



# Beyond the Stigma

Young people using the art of poetry to end the stigma of mental health



### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to these schools that supported the project - Palfrey Junior School and Palfrey Girls School, and also Masjid Al Farouq Mosque and the Palfrey community.



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# Introduction

## Who are Changing Our Lives?

Changing Our Lives is a rights based organisation that works in coproduction with disabled people and people with lived experience of mental health difficulties, of all ages and backgrounds, to find solutions to social injustice and health inequality.

All of our work is rooted in the belief that no one is too disabled, or too affected by mental health difficulties to lead an ordinary life. We believe people's lives should not be limited or defined by their disability or mental health difficulty. We are aspirational in our expectations.

Our work takes a community development approach, as we know that local people and communities are best placed to find their own solutions to local problems. For this reason whilst we have a range of approaches, we are continually developing new approaches in partnership with local people that work to address inequality and injustice, achieving outcomes that will result in social inclusion and self-determination.

# About the project

Poetry works on many levels: it is a powerful way to connect with individuals and communities; it is a fun and memorable way of sharing information and challenging myths and prejudice and it takes the individual on a personal journey where they find a new form of self-expression. It's for these reasons that poetry is the perfect vehicle for community development and rights based work.

For this project, funded by an Open Access Award, Changing Our Lives delivered a series of poetry events in Palfrey, Walsall, with a focus on mental health and wellbeing. Although the project was open to all, we worked with schools and community leaders within the Muslim community. We took this approach as we know from our local work and national research that mental health inequalities are prevalent within BME communities and myths surrounding mental health continue to impact negatively on people's lives and communities as a whole.

We equally wanted to explore how poetry can be developed as both a creative and cultural experience with individuals and communities, where poetry may rarely be written, spoken or read. Taking poetry workshops into this community helped us to explore the ways that young people were able to use a creative arts medium to tackle issues around mental health, challenge stereotypes and increase awareness. Working with schools, community leaders and an established poet, we tailored each poetry workshop to the needs of the individual group.

The poetry workshops were led by poet (Dreadlock Alien, former Birmingham Poet Laureate, 2005-2006) who worked with young people to develop their poetry and perform it in front of their peers.

To begin with, leaders from Changing Our Lives who have current or recent lived experience of mental health difficulties, facilitated a discussion around mental health. This encompassed the definition of mental health, the relationship between mental and physical health, and the way young people view mental health. This discussion enabled them to understand and capture their own experiences within the poetry.

“ Thank you to you and your team for the workshop this morning. I found it really inspiring as did the children. Issues that are not always easy to talk about were tackled in a fun way which engaged the children and made them empathise and think about their own wellbeing as well as others. Your team brought an awareness of mental health wellbeing into the classroom in such an exciting way that the children will remember it as being one of the highlights of their school lives. Dreadlock Alien was an inspiration and had the children in the palm of his hands. As a teacher with over 10 years experience I learnt so much from this workshop. I look forward to working with your organisation again.

**Amina Mahate, teacher**

”

“ Our children really enjoyed working with Changing Our Lives. Not only did they have an outlet for their creativity, but they realised that mental health is an issue that many of us face at some point. It is of vital importance that we equip our young people with the language to express their needs and the skills to cope with difficulties that they may face. The stigma and prejudice towards mental health problems must be stripped away, and it is through projects like this that we can begin to achieve that goal.

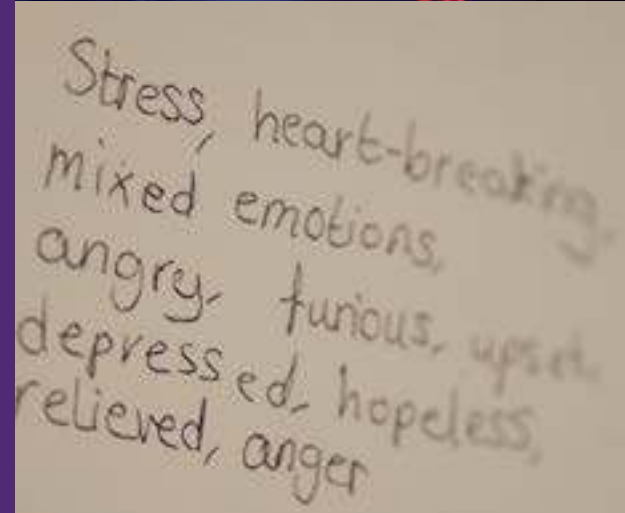
**Cheryl Collis, Head of School**

The event left me speechless, I was given mind blowing facts and I really enjoyed learning about mental health and how to deal with it. Dreadlock Alien's rhyming was the best!

I really enjoyed the poetry, some bits were really funny. The best bit was writing the poetry, but the most exciting and my favourite bit was about mental health.

**Quotes from young people**

”



## From page to stage

The series of workshops culminated in a 'Poetry Slam' which saw the schools join together in a vibrant and exciting event with their families, faith leaders and the wider community.

