Final Project Report

April 2019 - Sep 2021

Prepared by: Sangath, India
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Date: December 2021

mann mela

www.mannmela.in

Sangath — An initiative by

IT'S OK TO TALK

QUICKSAND — Designed by

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About our project

This project, titled 'Mann Mela' (festival of the mind), aimed to produce a novel youth-friendly mental health museum co-designed with young people. The museum used digital media and storytelling to highlight the social and cultural causes of mental health problems for youth in India and increase their awareness about mental health and help-seeking. Although originally conceptualised as an interactive digital museum traveling to different parts of India, the project was modified to deliver the same content online due to the COVID-19 pandemic which coincided with the project timelines.

Mann Mela comprises a bi-lingual web-based museum of young people's mental health experiences through interactive multimedia formats, psychoeducational materials in video and written format, and a podcast featuring young people's stories.

Our strategy

Sharing lived experiences

The motto *"tell your story"* is foundational to Mann Mela's strategy to addressing stigma and shame associated with poor mental health at an individual and community level. Sharing our own experiences is closely linked with building connectedness, hope, identity and finding meaning and empowerment. Our stories have the potential to encourage others and let them know they are not alone.

Given the context of widespread stigma and discrimination related to mental health problems, the process of handling difficulties ranging from stress or anxiety to suicide or self-harm, relating to others, to making important life choices, are often best illustrated through people's own stories of coping, building resilience, and recovery. Mann Mela comprises nine distinct stories that demonstrate the deeply intersectional nature of young people's mental health outcomes and how these are defined by the interaction of complex biological, psychological and social factors including support systems, community norms, intimate relationships, gender and sexuality. In addition to stories, a series of psycho-educational content was developed as illustrated handouts and videos to bring everyday mental health problems to life.

We identified multimedia formats that young people felt were culturally sensitive and contextually relevant. We did this through:

Carrying out extensive research on best practices related to co-design with youth and identifying the most suitable media to help build awareness about young people's mental health in India.

Conducting human-centered design activities through participatory workshops and consultations with 61 young people and 38 experts to learn from their experiences and expertise.

Conducting prototype user-testing sessions with youth to ensure that media were acceptable and engaging to youth and to make refinements based on youth feedback.

Working with young people on outreach to conduct activities online and offline.
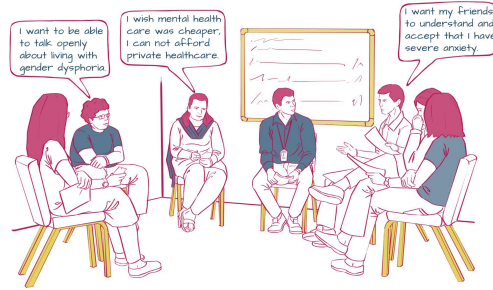
Developing a bespoke monitoring and evaluation framework to capture user engagement and feedback at each stage of the project.
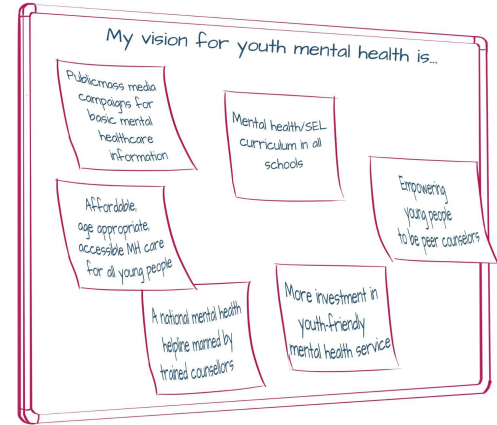
Timeline of activities

The project was implemented over a period of 30 months. During the first year we developed our strategy through conducting co-design sessions and prototyping activities. The second year focused on the design and production of Mann Mela and its dissemination.
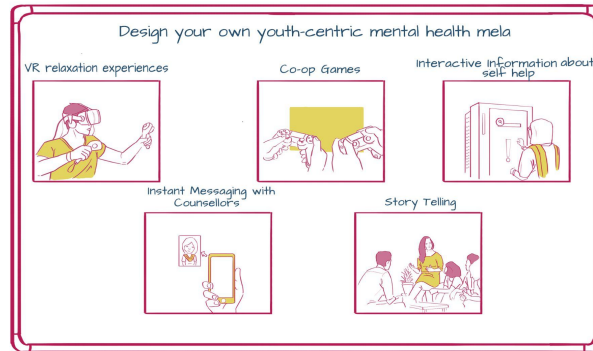

INITIAL DISCUSSIONS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

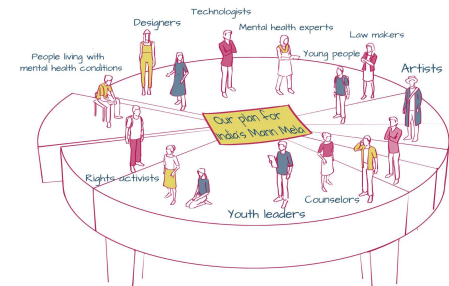I want to be able to talk openly about living with gender dysphoria

I wish mental health care was cheaper, I can not afford private healthcare.

I want my friends to understand and accept that I have severe anxiety.

THEORY OF CHANGE WORKSHOP

My vision for youth mental health is...

Public mass media campaigns for basic mental healthcare information

Mental health/SEL curriculum in all schools

Empowering young people to be peer counselors

Affordable, age appropriate, accessible MH care for all young people

A national mental health helpline manned by trained counsellors

More investment in youth-friendly mental health service

PROBLEM TREE MEETING

Let's identify causes and consequences to 'The Big Problem'

Misinformation

Lack of mental health literacy

Substance abuse

Problematic Media Representation

CO-CREATION WORKSHOPS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Design your own youth-centric mental health mela

VR relaxation experiences

Co-op Games

Interactive information about self help

Instant Messaging with Counsellors

Story Telling

BIG CONSULTATION

Designers

Technologists

Mental health experts

Law makers

People living with mental health conditions

Young people

Artists

Our plan for India's Mann Mela

Rights activists

Youth leaders

Counsellors

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Strategy and Co-design Phase

April - August 2019

Foundational work included team brainstorming sessions on the theory of change; ideation for potential museum exhibits along with an extensive landscape review on immersive media and their application in storytelling for youth mental health.

National consultation with diverse stakeholders to collect perspectives on designing and scaling an effective youth mental health public engagement project.

Co-creation workshops and interviews with 61 young people across four cities to understand their perceptions and experiences around mental health and capturing their ideas and vision of an accessible mental health museum.

Formation of a youth steering committee comprising young people with lived experience to guide the project design and development at critical junctures.

January - February 2020

September - December 2019

Pilot event at Goa Open Arts Festival as a large scale user testing to receive feedback on existing designs and understand from the audience perspectives on their experiences.

Artist Residency with 10 young artists from across the country to co-develop prototypes for the Mann Mela museum.

Prototype development and testing through a curation of low fidelity artefacts that would simulate experiences similar to the proposed Mann Mela artefacts. These were tested in three locations - Delhi, Goa, and Manipur with young people, and the project advisors.

Production and Rollout Phase

April - May 2020

Digital pivot of Mann Mela due to COVID-19: Mann Mela was planned as a travelling museum with roadshows in 5 cities of India. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of Year 2, the project had to revisit its strategy to be digital first. With extended lockdowns, restrictions on public gatherings and the potential risk to the safety of team members and young people, the project moved to an online platform only which would also help increase the outreach to a larger audience. It was planned as a mobile first website hosting art-based representations of young people's lived stories and educational resources for managing mental health.

