — you need to find the five solutions and scale. People ask: How would you support so much innovation? It's too risky, too complicated.

For me, I'm doing it. This year we're supporting about 70 initiatives on what's quite a small fund. People find it really hard to get their head around. The challenge that I have is that people put too much energy into finding innovation, but they don't often have the expertise around finding the innovation.

What we need to be doing in this sector is putting our energy into the ecosystem and the connective tissue. Innovation is happening in silo and everyone is isolated. If you are someone running a mental health initiative in your community, you don't have the time, the energy, the capacity to connect with another innovation.

There's a huge amount that could be done if people started to connect. Things could really flourish.

I mentioned that 1,800 organizations applied to us. I took the decision to interview 900 and we found out so much.

What we found out was, for instance, in art therapy, there's incredible stuff happening in art therapy globally, but they don't know each other. Once you start connecting people, all sorts of incredible things can happen, but there's no support for that.

I find it hard to tell that story because we're doing this work, but not many other people are. We are generally the only organization I know doing this work. It's exciting, but when you don't have other people on that journey with you, it's quite hard to get others to understand what you're doing.

Holly Wise: What do you think is needed to change the way people think about youth mental health?

Anna Kydd: I still feel like people think community work is a nice-to-have, not the real solution. It comes from the way that capitalists think. In mental health, it feels like you need to have highly trained people who've gone to university in psychology, who come up with a solution that's in an app.

We have this initiative in Mozambique where the suicide rate is incredibly high for young people. They started to do art together, a group of young people, and now it's become huge.

It's a warehouse, and every month they come together and do music, and they do visual arts. Young people are getting more connected.

Despite lots of barriers, they've managed to set something up, and they're doing it in their community. We need to support that. We need to create a system that allows them to keep flourishing.

Another barrier is the larger funders in this space are looking for that one instrument to measure impact rather than asking communities: How do you measure impact?

It feels quite colonial, again. What you find is that, of course, they're measuring impact. There are ways, and techniques, and tools that people are using to measure impact, but no one's asking them that. They may not be writing it in a report, but they need to know if their initiatives are working.

Holly Wise: Tell me more about who still sees community work as a nice-to-have.

Anna Kydd: Funders, governments, and the W-H-O's of the world. It also comes because of impact. There's a huge concern about how you measure impact in this space. There's an obsession with trying to find the one or two instruments for measuring impact, which is clearly, again, never going to work, because the range and the diversity of mental health conditions is so contextually specific.

Holly Wise: I'm sure you and your organization think about impact as well, and I'm curious how you measure it within the foundation.

Anna Kydd: We start by asking every organization how they would like to measure impact. It's fascinating we seem to be literally the only ones doing that in this space.

What we're finding is that obviously people are using a diversity of approaches, and we help them with that.

We might apply an instrument if it feels like the right thing to do, and that's something they want to do. Sometimes they want to get in a journal article because it helps them with prestige, for instance. There's little investment in universities in the global mental health space, so you are seeing the same things being mentioned in journals because no one's looking at an art therapy technique. There isn't the investment or the research to evaluate the art therapy technique.

Holly Wise: What insights or teachable lessons can be shared from your work that others could use?

Anna Kydd: I'd love to be able to show that there are ways of measuring impact that allow funders to feel "safe" or know that there is accountability, but doing it from what makes sense to the communities that we're working with. That is a learning and an insight that would be really great to show others.

Our Wellbeing Fund has been really a massive learning. It now seems so obvious to us that if you're going to work with an organization on so many other levels, you need to take into account their well-being. For so long, we haven't been doing enough to support the supporters, and that's really instrumental.

Holly Wise: How do you define current attitudes towards youth mental health, and have you seen those attitudes shift in your community?

Anna Kydd: We had a huge number of applications from youth-based organizations. It seems like it's on the rise. There's a huge amount happening at the community level. I feel that people are definitely understanding the need to support youth. There are lots of different methodologies and tools that are being used, which is really exciting. There's so much that happens when you give young people agency to develop innovation that works for them.

We work with an initiative in Kenya that is doing quite a lot of work in universities, and it's been fascinating what they do. They use theater a lot. They play out scenarios, and then the audience takes part in thinking about what should happen and the storyline. I went to visit there two years ago, and the whole theater was packed. There were just so many young people talking and getting involved.

There is a perception that youth mental health is all very depressing, it's all pretty difficult, but what you see globally is some fascinating upbeat initiatives. A lot of people are using music and theater to support people's mental health. It's a really exciting area.

Holly Wise: What I'm hearing you say is that you are seeing this ramping up in the meeting of the moment. What do you think is contributing to that change?

Anna Kydd: There's a lot of youth with a huge amount of energy that are just like, "You know what? There isn't something for us, so we are going to create it."

They are coming across a lot of barriers, like, no one's going to fund them, or it will take a long time for them to be funded, a lot of them have day jobs and are having to do something else, but they just really believe in it. They're talking about mental health a lot more, and they want to do something to support each other.

You are seeing pockets in some countries where there's a huge amount happening.

For instance, in Kenya, there's so much going on. I don't know whether that's maybe people talking to others but there's something contagious there, something's going on.

Holly Wise: The Youth Mental Wellbeing Co-Lab has three focus areas: building young people's resilience, giving young people agency, and helping young people build a sense of community and belonging. Is there any emerging work in this field that excites you?