Young people from years 4 -11 who took part in the workshops, performed the final version of their poems using drama, beat box, song and spoken word. Some had produced artwork to illustrate their thoughts and feelings about mental health. Clearly and confidently they championed the message that **'We all have mental health'**.

Delivering this message in a fun and innovative, yet poignant way, began to tackle some of the stereotypes that exist with the community, increase people's awareness around mental health and celebrate the young people's creative achievements and understanding.

## Outcomes from the project

- People understood that poetry is a creative medium through which an individual can express themselves.
- Changing Our Lives developed links with schools and community leaders to further embed this work in the schools and wider community.
- People understood how to write, deliver and perform a poem.
- Over 300 Individuals gained a greater awareness of mental health that enabled them to challenge some of the stigmas and myths.
- Changing Our Lives understood how poetry workshops/slams can work in different communities.



## What young people said:



*I've learnt that mental health difficulties can happen to anyone.*

*It's amazing how everyone came together and worked together with poetry.*

*I found it really fun. It helped me a lot and made me think that poems are not boring. I also learnt about mental health.*

*I never enjoyed poetry before but Dreadlock Alien made it great for me.*

*I thought that poetry was silly but I was wrong. I extremely enjoyed it and learnt about emotions and mental health.*

*Mental health is just as important as physical health. Looking at the work that young people have done producing their own poems, I strongly believe that young people are the catalyst for change in attitudes towards mental health.*



**Mareesha Morris, MP for Sandwell Mental Health People's Parliament**





“

*It was amazing, very engaging and fun!*

*Brilliant event. Great turnout and good liaison opportunities created.*

*What a fun way to make people aware of such a taboo subject. Fantastic!*

*It helps to raise awareness of mental health.*

*I didn't like it - I loved it!*

*Everyone has mental health. Those with mental health keep quiet and refrain from being called abnormal.*

*We all have problems at some point. We should be ashamed because we don't talk about it.*

*There is a stigma around mental health in the community but with events like this we can slowly eliminate it in time.*

*This was the most fun i've had all year!*

”



**Quotes from community members at the Poetry Slam**

# Who we worked with

Each year 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience mental health difficulties and more recent evidence suggests that this is rapidly becoming 1 in 3.

Palfrey is a neighbourhood in the metropolitan borough of Walsall with a population of over 16,000, of which approximately 95% are Muslim. This means that at least 4133 people will experience mental health difficulties in the next year of their life.

Throughout the project, Changing Our Lives worked with a total of 210 children and young people in Palfrey. The poetry slam to showcase their work was attended by 82 community members.



**210** children and young people

42%	Pakistani
37%	Bengali
14.5%	Indian
4.5%	Afghan
1%	Eastern European
1%	Mixed other