June 2020 - July 2021

Design and co-production of contributor stories in multimedia formats

Development of psychoeducational resources in written and video formats

August 2020

Launch of Digital Mann Mela in August 2020: Monthly release of stories and psychoeducational materials on their development

September 2021

'Hope through action' online festival: Two-day online festival organised to close the project.

Overview of activities

Year 1: Strategy and co-design

Identifying priority areas and themes for Mann Mela:
During the inception of the project in April 2019, the team conducted a 'Theory of Change' workshop to identify key challenges and to define priority areas for Mann Mela activities. The workshop resulted in the following identified themes for Mann Mela to focus on —

- Increasing youth awareness about mental health
- Creating spaces for open conversations to reduce stigma

Scoping research:
Scoping research was an ongoing activity throughout the project. The team conducted scoping activities through desk-based research, consultations and workshops with youth to identify similar existing projects and innovative public engagement initiatives from across the world. This research helped inform the tone, design, and formats for Mann Mela. Our team found that interactive media were very limited, especially within the Indian context or in other low-and-middle-income countries — and this was identified as a gap that the Mann Mela project could potentially contribute to.

National Consultation (2019):

A multistakeholder national consultation was conducted on 31st May 2019 in New Delhi with 38 participants from across the country. Participants included mental health experts, young people, media professionals, new and digital media experts, therapists, researchers, and people with lived experience. The objective of the consultation was to identify key focus areas for the project, barriers and enablers to youth participation; and stakeholders to involve in design and development of the project.

Co-design with young people:

To co-create Mann Mela and ensure diverse voices were included in our research, we hosted co-design workshops over May - September 2019 in five Indian cities — New Delhi, Goa, Bhopal, Imphal and Ahmedabad — to better understand the mental health experiences and needs of the young people in India. Through the course of all the co-design workshops the research team met with more than 61 young people across varying ages, genders, and socio-economic classes. The team found that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to address young people's mental health needs would not adequately represent the diversity of Indian culture.

Formation of Youth Steering Committee (YSC) (2019):

We recruited a YSC comprising seven members aged 14-24 years who identified as having a lived experience of mental health difficulties. The YSC was recruited at the start of the project to work closely with the Mann Mela team and provide insights and feedback on the strategy, media resources and awareness materials.

User testing with young people and project advisors (2019):

Upon creating the first set of Mann Mela experiences, the research team hosted user-testing sessions with young people in New Delhi; Aldona, Goa; and Imphal, Manipur — to test the validity, design, tone, content of the experience created. This process helped the design team get feedback and develop iterations on the prototypes created - to represent what the target audience wanted from such experiences.

"Design for Mental Health" Artist in Residence Programme (2020):

To co-develop Mann Mela experiences with young people with lived experience and young artists, our team hosted 'Design For Mental Health', a three-day arts and new media residency in January 2020.

The residency was attended by 10 young artists from across India, including but not limited to graphic designers, illustrators, 3D artists, photographers, poets, singers and writers. The artists were selected via an open application process. The aim was to learn and work together with experts and practitioners of new media and the arts, design thinking, human-centered design, and mental health. The residency was designed to be a space of collaboration and learning, to build prototype-works aimed at increasing mental health knowledge and tackling the stigma that surrounds it.

Pilot Testing Mann Mela at the Goa Open Arts Festival (2020):

In February 2020, Mann Mela had the opportunity to participate and conduct 'real-life' user testing, by putting together a simulation at the Goa Open Arts Festival (GOAF) - a public arts festival in Goa, India. Over the course of four days, Mann Mela was visited by ~200 people across all age groups, genders, professions, and socio-economic backgrounds. This live simulation at an arts festival helped the team receive feedback on their existing designs, test new ideas, and understand from the audience what kind of mental health information and knowledge they wished to receive. The exhibits at Mann Mela, Goa Open Arts Festival included:

- **Mann Ki Diary:** An interactive graphic novel based on the story of a person who identifies as non-binary in gender, and their experience with mental health.
- **A Day in my Life:** A physical recreation of a contributor's room where the audience can interact with the various objects in her room to hear her story about mental health, in her own words.
- **Mann Ki Selfie:** An augmented reality filter on Instagram and Facebook to help young people think about and begin conversations about mental health.
- **Mann Merchandise:** A line of positive mental health messaging merchandise.
- **Express Yourself:** A space dedicated to free expression, to encourage the audience to express themselves using art and craft materials like paints, colours, crayons and clay.

Year 2: Production and rollout

Year 2 coincided with COVID -19 lockdowns which led to a shift in the overall strategy of Mann Mela and we pivoted our outreach strategy to focus on online outreach and modified our plans to deliver the museum digitally online. We conducted the following activities: (i) preparation of a comprehensive process for working collaboratively with youth contributors remotely; (ii) launch of an online call for young people to contribute their experiences of mental health difficulties and recovery to the web museum; (iii) identification of diverse young people's' stories from across the country and virtual co-development of interactive online stories with contributors; and (iv) launch of the online museum, Mann Mela (www.mannmela.in/) in two languages (Hindi and English); and (v) a two-day virtual festival, 'Hope through Action' featuring 22 lived experience speakers, 15 artists, 10 mental health experts and 145 participants.

Guiding principles

Mann Mela was developed with the following guiding principles:

Co-creation with young people: The co-production and design teams followed rigorous informed consent procedures with story contributors, seeking their approval on the storyline and visual representation through each iteration. For the reader, we ensured a reading experience that is responsible. Since a lot of stories dealt with extremely sensitive subjects, visual metaphors and abstraction were used. We were especially careful of what could be distressing for readers, and provided support information alongside stories.

Diversity and inclusion: We worked with youth, especially who identified as queer or belonging to minority ethnic and religious groups through consultations, co-design workshops and as story contributors to the web museum. Involvement of under-represented youth audiences was facilitated through partnerships with local community-based and youth-led organisations that work for the wellbeing of vulnerable youth subgroups. The character design for the Mann Mela illustrations used on the website and additional resources were designed to showcase diverse genders; social, geographic and religious backgrounds; representation of able bodied and disabled bodies. A predetermined inclusion criteria for media presentation helped ensure underrepresented audiences were highlighted.