Anna Kydd: The thing that's exciting for me is the connective tissue pieces — joining the dots, bringing people together. When you do that, so much more is going to happen. We are just piloting at the moment, but we are doing reflective sessions for people. Because we've done all these interviews, we can start to see these themes.

At the moment, we've got a few reflective sessions in Africa for youth, for LGBTQ+, and we're creating a safe space for them. They've had a couple of sessions, and you can see they've got ideas of things they can do together. That's where there's a lot more that can be done, and it's very exciting going out of this silo way of working.

Holly Wise: How does your organization collaborate with other organizations who are doing the same or similar work in these focus areas?

Anna Kydd: I'm really keen to collaborate because we're a small organization and there's only a certain amount we can do. There are a number of foundations that have a similar philosophy to us. There's one based in Africa called the Siegel Family Foundation. There's also the Roddenberry Foundation, where it's quite similar. We've found ways to support each other or work with each other, but I would like to do more on that.

I feel at the moment we know more about what's happening at the community-based level than anyone else right now globally. It's also a challenge because no one else is getting what we are getting.

Holly Wise: You mentioned these 900 interviews that you've done. How do you see yourself bridging the gap between organizations and connecting people? How do you see that functioning in the ecosystem?

Anna Kydd: We try not to make the application process too complicated for them because we know they're so stretched, and we'd normally have 200 applications.

Then suddenly this thing happened and it was 1,800. Then I was like, "Well, we can't go back on what we said. This is what we said we were going to do." Then I thought, "Well,

let's turn it into a learning for us to actually really understand what's going on.” We changed our timelines, and we took six months to interview 900 organizations.

We have this really rich database of qualitative interviews. We are turning them into an insights report with some key findings of what we found out. We're also creating a film about what people are proud of. It's quite an upbeat film. It's the last question that we ask people and their eyes light up. It's just amazing.

We're also writing an academic piece to try and get a bit more of the narrative out that innovation exists. Stop looking. Start funding it and start working on the ecosystem.

Doing those 900 interviews, it was the biggest pleasure. It was just like being in all these people's living rooms, hearing what people are doing — it gives you hope, it gives you so much hope. I feel so lucky to have had that experience. It's about getting people to know about them. That would make everyone's lives better.

Holly Wise: How do you hear from and incorporate youth voices in shaping your work? How do they talk to you?

Anna Kydd: We're working actively on things together. Every week, I'm working with a team on their strategy, on creating a brand for them. We're working in every way. Also, some of my team are young people themselves.

Holly Wise: How do they know that your organization exists?

Anna Kydd: I still don't quite understand how so many people applied to us. It was accessible and easy to apply to us. It was literally three questions that people had to answer to apply to us because we put a lot of emphasis on the interview. We get a lot from talking to people, and we talk to them as a team.

My team is global. We work in different languages. That also was good. Our communication was quite clear. People, apparently, shared it quite a lot on WhatsApp groups. It got around that way.

Holly Wise: Tell me about your decision to make this process so simplified, and about those three questions.

Anna Kydd: We knew we needed to make it simple. For one, we didn't want people to spend too much time applying to us because we honor their time. It is really important that it's us that puts the energy on understanding them and doing a lot of active listening.

The first stage of our funding is always mentorship and funding.

We're getting to know those organizations through mentoring and working with them every week. By the end of that year, we can be much, much clearer about whether we should go for larger investments with them.

We didn't want a restricted, very clear budget, because most of the organizations we know are constantly having to adapt. It was more about: we trust you as an organization. If tomorrow an earthquake happens and you have to adapt to it to support that community, we want you to be able to do that.

The questions in the application were around: how would support from us help them in their journey? What are the challenges that they're facing? Can they explain why they are community-based and what led them to set up what they are doing? We are looking at things that are set up in communities, not methodologies that have come and been imposed on a community.

Holly Wise: Are there any resources that you have found useful as you're doing your work?

Anna Kydd: Some academic work. For instance, this academic we work with named Professor Rochelle Burgess. She's a Professor of Global Mental Health at University College London. She's done a lot on what community means and why we disregard community when it comes to mental health. That's been quite helpful for our thinking.

Holly Wise: What do you think is missing from the conversation about youth mental health? Is there a question that the Co-Lab should be asking at this moment?

Anna Kydd: It's absolutely amazing what the Co-Lab's done. It was a breath of fresh air to come across it and to be part of it. What is missing is more of the Co-Labs like this, because this is exactly what's needed, but there isn't much else like that. What is missing is more people coming in and taking that approach, because if more people did that, we would really get much, much further in the crisis that we are facing with youth mental health.

Holly Wise: What do you wish that more people were talking about in this space?

Anna Kydd: I wish people would be talking more about investing in a diversity of solutions, not just a few.

Holly Wise: What does community-based mental health mean to you? How do you define that?

Anna Kydd: It's led by people in the community for their community, and giving them agency and trust that they know how best to support their community.

Holly Wise: Is there something that we have not talked about today that you think is important for this conversation?

Anna Kydd: For me, it would be amazing to find ways to highlight more of this work in a way that people get and understand, and to get that narrative out about the ecosystem that's needed for this kind of thing to flourish.

Holly Wise: Thanks so much.

Holly Wise is a two-time Fulbright-Nehru Teaching Scholar with extensive experience in solutions journalism and academia. She has held multiple roles at the Solutions Journalism Network, including its first director of journalism school engagement and later its first program director. She is a certified leadership and cross-cultural coach, based in Bengaluru, India. She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and a master's in mass communication from Murray State University.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*