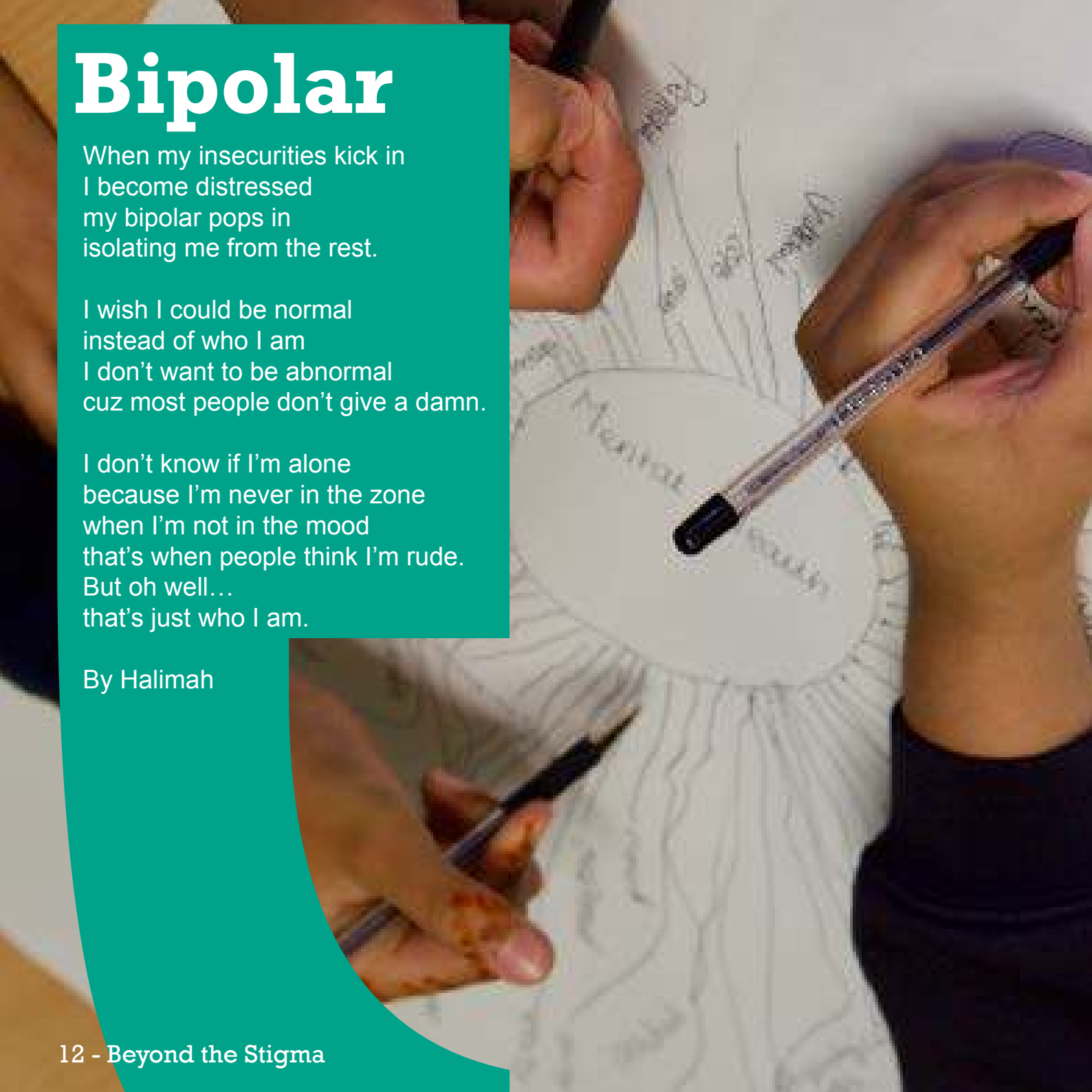
# Bipolar

When my insecurities kick in  
I become distressed  
my bipolar pops in  
isolating me from the rest.

I wish I could be normal  
instead of who I am  
I don't want to be abnormal  
cuz most people don't give a damn.

I don't know if I'm alone  
because I'm never in the zone  
when I'm not in the mood  
that's when people think I'm rude.  
But oh well...  
that's just who I am.

By Halimah





# Dementia

Dementia has taken over his brain  
his personality is no longer the same,  
don't expect him to remember  
what happened on the 1st of November.

I miss all of his fun and laughter  
maybe I'll see a smile on his face  
in the hereafter,  
you may think he has gone mad  
but he's still my grandad.  
We've got to stand beside him  
and love him till the end!