Over the next few weeks, I began to feel like I was sinking deeper and deeper into an abyss of loneliness.
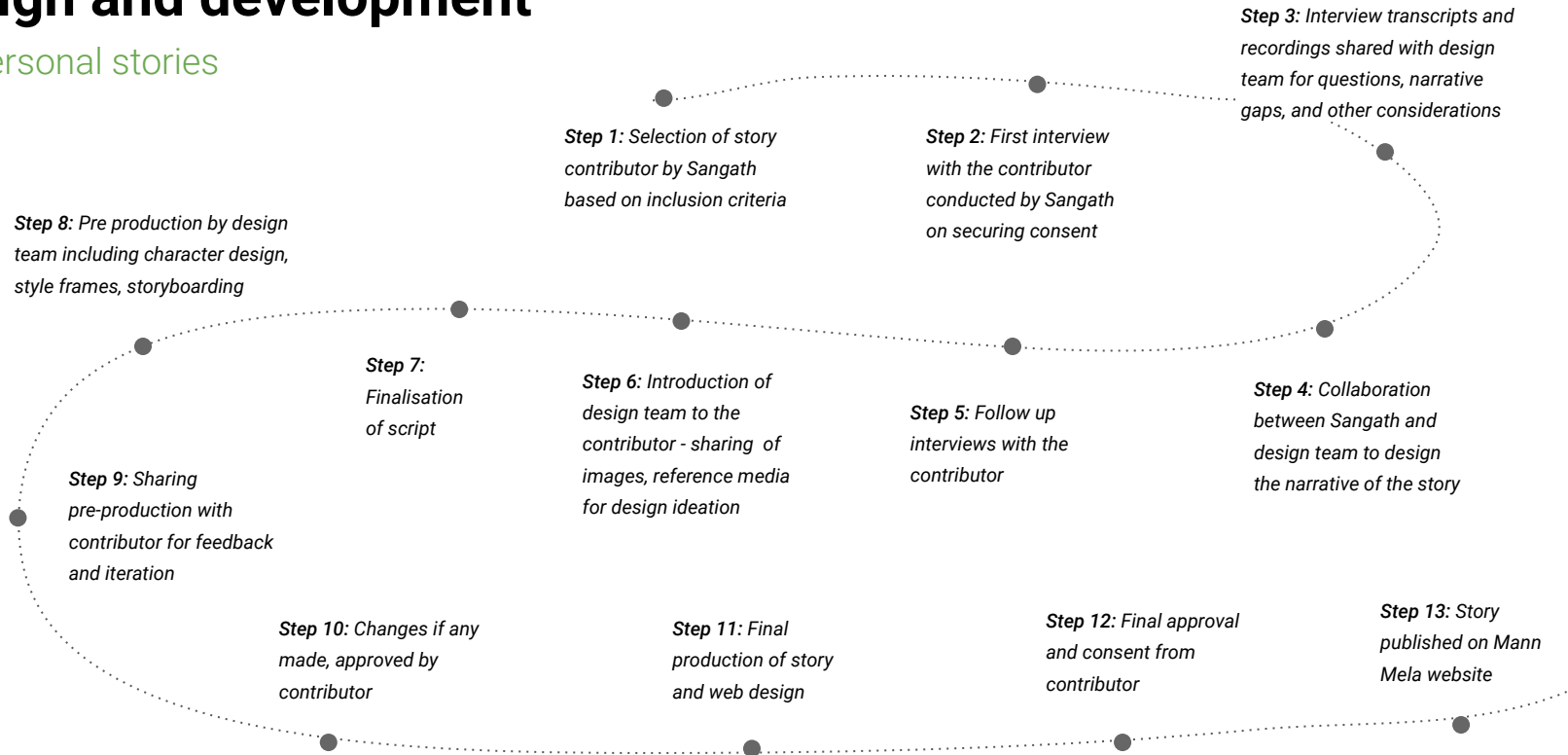
Empathy and kindness in storytelling: While designing the experiences for Mann Mela, an approach of empathy and kindness was adopted such that the reader could empathize with the story contributor.

Promoting hope and resilience: All stories were designed with a takeaway message of hope and recovery, although they described the difficulties that youth with mental health difficulties face. Stories highlighted adaptive coping strategies and self-management tips.

Providing support: Psychoeducational resource materials were developed in alignment with themes that emerged from the project's initial consultative work with young people. In addition to stories, Mann Mela provides a variety of help-seeking information.
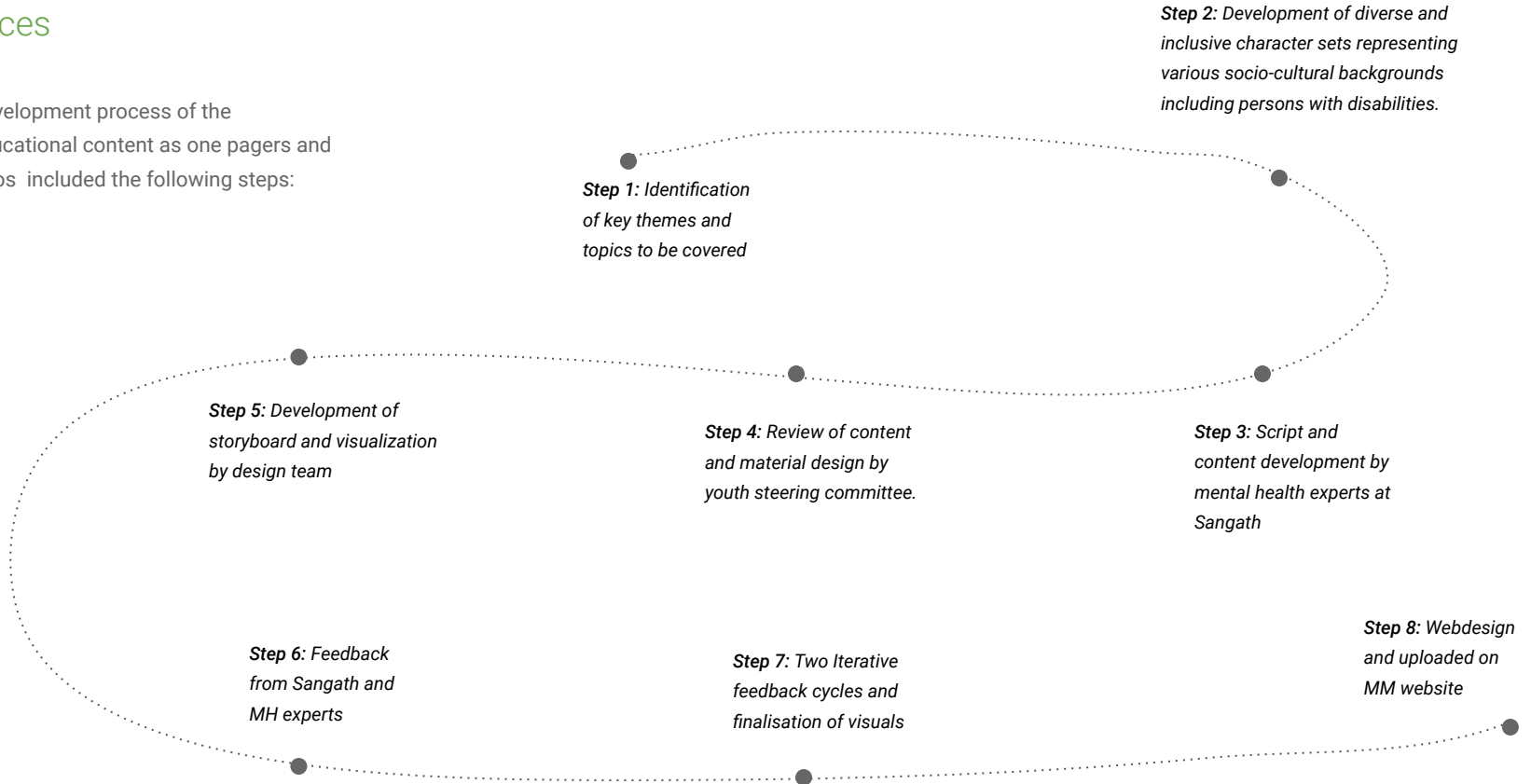
Iterative process of design and development

For personal stories

Step 1: *Selection of story contributor by Sangath based on inclusion criteria*

Step 2: *First interview with the contributor conducted by Sangath on securing consent*

Step 3: *Interview transcripts and recordings shared with design team for questions, narrative gaps, and other considerations*

Step 4: *Collaboration between Sangath and design team to design the narrative of the story*

Step 5: *Follow up interviews with the contributor*

Step 6: *Introduction of design team to the contributor - sharing of images, reference media for design ideation*

Step 7: *Finalisation of script*

Step 8: *Pre production by design team including character design, style frames, storyboarding*

Step 9: *Sharing pre-production with contributor for feedback and iteration*

Step 10: *Changes if any made, approved by contributor*

Step 11: *Final production of story and web design*

Step 12: *Final approval and consent from contributor*

Step 13: *Story published on Mann Mela website*

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For psychoeducational resources

The co-development process of the psychoeducational content as one pagers and short videos included the following steps:

Step 1: *Identification of key themes and topics to be covered*

Step 2: *Development of diverse and inclusive character sets representing various socio-cultural backgrounds including persons with disabilities.*

Step 3: *Script and content development by mental health experts at Sangath*

Step 4: *Review of content and material design by youth steering committee.*

Step 5: *Development of storyboard and visualization by design team*

Step 6: *Feedback from Sangath and MH experts*

Step 7: *Two Iterative feedback cycles and finalisation of visuals*

Step 8: *Webdesign and uploaded on MM website*

Design and development of the digital museum

What our designers said:

Mann Mela initially had two components - a physical interactive space for open conversations and media experiences and a corresponding digital adaptation for higher reach and longevity. The digital reorientation of our strategy came with a challenge - *how to take a physical experience and effectively adapt it to a digital online space, and yet have it be as impactful and reflective?*

Mann Mela aimed to create a project that would be easily accessible from any internet connected device and in two languages, Hindi and English. We however knew that despite the increasing reach of digital infrastructures, young people, especially those in low-resource areas or with restricted access to internet or technology would be excluded from an online project. To 'future proof' our materials, we created the stories and psychoeducational contents to be usable 'offline' or printed for future use in in-person settings.

Limited similar projects made it difficult to find sources of inspiration or tried and tested models and this required creative thinking by the design team and user-testing and feedback from youth.

Mann Mela is a **museum of young people's mental health stories** from India

Through sharing people's **real experiences**, we tackle common misconceptions about **mental health** and **mental illness**, break down stigma and discrimination and encourage help-seeking.

We sought inspiration from online museums and other public engagement websites on health issues to build Mann Mela. The process included:

- **A branding exercise for Mann Mela** that used a simple logo icon that could exist freely and be embedded in our stories and content without too much attention.

- **Exploring multiple forms and formats** in this journey of launching stories from exploring online reading techniques to web comics and more interactive web game platforms.

- **Thinking through ways to address the complexities of the digital interactiveness,** without relying on very high-tech formats.

- **Launching model prototype stories onto the web-platform with an open call to invite contributors** to share their stories with Mann Mela.

Stories

Monica's Story
5-10 min read

Hi I'm Monica, I'm sharing my story with you because the biggest lesson I learned is that the stigma of asking for help is real. But, help is right here and all you or I have to do is to reach out to that one person who sees us and will listen. We can rebuild ourselves because there is space for growth, love, and endless

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- **Publishing all the content in English and Hindi,** to widen reach.

- **Creating downloadable material** for both, the psycho-educational content and stories such that users could save/read/ print this information.

- **Simplifying the web experience** and launching stories and psycho-educational content in different multimedia formats.

- **Harnessing social media** to create curiosity and excitement with each story launch - this helped ensure that the website got sufficient user traffic.

- **Overhauling the website design after user-testing** to incorporate youth feedback and make the web experience engaging and easy to understand.

Reflections from design and development team

"Working on Mann Mela has been a unique experience as it was the first time I was personally involved in the co-creation of a narrative with a contributor. I have previously worked with either fictional narratives, or those based on my own life. This process taught me to approach storytelling with a focus on empathy. I had to be mindful that the story was being told in the way the contributor wanted to tell it, and not driven by my own preferences or biases. It was the contributor's story, and I was only acting as a catalyst to bring it to life."
Saket, Artist

"The challenge was to really engage the audience into reading these complex stories over their phone screens and laptops which were long heartfelt experiences of individuals that one would otherwise only encounter first hand. However, google analytics and other such evaluation devices helped us gauge how people were responding to the content; we also had YSC reviews to help us understand what worked and what didn't and simplify our formats to better the experience."
Shelly, Graphic Designer

"Visual representation of sensitive topics was challenging, and we invented various visual devices to deal with this - Visual metaphors of closets, playing with scale etc in the Sadam story for example, or the personification of Monica's internal thoughts to represent her relationship with them. This allowed us to touch upon subjects like substance abuse, suicidal ideation, etc in a way which represented the intensity of the experience while still being as little triggering as possible for the reader."
Deepti, Artist

"The greatest value of Mann Mela is that all that has been created, is based on real people's' real stories. We haven't sat in a room in an office and created these narratives, but we collaborated with people who wanted to share their own stories of their personal experiences with mental health. Mann Mela to me represents the incredible power of storytelling, and how listening to someone's story can literally change your life."
- Nitya, Design Researcher, Quicksand

"Working on the Mann Mela project has both been challenging and rewarding at the same time. We were lucky enough to work closely with the contributors to bring to life their personal stories of resilience and courage. In the process we got to work with a host of amazing artists from across the country which further made the project more engaging."
Kapil Das, Creative Director

The Museum

Sadam's Story
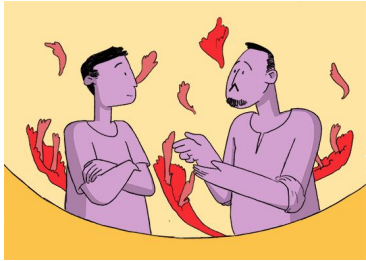
Sadam's story

Sadam is from Imphal. His struggle with accepting himself and the fear of not being accepted by others almost cost him his life twice. He believes that it is important to have spaces and channels where one can be honest, express themselves, and feel vulnerable.

"Recognising I was queer when I was a young person wasn't made easy because I knew I could never really tell anyone. I told myself there were always more important things going on, bigger things to worry about. "

"I experienced a strong sense of rejection in Mumbai, and had tried so hard to fit in. I had always been shy anyway."

"In most ways while Mumbai was a real struggle, it was also the first place where I was able to express, and even celebrate, being queer. That was a part of my identity I had to hide away everywhere else that I had lived."

"Finding a safe space to talk openly about myself was my first step towards real recovery."

"I want you to know that sometimes, it's okay to be vulnerable, and it's a huge step to accept our vulnerabilities. They are a part of who we are. Once we do this, we can find ways to turn them into our biggest strengths."

-Sadam

Contributor: Sadam Hanjabam
Story research, writing and curation: Faith Gonsalves
Comic: Deepti Sharma and Saket Ghaisas
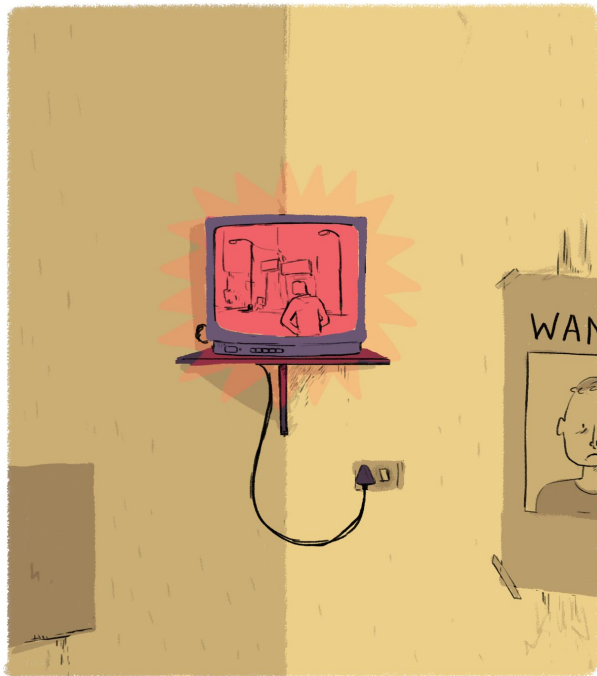
The Museum