By Safa

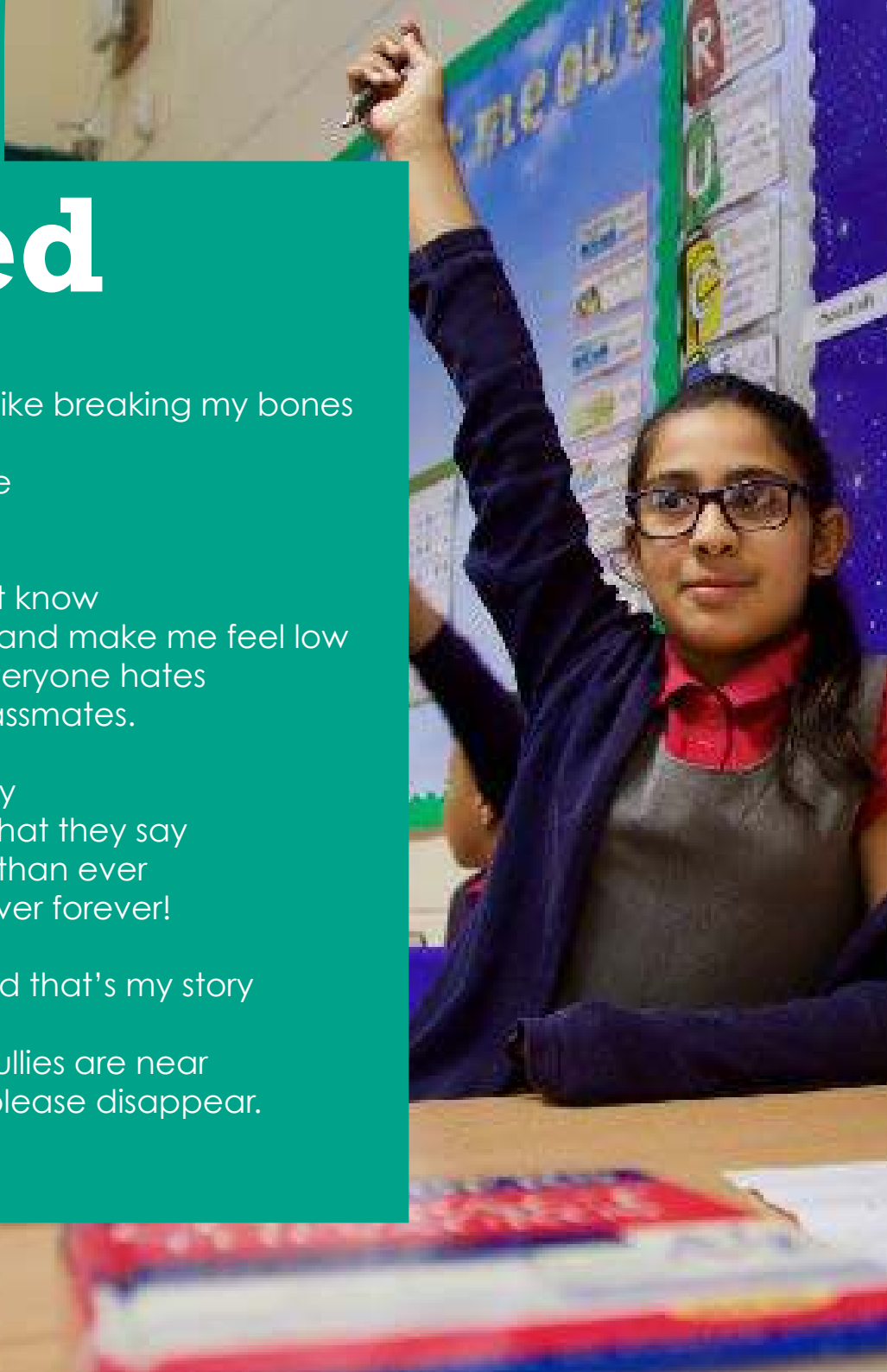
# Bullied


I feel so alone  
emotionally mentally it's like breaking my bones  
my life's a mess  
these bullies are killing me  
I'm in too much stress.

I feel so empty I just don't know  
they mess with my head and make me feel low  
I'm just a shadow that everyone hates  
no friends but horrible classmates.

It's like a routine everyday  
nobody likes me that's what they say  
but then it hit me harder than ever  
I couldn't live like this, never forever!

So I took away my life and that's my story  
written on this knife  
this can happen when bullies are near  
we don't want them so please disappear.



A photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, the back of a student's head and shoulders is visible, sitting at a desk. To the right, another student wearing a blue hijab and glasses is looking towards the left. In the background, there is a wooden bookshelf filled with books and colorful storage bins (red, green, blue). The lighting is warm and indoor.

And because of them my momma's so sad  
but by the look on her face she's also mad  
night and day, day and night  
her wild eyes are filled with fright.

I felt so bad, as do the rest  
she works so hard, her limit to the best  
she was so stressed  
she died with depression  
she's with me now, she's not alone  
cuz she got me now her very own...  
like I said her very own.

By Mariya

# My Rights as a Sister

B-R-O-T-H-E-R-S

I'm told I'm totally blessed  
that my short life's not a mess  
but with these rascal boys  
I've sadly become stressed.

Sleepless nights  
with my small naughty knights  
covered in colorful kites  
still fighting for my human rights.

Oh well.  
Your life might feel like H-E-L-L  
but remember well  
a strong mind will show you soon in time  
where you belong,  
and remember be bravely strong.

By Aishah







# You're not alone

This is mental health we are talking about,  
when no one's around the horrible thoughts start coming out.  
You recall everything that happened that day,  
and remember all the things that those people say.

Many things have caused my depression,  
nobody can see this it's in my reflection and I think it's taking possession.  
I stay up all night, I can't sleep its taking over from head to feet.

I can see things no one else can see,  
I'm standing in the middle with them circling around me.  
I hear whispers, I see a figure,  
I wake up at night to find myself in a fright, sitting in my bed tight.

ation.

Sadness  
drown

My mood changes very quick and people start calling me thick, I lose control, all my thoughts change it's like a twist in the game. It's like my mind is broken, everything is muddled up, but don't think I'm gonna give up.

You don't have to be ill,  
you don't have to take a pill.  
You're more than you think you are,  
cuz you're not useless.

The Anonymous Four

-Sweet

ion

her knees

emotion  
potion

Suspicious  
evan

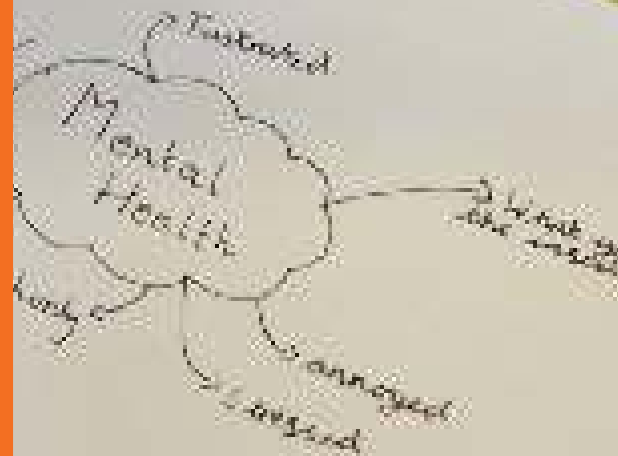
# Frustration

We all know life is a little crazy  
sometimes things can become a bit hazy,  
you look frustrated – don't know how to cope  
all you do is deny – you've given up hope.

Your mind is full of unbearable stress  
get the cleaners in to remove the mess,  
remember to look after your mental health  
it's far more important than gaining wealth.