Tarini's Story
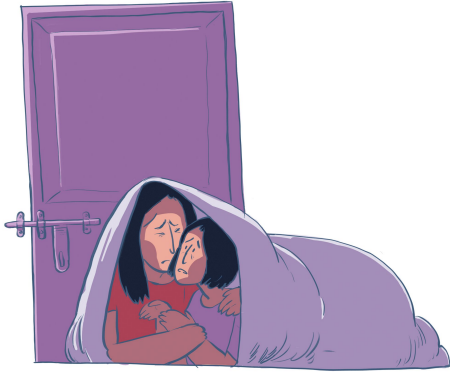
Tarini's story

Tarini is from Chandigarh. She had a picture of how she wanted her life to look, but things didn't turn out that way and the picture she had envisioned changed. Soon, she realized that it was actually a good thing, and promoted resilience.
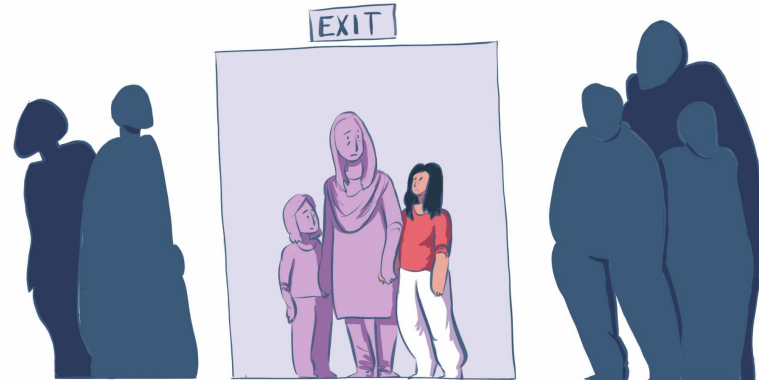
"My dad and mom separated when I was young, we were always short on money, and money was always a big issue for us. So, my sister and I always knew that when we grew up, we had to become independent and earn money, so that we could support our mom and she wouldn't have to work all her life. "

"We are taught to believe that a man is a safety net for you, a man is a kind of pillar of strength to lean on all the time. Today, I'm at a point in my life where I've realised that a man is not a fatherly figure, he is a partner to you. He's not someone you're supposed to depend on for your every need, but someone who you can share your life with. So, find support in him, but not depend on him."

"I've become less dependent on others, I have learnt to take care of myself, take my medicines, go for therapy, keep the negative thoughts at bay, keep my morale up -- I can't depend on anybody else to do this, I have to do this myself. "

-Tarini

Contributor: Tarini Chawla
Story research, writing and curation: Faith Gonsalves
Comic: Saket Ghaisas
Media Production: Kapil Das

The Museum

Pavel's Story

Pavel's story

Pavel is from Manipur, and is currently based in Delhi Pavel was born male and assigned that gender at birth, but soon realised that something didn't feel right. Ze shares their story to help others understand their experiences as becoming a 'non-binary' individual and the importance of not seeing one's self and world in binaries.

Even today I feel the repercussions on my own self esteem and confidence as a result of growing up in this kind of a culture.

I hate the fact that I had to get away from my land and people to feel good about being who I am.

I call it 'self-exile' and while it is adventurous and fun, sometimes it just feels unfair.

If it's the weekend, I look around my house, like to acknowledge and feel grateful for the fact that I have a house in Delhi, appreciating the nice things I own. I grew up in a lower middle class family in Imphal which is an underdeveloped area.

The kind of life I live here is something very different, and I like to remind myself of that.

Parks, and nature really help me. When I'm in a place full of trees and grass I feel like I'm a part of nature. I find acceptance there, and feel very calm. I love the sound of water.

"I hate the fact that I had to get away from my land and people to feel good about being who I am. I call it 'self-exile' and while it is adventurous and fun, sometimes it just feels unfair "

"Some days, my internal conversation is a battle. One part of me believes that I am unattractive, and unlucky to be born this way, and I hold it against God. Another part of me is trying to be compassionate, learning to accept and love myself the way I am. "

"In terms of self care practices, I talk to my friends a lot. I chat with old friends, who are like my family, on the phone. I sometimes go to a friend's house after work. Parks and nature really help me. When I'm in a place full of trees and grass I feel like I'm a part of nature. I find acceptance there, and I feel very calm"

"Your faith and belief in yourself isn't absolute every day. Everyone needs reinforcement. Constantly questioning yourself can take a big toll on your confidence and self esteem ."

"Why is it so difficult to understand that I am neither, and I am both."

-Pavel

Contributor: Pavel Sagolsem
Story research, writing and curation: Faith Gonsalves
Comic: Debangshu Moulik
Media Production: Kapil Das

The Museum

Monica's Story
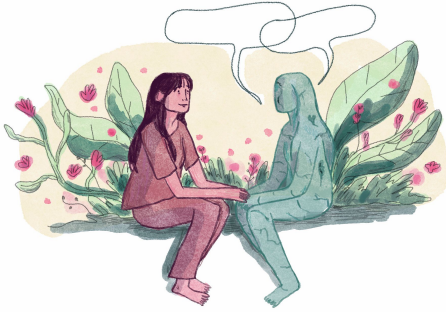
Monica's story

Monica is from Hyderabad. She shares her story because she realised the stigma associated with asking for help is real. But, help is available and everyone can access it if they reach out to that right person who acknowledges their experiences and listens.

This is too much... I feel so alone.

I don't know how to handle this. Maybe I should ask for help.

It's okay if I feel low right now, I accept this feeling. I know it will pass.

"I'm telling you my story because if you are going through a difficult time, I hope you can find some hope in knowing that no matter how bad it seems right now, you are not alone and there is light at the end of the tunnel. You will conquer this too. Do not rush the pain, give it time, and know that you are not your pain, it is only a part of you and it is okay to feel it. "

"After I began the process of seeking help for my mental health, my mental wellbeing wasn't a one-stop fix. I now know that recovery is not a linear process. It is constant, but I saw a change in how I was able to cope with difficult situations. "

"The real changes happen when I made an effort to want to do something for myself. That didn't mean not acknowledging what had happened, but it meant taking charge of the things I could in my own life."

"You are not your mental illness or the experience. It is a part of you and it is okay to acknowledge and accept it ."

"Help is right here, and all you or I have to do is reach out to at least one individual who is willing to see you and hear you and love you."

-Monica

The Museum

Sam's Story

Sam's story

Sam is from Vellore. She was brought up by her grandmother as she was separated from her parents when she was an infant. Today, she is a mother, and there isn't a single day that she doesn't think about her own mother. She believes that everyone can create their own life and change the patterns they learnt as children to be self-reliant.

"As more of an introvert, I felt a lot of pressure to be more outgoing. I also lived in a hostel, which meant interacting with lots of different people and this was a big adjustment for me."

"College was the first time in my life when I began to address the childhood trauma I was carrying with me for many years. I reached out for help and behan to attend counselling sessions with one of my professors."

"Over the course of the counselling sessions I acknowledged how my childhood experiences were really holding me back as an adult. I blamed myself for my mother leaving me when I was an infant and carried the weight of this guilt with me all the time."

"I learned to break out of this vicious cycle, pause to think and be patient before reacting."

"Throughout these experiences, a constant source of hope that kept me grounded was my spirituality. My belief in God plays an important role in my wellbeing. Sometimes, if I'm really struggling, I listen to spiritual songs and read the holy book."

-Sam

Contributor: Sam
Story research, writing and curation: Faith Gonsalves
Comic: Saket Ghaisas
Media Production: Kapil Das

The Museum

Vidushi's Story

Vidushi's story

Vidushi is from Haldwani. She struggled with a mental illness, and has made a full recovery. She shares her story to highlight that the hardest thing she struggled with was not her illness, but the stigma she faced because of it.