Now it's proven pain will find its way  
it is time to tell those tears not to stay.

By Yusuf, Ibrahim, Essa and Hussain



# When I was Seven Years Old

When I was seven years old my mama told me  
go make yourself some friends or you'll be lonely,  
soon it will be cold, the direction will be bold  
and all my books have been sold.

My trigger got pulled, the stress took it to the limits  
and I had a life which was filled with depression and aggression,  
never think you're dumb, left feelings alone and numb.

When I was 7 years old I was the smallest,  
but others were the tallest, I just limped like a wimp.  
When I was 7 years old, I was shy and I used to cry,  
I used to lie but I always tried.

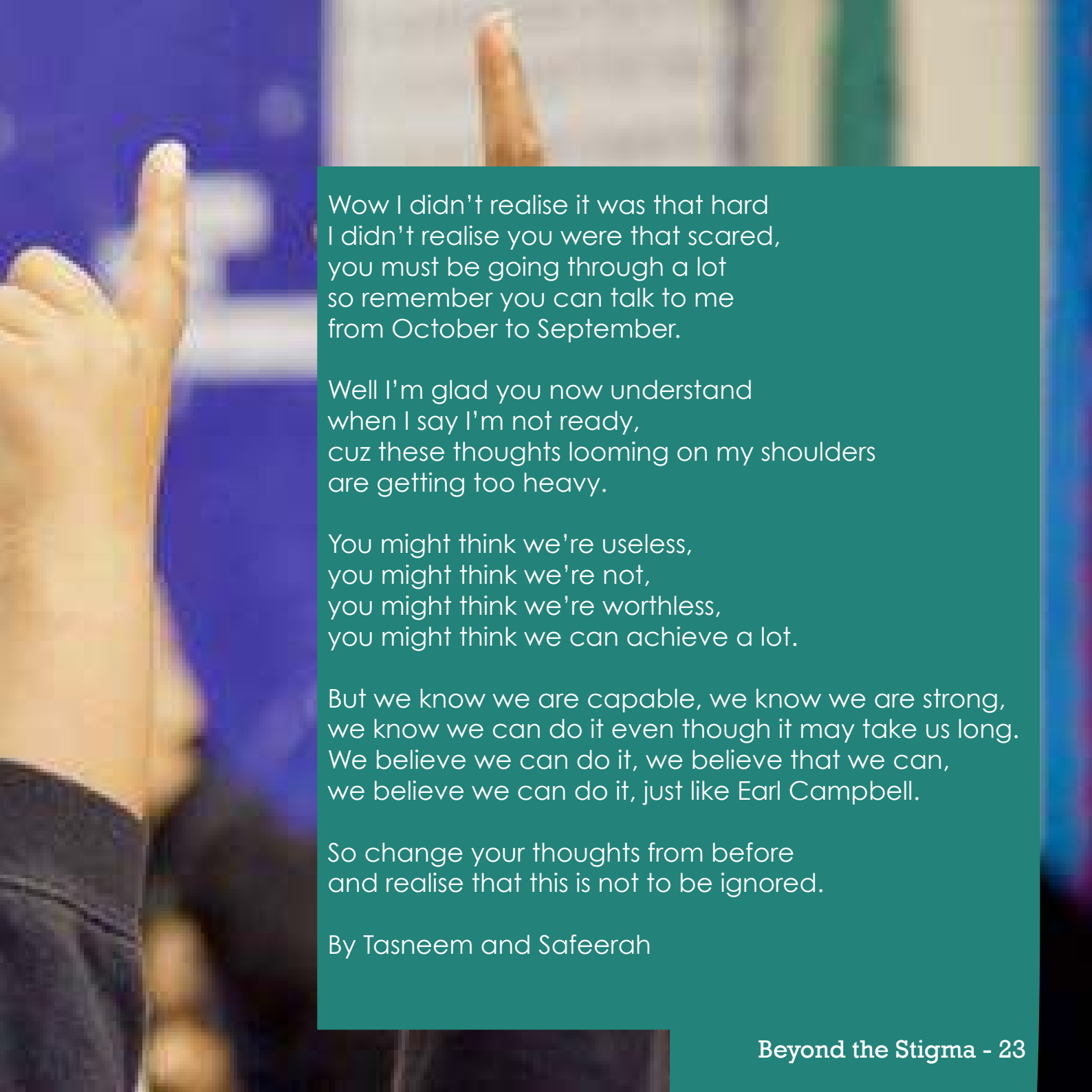
By Usman

# Truth and Light

Oi you the one who's mental  
always bumping into me saying it's accidental,  
oh why are you being so mean,  
I can't control it's all in my genes.

To be honest I find you a bit lame  
you should really be ashamed,  
it's not my fault I'm always worrying,  
while you're over there still bullying.

Wait hang on a second I'm confused  
so tell me the truth, tell me about you,  
you see the thing is I can never see the light,  
always in darkness and it's giving me a fright.

A hand with a lit cigarette pointing upwards against a blurred background. The hand is in the foreground, and the cigarette is lit. The background is out of focus, showing some indistinct shapes and colors.

Wow I didn't realise it was that hard  
I didn't realise you were that scared,  
you must be going through a lot  
so remember you can talk to me  
from October to September.

Well I'm glad you now understand  
when I say I'm not ready,  
cuz these thoughts looming on my shoulders  
are getting too heavy.

You might think we're useless,  
you might think we're not,  
you might think we're worthless,  
you might think we can achieve a lot.

But we know we are capable, we know we are strong,  
we know we can do it even though it may take us long.  
We believe we can do it, we believe that we can,  
we believe we can do it, just like Earl Campbell.

So change your thoughts from before  
and realise that this is not to be ignored.

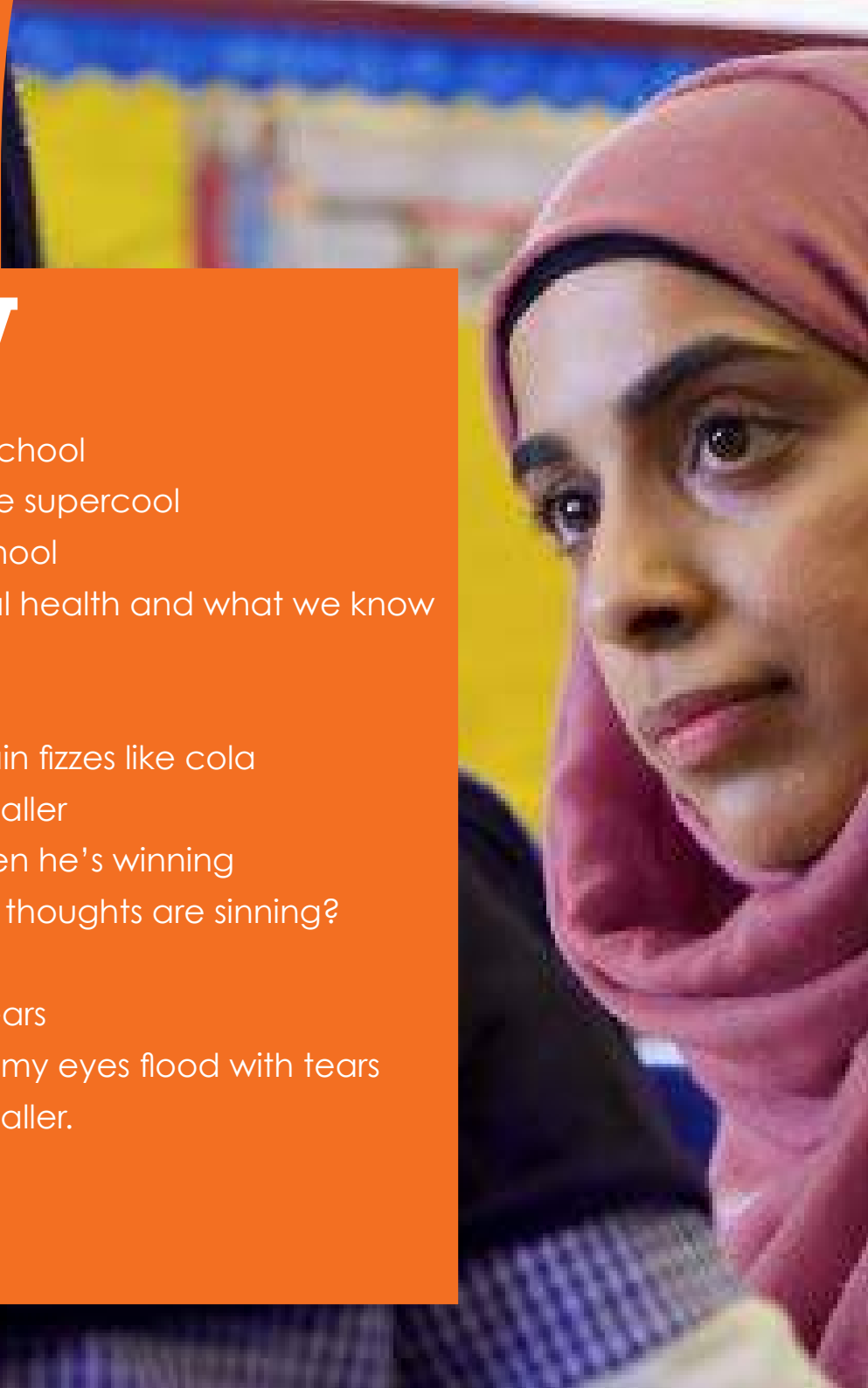
By Tasneem and Safeerah

# How it is Now


Here we are at Palfrey Girls School  
a rap battle from us would be supercool  
back from our little Junior School  
we have learnt about mental health and what we know  
let's get started here we go!