No one thought I would pass, but I did! When I saw the results, I was crying and jumping around dancing with joy.
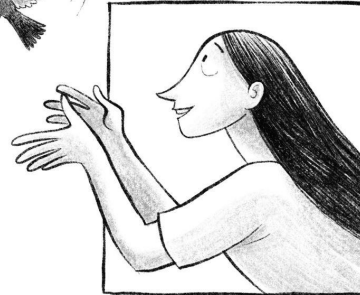
That day onwards, I tell people, because of one person's belief in me, I believed in myself too, and my life changed.

Mental illness may not always have an apparent reason or cause, so it's really important for people to not assume anything or say things like, "I have problems too, life is full of problems", or, "Just chill and get over it". I used to feel like such a loser, thinking, "Maybe they are right, what's wrong with me? Why can't I get over it?"
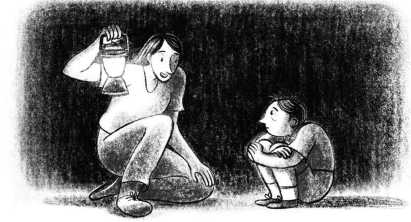
It isn't a mental illness that can break you, it's the stigma. This lack of support or empathy to those recovering from mental illness makes it even harder for them.

"Looking back, I think I knew I was developing some sort of mental illness, but I never said anything to anyone for fear of being put in a mental hospital. At the time of that attempt, I was overcome with feelings of helplessness, and I couldn't carry on, I couldn't fight any more. I couldn't really understand what was going on."

"Working with my counsellor also helped me overcome the guilt I was carrying because of my experience being sexually abused. It was the first time I understood that what had happened was not my fault."

"That day onwards, I tell people, because of one person's belief in me, I believed in myself too, and my life changed."

"If you struggle with a mental health problem, like I did, don't be ashamed of it. It really takes a lot of guts to wake up every morning with that shit feeling, the sleep disturbances, the appetite changes, mood swings… it's all disturbing. If you can find the strength and help to face it all, believe me, you are a warrior."

"It isn't a mental illness that can break you, it's the stigma."

-Vidushi

Contributor: Vidushi Karnatic
Story research, writing and curation: Faith Gonsalves
Comic: Ekta Bharti
Media Production: Kapil Das

The Museum

Anjali's Story

Anjali's story

Anjali is from Azamgarh. She wants girls to stop feeling that no one will listen to them. She acknowledges the many difficulties young women in India face while growing up due to lack of conversation and a restrictive society.

"The gender bias in my community means that families feel a sense of responsibility to keep girls "safe", and they don't worry that something will ever go wrong for the boys. They think that if something untoward happens with a girl, the people will blame the family. In the name of keeping their girls safe, families make decisions on behalf of their girls, and we feel like our rights are being taken away."

"Growing up as a girl here is very hard sometimes because there are so many things that are not talked about."

"When I see the kind of change this access to information makes, I feel more confident and that's why I want to continue doing this kind of work.."

"I want to enable other young people to stay focused on achieving their dreams and motivate those who get distracted. I want my village to have a positive environment where what happened to me doesn't happen to anyone else. If it does happen, families should support their girls, and also, more importantly, girls and boys shouldn't feel forced to make decisions that they don't want to."

-Anjali

Contributor: Anjali
Story research, writing and curation: Faith Gonsalves
Comic: Saket Ghaisas
Media Production: Kapil Das

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The Museum

Namarita's story

Namarita believes that the right support system can be a lifesaver. Growing up, her mother had a chronic and complicated mental disorder called schizophrenia. She struggled to play many roles, a child, a carer, and a student. But, her life began to change when she was able to ask for help. She shared things that were worrying her with others, started journaling and writing, and a world of support opened up for her.
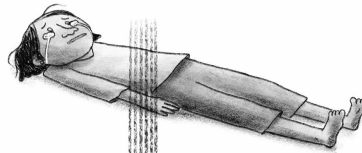
When my brother and sister were born I had a big role in taking care of them. The ten year gap between us meant I helped them when they were growing up.

I faced a lot of pressure from my dad to do really well at school, and so at that time it felt I had to juggle many things, but I wasn't equipped to do it. I would wonder why I had to do all this.

I'm not SUPPOSED to take care of these children AND also take care of my studies, and then also be a teenager!! UGH!

"When I was growing up, being sad was treated like a crime. It wasn't cool. It was as if always having a cheery smile was the only way to be!"

"Even though at the time I couldn't fully appreciate everything that was going on around me, I listened to that little voice in my head telling me that this isn't right, something is wrong here."

"There came a point when I knew I couldn't live my life the way it was. So that was the turning point when I knew I needed to seek support. I felt like if I continued the way I was, I wouldn't live very long."

"It is not about not having problems in your life, problems are a constant. It is about how quick your breakthroughs are, how quickly you are able to recover or bounce back, and move forward. I think this really depends on how good your support system is and how you find ways to take care of yourself."

"The moment I share things that are worrying me with somebody, they don't feel so big."

-Namarita

Contributor: Namarita Kathait
Story research, writing and curation: Faith Gonsalves
Comic: Saksham Arora
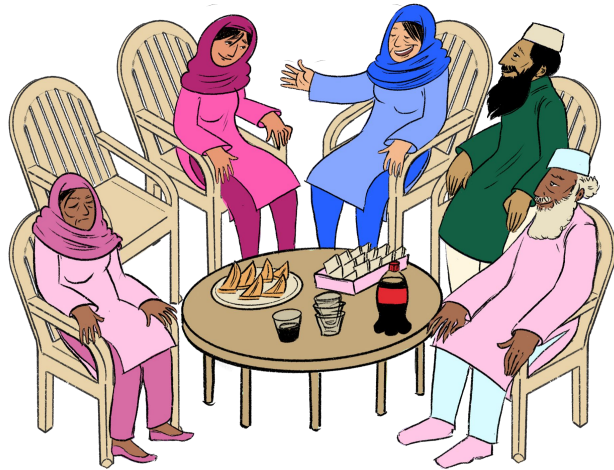Media Production: Hiren Kangad

The Museum

Kehkasha's story

Kehkasha's story

Kehkasha is from Delhi. She is trying to balance her life between her religion, family and society's expectations. She fights against the normative gender roles expected of women in a devout Muslim family and an unequal society.
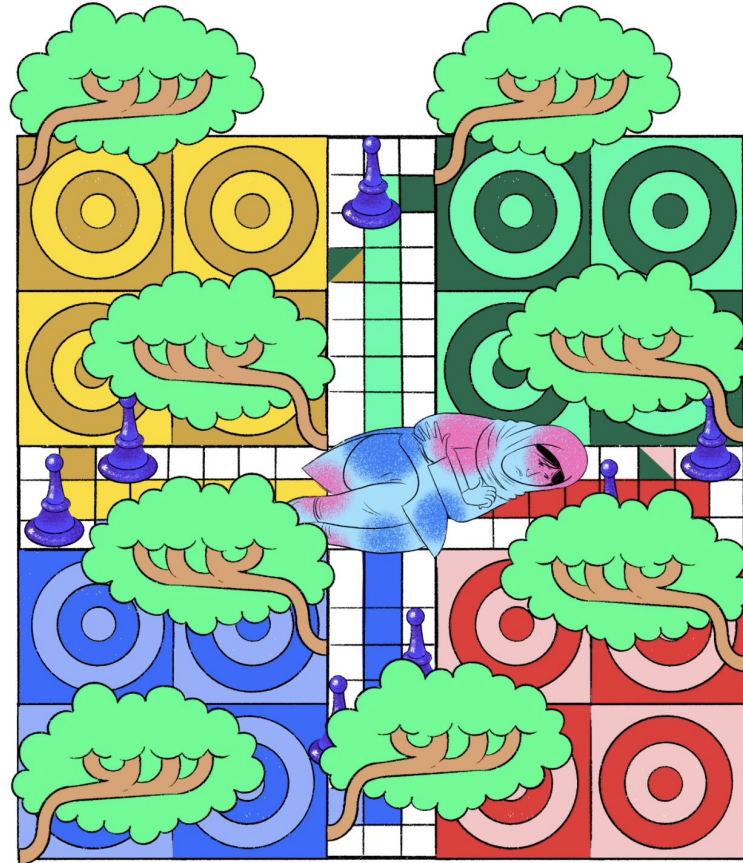
" As my body changed during adolescence. I had to stop going out to play. I had to stop meeting my male friends "

" I started to realize the fact that I live in a very gender unequal world. "

" I don't want to choose, but I feel that I have to constantly choose my identity. "

" Neighbours have said to my father, "Mulla Ji, you have kept a beard, but what kind of clothes do your girls wear? They are too modern.""