Full of scary thoughts, my brain fizzes like cola  
but before that I was a footballer  
after games I'd dab, like when he's winning  
but how can I play when my thoughts are sinning?

All of our anxiety, all of the fears  
I want to play and score but my eyes flood with tears  
but before that I was a footballer.







Pack your bags, come back next year  
cause we ain't got no space for fear  
scared of failure, won't achieve  
must be confident and believe.

Why do I feel like this? I feel so frustrated!  
Crash! Bang! Like a volcano which is about to explode  
my tummy filling up with butterflies like spicy curry  
bubbling up a big pan of worry  
my heart is beating as I enter a room full of people in a meeting.

Sometimes life is like a game  
I can't take much more of this daily strain  
my mind is screaming at me  
my heart is beating as fast as I could ever imagine it to  
I feel as if I am pressured, wait am I?

Bricks together this wall has built  
to keep the cons out, just like guilt  
and what is me is honesty  
so stay right and you'll be free; without family.

By The Tortilla Rappers

# Sensational Solution

Stuck in my own head; feeling frustrated  
that people always left me under-rated  
feeling useless and beating myself down  
people perpetually see me with a frown.

I've got a sensational solution  
to help overcome this mind confusion  
talk to someone else and share your fears  
don't keep it a secret or hide your tears.

I've got a sensational solution  
to help overcome this mind confusion  
let the stress and agony go  
clear them out before they overflow.

I've got a sensational solution  
to help overcome this mind confusion!

By Samira, Humairah and Shayla

# Rejected

Rejected, my watery eyes start to explode  
down my ashen cheeks, volcanic tears freely flowed.  
Repetitive insults, echo through my ears  
constant bullying adding to my fears.  
Slowly the fog descends enveloping my brain  
concealing the danger of the approaching train.

Piece by piece the puzzle grows,  
once in a blue moon, my courage shows.  
I expose the bully – face to face,  
now my life surely steps up a pace.

By Zoya, Amarah and Maleeha


# Wrap it up!

Ladies and Gentleman!

We're rapping 'bout mental health problems  
we have much stress please god bless  
Drop the beat...

Constant worries weighing on my brain  
round and round, driving me insane.  
Tossing, turning, sweat drained sleep,  
waterful tears streaming I weep.

A terrible, frightening, fearful feeling,  
praying to my god keeps up with healing.  
If only to myself I could be so kind,  
but happiness is a treasure, difficult to find.



Tears flow in streams of sorrow,  
only hoping for a brighter tomorrow.  
You've stolen my heart and ran away,  
I could run after but here I stay.

Hoping that you'll turn around,  
with love lifting me up off the ground.  
But still I lie in my pool of despair,  
emotionless, empty without a care.  
Because through my sad sorry state,  
I sit for you and silently wait!

By the  
Demented Falcons

# Positive Vibe

Sometimes it can be hard to be happy  
no feelings barred  
and I get it, I'm sad too,  
but you can be happy with things to do.

Singing to your own beat  
doing drawings, being neat.  
Sometimes I like to cook,  
or knit and snuggle with a good book.

Anxiety has a variety of problems  
so be happy without any tension,  
don't let bad feelings get their retention.

To be better an inspiration is the key to detestation,  
instead of a stomach filling up with butterflies,  
you can be happy with life behind your eyes.



Dancing, singing in tune,  
full verse is a much better way than being nervous.

I will give you hope and courage to overcome the pain  
if you shout out my name,  
I will come and reduce the pain.

I can make a smile  
because I know that I can freestyle,  
smiling helps you be happy  
as of frowns, they could be snappy.

When I can't eat, I feel so low  
so I get out a sheet, and draw a rainbow.  
I have beautiful colours  
but I don't love them all year round,  
because of my eating disorder  
which doesn't keep me sound.

By Sadiyah

# Cemented

Every day when he wakes up he feels demented  
sadness, fear, depression, every day is oppression,  
he feels so cemented.