" In many ways, my father and mother have broken out of a certain mould of thought, common in their generation, where prejudice is a huge problem. While we don't agree on everything, I feel supported and confident because of them. When I see my sisters' lives, I feel proud of them. And I want to achieve things in my own life for my sisters, and for other girls. Where there is hope, there is hope that things may change."

-Kehkasha

The Museum

Bi-lingual psychoeducational videos and downloadable handouts

We produced a collection of 10 handouts (including downloadable versions), and four videos which provide basic information to help one better understand and cope with mental health challenges.

The 10 handouts included:

- **My mental health starts with me:** This handout aims at creating an understanding that mental health is about how each of us as human beings think, feel, and behave; moment by moment, day to day. It enlists self-care techniques that can help prevent some mental health difficulties from developing, as well as manage any ongoing symptoms. These include relaxing, seeking help, fostering nourishing relationships, and doing things one enjoys.

- **Mind and body are one system:** This handout explains that mental health is not about only what is in your head, and that one cannot separate the mind and the body - as they are part of one system. It emphasises that taking care of our physical body is a key part of caring for our mental health. This includes getting physical exercise, eating right, and getting good sleep.

- **Coping with Anxiety:** This handout helps understand what anxiety is, and how it manifests itself in people's behaviours. It also explains the causes and cycles of anxiety through graphics and provides tips to help manage anxiety better.

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डिप्रेशन का बढ़ना

कुछ करने का मन नहीं करना, स्वयं
का ख्याल न रखना, किसी
कार्य में रुचि न होना

- **Dealing with depression:** This handout helps explain depression, and its various causes and triggers, its cycles and its behaviour manifestations. The handout also details strategies to manage depression by doing things that matter, exercising, and seeking professional support.

- **Drugs and Alcohol:** This handout helps understand when drug or alcohol use is a cause of concern, and what are warning signs of overuse. It highlights strategies to regulate their consumption (through healthy alternatives like setting goals and tracking one's consumption) as well as outlines how to help a friend/family member if they are likely to be abusing alcohol or drugs.

- **Managing self harm:** This handout helps explain self-harm, in its many different forms such as cutting, burning or biting, over or under-eating, or consuming harmful substances. It also details how self care can be practiced through identifying patterns, practicing alternative behaviours and seeking help, as well as things to keep in while caring for a friend/family member who are at the risk of harming themselves.

- **Understanding Trauma:** This handout helps understand trauma and its multiple manifestations like when a person's sense of emotional or physical safety is significantly harmed or threatened and where they feel overwhelmed. It also provides steps one can practice if they are experiencing trauma like managing flashbacks, talking to professionals or anyone they can trust.

- **Understanding Suicide:** This handout emphathises with readers and acknowledges how challenging experiencing suicidal thoughts and feelings can be. It also provides strategies and steps one can do to help manage and stay safe while experiencing their thoughts like seeking help, looking after their mental health, understanding one's safety options, and putting in place a safety plan. It also shares verified resources one can access for help.

- **Preventing Suicide:** This handout focuses on how to help someone experiencing suicidal thoughts by practing steps like staying calm and listening not being afraid to help them. It guides the reader on how to make their environment safer, encourages professional help, as well as putting together a safety plan for those experiencing suicidal thoughts.

- **Sex, gender, and sexuality:** This handout aims to help the readers understand the links between sex, gender, sexuality, and mental health through some examples. It provides strategies for managing mental health and enlists resources they can reach out to for assistance.

Videos included:

- **We all have mental health:** Mental health lies at the very core of what it means to be human. It has the power to help us grow, manage life's ups and downs, and live fulfilling lives. This video brings to light that everything that runs through our minds, our feelings and emotions, and how we behave - all make up our mental health and that each one of us has it.

- **You are not the sum of your thoughts:** We all have thoughts running through our minds all the time, and they can be different for each one of us. Some thoughts can be happy, while some can also be distressing. This video is focused to help the viewer recognise that you are not the sum of your thoughts - and you don't have to listen to, accept or act on everything your mind says.

- **Mental health is a complex dance:** Our mental health includes how we think, how we feel and do what we do day by day. It introduces the viewer to three factors that work together to produce our mental health (1) our genes and biology, (2) our past and current life experiences and, (3) our internal coping resources.

- **Suicide prevention:** Anyone can have suicidal thoughts and they are understandable - it doesn't make us 'crazy' or 'weak'. These feelings are transient and amenable to change. The most important thing for prevention is to be able to talk about suicide.

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The Museum

Podcast

Youth mental health stories from a pandemic

Through the Mann Mela's podcast, **"Stories from a pandemic"**, we considered from personal, research, and policy perspectives, how the COVID-19 pandemic offers us a historic opportunity to examine a range of challenges related to how young people live, learn and work, and transform our approach to addressing their mental health concerns for the long-term.

The research for this podcast included consultations with 54 young people from across India, captured through a series of online focused-group discussions and individual interviews conducted by our team between December 2020 and June 2021.

The podcast is available here: www.mannmela.in/podcast, or Spotify, JioSaavn, Apple and other platforms.

Episode 1: Breakdown or breakthrough?

We know that COVID-19 is not creating a new mental health crisis but expanding an existing crisis and highlighting that we simply do not have the resources and breadth of effective treatments to deal with it. How we can prioritize and put mental health front and centre in India's response to and recovery from COVID-19?

Episode 2: Finding meaning in loss

The novel coronavirus has interrupted our traditions of mourning. With social and working lives going virtual many have lost access to familiar customs, gatherings, and routines that used to comfort the bereft. Those combined losses can put us at risk, and they require managing. While many losses cannot be undone, spaces for mourning those losses can be created. How can we find new ways to muster presence, patience, and make room for loss?

Episode 3: From the frontlines to the future

Experiences from different frontline workers' during the second Covid-19 wave in India sheds light on how we can prepare our future humanitarian response to Covid-19 in India, while also addressing the mental health fallout of the pandemic.

Episode 4: Suicide prevention

What effects is the COVID-19 pandemic having on suicide rates around the world, and, what we as individuals can do to help? We explore how the pandemic can offer an opportunity rather than a threat to how we continue to tackle suicide prevention.

Episode 5: Inside a COVID-19 ward

Healthcare workers are the first line of defence to combat this pandemic. But health workers find themselves under unprecedented pressures that can manifest in a range of mental health difficulties. If this situation is not considered carefully and quickly, the psychosocial consequences on the mental health of our health workers are likely to be very serious. How can we make the investments necessary to prepare ourselves for the future?

Our impacts

Co-design and consultations

We conducted five focused-group discussions (FGDs) and co-design workshops in New Delhi, Goa, Bhopal, Ahmedabad and Imphal with 61 young people including youth with lived experiences of mental health needs between May-September, 2019. In addition, 54 young people from various parts of the country were engaged through FGDs and in-depth interviews for the production of the 'Stories from a pandemic' COVID-19 podcast between December, 2020-January, 2021.

FGDs with youth participants centered around understanding youth perceptions on socio-cultural beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes towards people with mental health issues and identifying existing community based mental health support and coping mechanisms. For the development of the podcast, discussions and interviews with young people were aimed to map the context and short term mental health impacts and responses of youth, particularly those on the frontline, experienced during the pandemic in India.

What we learned:
- Youth participants highlighted a difference in the understanding of mental health issues with respect to their parents, which may lead to increased conflict at home
- Participants said there were no conversations around mental health in the school curriculum
- Participants expressed a concern for social media to be a risky space to share personal information, but also agreed that the internet provides a degree of anonymity that provides platforms where discussions around mental health can be initiated and sustained without much risk

'Balance in an unbalanced world' by Lakshmi
Commissioned for Hope Through Action Festival

Mx. Ria Rumi

'P(l)ain(t) Re-flextion' by Rumi
Commissioned for Hope Through Action Festival

Event visitors

We conducted two large events, one in person as a **Mann Mela exhibition** at the Goa Open Arts Festival on February 13-16, 2020 and the second as a two-day virtual festival, **Hope Through Action,** on September 10-11, 2021**.**

The **Mann Mela exhibition** featured two lived experience story based artefacts, namely – Mann ki Diary and A Day in My Life, an augmented reality based filter called Mann ki Selfie, and a space for self-expression. Over three day, the exhibit was attended by 200 attendees, and feedback was collected via check-in and check-out forms. More than half of the respondents said that their experience of Mann Mela was positive and it enabled them to learn about mental health.
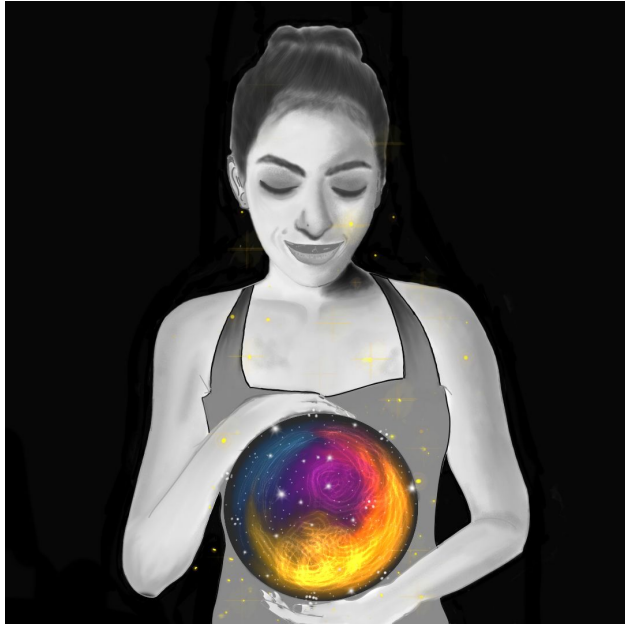
Hope Through Action was organised as a virtual festival to celebrate personal stories of mental health and to mark World Suicide Prevention Day 2021. The festival featured a virtual art exhibition consisting of specially commissioned works by young people with lived experience from across India, skill-building workshops, panel discussion and plenary talks by young people and experts. The festival was attended by 150 people and feedback was collected after skill-building workshops through zoom polls. After a workshop to learn suicide saftey planning, 67% attendees said they felt comfortable and confident with creating a suicide saftey plan for themselevs or someone else.

'Elpis on Earth' by Sanjana
Commissioned for Hope Through Action Festival

Social media and web visitors

The web museum reached 22.2 million users online through its social media, 100,000+ direct web museum visitors, and received 6000+ podcast listeners. A website feedback form was triggered to visitors after spending 2 minutes on the website. Feedback collected from website users (n=165) who completed the form highlighted that most visitors felt that visiting the web museum had positively impacted their understanding of mental health; helped them feel more comfortable talking about their mental health with others; and that they were more likely to seek support in the future.

'You-niverse' by Tena Paul
Commissioned for Hope Through Action Festival

What our contributors said

Feedback from story contributors highlighted that they felt involved in drafting their script and in producing their stories and that being part of the project helped them to learn new things from their participation in the project. They also felt that their contribution has made a difference to raising mental health awareness for youth in India.

"I felt that someone was seriously listening to me effectively, which gave me confidence that my story is also important to convey." **Kehkasha**, Delhi

"Telling my story was an empowering and insightful experience. It let me know myself better, as in the evolution of myself and my own ways of seeing the world. The changes so far and how each change is linked essentially - what are my core values and what challenges I have overcome." **Pavel Sagolsem**, Delhi

Insights from our team

What our team learned through the project

- Our team gained rich insights into social and structural determinants of young people's mental health through individual stories. In addition, we were able to learn and explore good storytelling practices in designing the journey of an individual's self-disclosure all the way to publishing the story in a mixed media or interactive format online.

- We learned that sharing personal narratives can be an empowering and enabling experience for contributors and that collaborative storytelling can produce very impactful high quality media.

- Adapting our project strategy during COVID-19 was a helpful exercise in team problem-solving and of discovering opportunities in the midst of difficulties. This included finding methods and mechanisms to effectively conduct the research for interviews and story production remotely; working with teams and story contributors located in different parts of the country; and defining safe storytelling practices to produce the content for the museum largely over video calls and online.

- Finally, working through the especially severe second wave of COVID-19 in India offered our team the ability to map the context and some of the short term mental health impacts and responses of youth, particularly those on the frontline, experienced during the pandemic in India.

'Zine' by Meghana
Commissioned for Hope Through Action Festival

Press

Between August 2020-September 2021, Mann Mela has been featured in 16 press articles.

Notable launches and releases of media outputs were disseminated via press releases sent to health and science reporters with national dailies and online news portals.

- 2021: Indian Express: Stories from a pandemic: Mental health podcast on coping with loss
- 2021: The Hindu: A podcast that brings you personal stories from the pandemic
- 2020: The Hindu: Mann Mela, a digital museum for your mental health
- 2020: South China Morning Post: World Mental Health Day 2020: digital library of survivor stories, Mann Mela, launched to get young people in India to talk openly about anxiety and depression
- 2020: Hindustan Times: Mann Mela: When mental health victories become virtual art
- 2020: Deccan Herald: All in the Mind
- 2020: The Logical Indian: This Unique Travelling Museum Is Busting The Stigma Around Mental Health
- 2020: Mid Day: Mind it
- 2020: Homegrown: Mann Mela - India's First Mental Health Museum Extends A Helping Hand To The Youth
- 2020: Indian Express: Pune: Travelling museum spreads awareness on mental health

Youth partners

Service partner
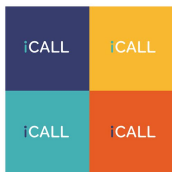
Outreach partners

Our partners

Mann Mela established partnerships with various mental health NGOs, youth-led initiatives, campaigns and service providers to support dissemination of psychoeducation materials and resources. The project engaged 8 outreach partners and one mental health service partner.

Mann Mela's psycho-education materials are also being shared through Facebook's emotional health resource as tips and resources for users to manage their emotional health or find help for a friend, as well as distributed to teachers and educators through a partnership with Population Foundation of India.

Contact information

Pattie Gonsalves, Principal Investigator | pattie.gonsalves@sangath.in
Sweta Pal, Communications Manager | sweta.pal@sangath.in

Mann Mela web museum can be accessed at www.mannmela.in
Follow It's Ok To Talk on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Youtube

Postal address:

Sangath
E-5, Lane 1, Westend Marg, Saiyad ul ajaib, Saket, New Delhi 110030, India | www.sangath.in