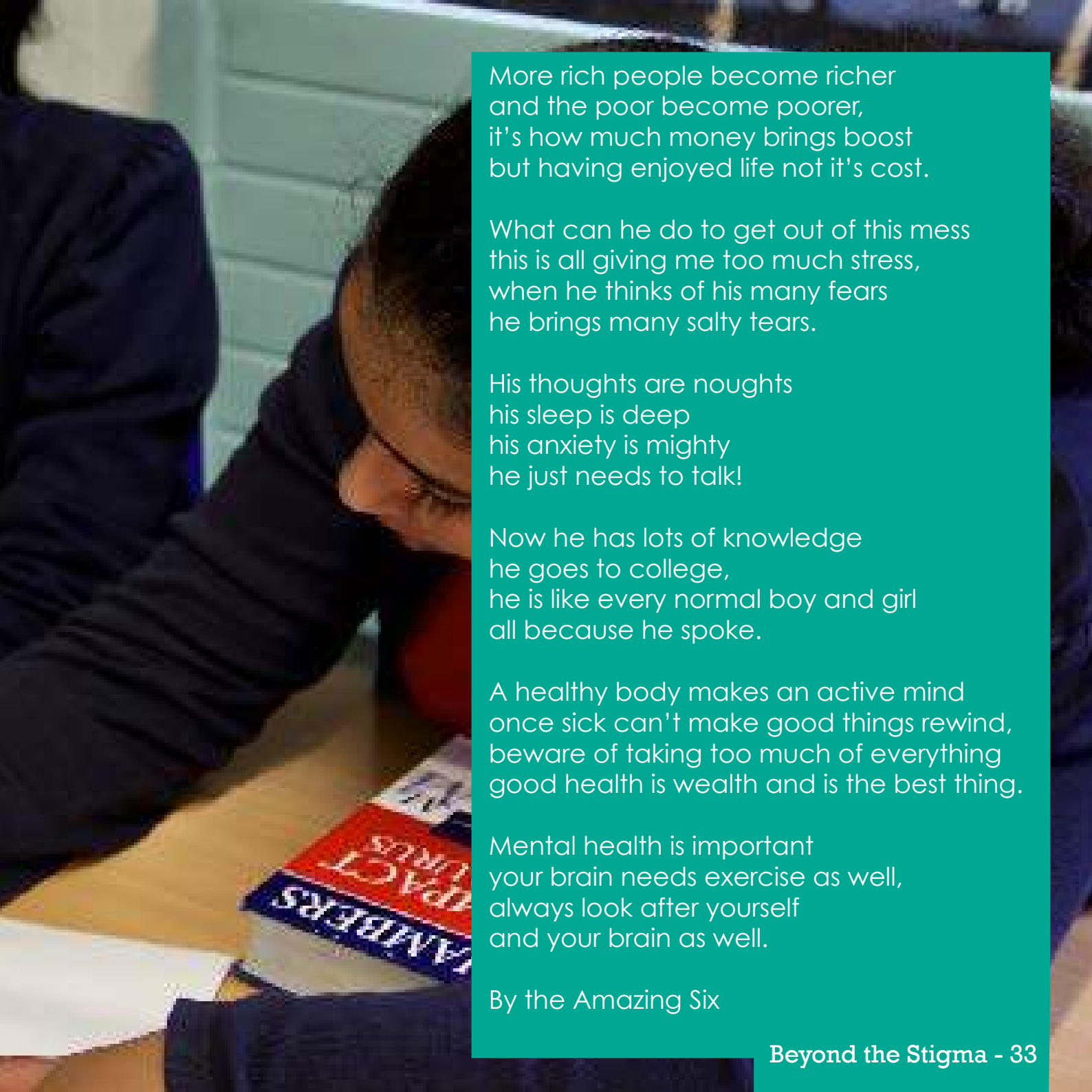
He doesn't know what to do  
he's blinded by anger,  
he don't know what to say  
for anger he has a burning hunger.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah,  
I heard what you said  
I'm hungry, I want some anger  
let's start some beef, mate you look like a langur.

Shave that beard it's bigger than your mothers,  
when I'm angry I'm the king of kings,  
on top of the world, but when I'm not  
I'm on the ground, but when I'm not hiding  
I'm crying...  
Because I want to let go...







More rich people become richer  
and the poor become poorer,  
it's how much money brings boost  
but having enjoyed life not it's cost.

What can he do to get out of this mess  
this is all giving me too much stress,  
when he thinks of his many fears  
he brings many salty tears.

His thoughts are noughts  
his sleep is deep  
his anxiety is mighty  
he just needs to talk!

Now he has lots of knowledge  
he goes to college,  
he is like every normal boy and girl  
all because he spoke.

A healthy body makes an active mind  
once sick can't make good things rewind,  
beware of taking too much of everything  
good health is wealth and is the best thing.

Mental health is important  
your brain needs exercise as well,  
always look after yourself  
and your brain as well.

By the Amazing Six

# The Legacy

The project was an incredible success and surpassed our expectations. With Creative Black Country's support, Changing Our Lives were able to bring together a community both young and old and translate a subject surrounded by taboo through a celebration of young people's artistic talents.

The Palfrey community are really excited about the work that Changing Our Lives has started, which has ignited an interest and appetite to develop further work across the wider Muslim community and tackle an issue that has never openly been talked about.

“

*We need to talk about mental health so people in the community become more aware and this will help people support each other. Some people in the Muslim community are afraid of what people will say if you mention mental health, but mental health is everyone's business so let's start a conversation about it. We need to use this work as a springboard for future conversations in our local community.*

**Siraaj Nadat, Palfrey Community Member**

*Palfrey is a rich, vibrant and welcoming community and it has been an absolute pleasure to work with them. Since the project took place we have had lots of interest from further schools and community members to build on the work that has been done. There is a genuine desire to embed an approach to mental health at the heart of the Palfrey community that will drive and creative real social change.*

”

**Lucy Dunstan, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Changing Our Lives**





**No one is too disabled,  
or too affected by  
mental health difficulties,  
to live an ordinary life**

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