



EMERALD POINTS

**MENTAL HEALTH  
LITERACY AND  
YOUNG PEOPLE**

**PAUL CRAWFORD**



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# MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY AND YOUNG PEOPLE

BY

**PAUL CRAWFORD**

*The University of Nottingham, UK*



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To all the young people of Ukraine*  
*Ми з тобою*  
*[Transl. We stand with you]*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Professor Paul Crawford** is the founder and the world's first professor of the field of health humanities. He directs the Centre for Social Futures at the Institute of Mental Health, The University of Nottingham, UK. He has contributed to policy development in mental health and human care in the United Kingdom, advising senior politicians on the importance of the arts and humanities in healthcare, health, and well-being.

Professor Crawford's work has attracted multiple awards and recognition, not least Fellowships of the Royal Society of Arts, Academy of Social Sciences, and Royal Society for Public Health. His pioneering work in health humanities has attracted more than £7m in research funding from Arts Humanities and Research Council, Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC/MRC, UK Research and Innovation, The Leverhulme Trust, and British Academy. He has led numerous AHRC-funded research networks related to the arts and dementia, the representation of mental state in literature, and in the broader health humanities.

Professor Crawford currently leads major AHRC-funded studies: (1) The production and evaluation of original animations with Aardman Animations,

[www.whatsupwitheveryone.com](http://www.whatsupwitheveryone.com) to advance mental health literacy among young people (released February 2021). This campaign won Best Design and Content in the 2021 Design Week Awards and reached over 17m people within four months of launch alone. (2) A study of Florence Nightingale at home that focuses on domestic health, psychological health, and contagion ([www.florenceightingale.org](http://www.florenceightingale.org)). The book from this study was longlisted for the B.S. Hughes Award for science-related writing and nominated for the People's Book Prize 2021. He is also co-investigator for the £1.25m national MARCH network into social and cultural assets for mental health.

Professor Crawford has held multiple visiting professorships or advisory board appointments in the United Kingdom and overseas. He has written over 140 publications including peer-reviewed papers, book chapters, and books, most recently *Cabin Fever: Surviving Lockdown in the Coronavirus Pandemic* (Emerald, 2021), *Florence Nightingale at Home* (Palgrave, 2020), *The Routledge Companion to Health Humanities* (Routledge, 2020), and *Humiliation: Mental Health and Public Shame* (Emerald, 2019). He is the Lead Editor for the *Palgrave Encyclopedia of Health Humanities* (Springer, New York) and Commissioning Editor for two series: *Arts for Health* (Emerald); *Routledge Studies in Literature and Health Humanities* (Routledge). His book *Health Humanities* (Palgrave, 2015) is now available in Mandarin (Springer Beijing). His other publications include the following: *Evidence-based Health Communication* (Open University Press, 2006), *Communication in Clinical Settings* (Nelson Thornes, 2006), *Storytelling in Therapy* (Nelson Thornes, 2004), *Evidence Based Research* (Open University Press, 2003) [Highly Commended, BMA Book Awards 2002], and *Politics and History in William Golding: The World Turned Upside Down* (University of Missouri Press, 2002). His novel, *Nothing Purple, Nothing Black* (Book Guild, 2002), attracted the critical acclaim of fellow writers David Lodge, Roy Porter, Sara Maitland, and Paul Sayer and was optioned for film with British film producer Jack Emery (Dramahouse) until his illness halted production.

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## MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY AND YOUNG PEOPLE: *WHAT'S UP WITH EVERYONE?*

This book examines creative approaches to mental health literacy. In the wake of COVID-19, and the onslaught of major war breaking out once again in Europe, the mental health of young people is at stake, with increasing numbers struggling with anxiety, depression, and other psychological challenges. During the pandemic, the Children's Commissioner reported that in the United Kingdom, 1 in 6 young people aged 5–19 had a probable mental health disorder in 2020. This had risen from 1 in 9 in 2017! There was also a 33% increase in referrals to children's mental health services in 2019/2020 and a 4% increase in the number of young people receiving support from the NHS in the United Kingdom alone. The report highlighted a big gap between ambition and reality in addressing these challenges, with a “decent mental health service” remaining elusive (Children's Commissioner, 2021). In the United States two key reports claimed a national mental health emergency among young people (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021; US Surgeon General, 2021).

This book aims to provide an accessible, lively, and creative entry point to mental health literacy and young people at a time of unprecedented challenges to their psychological health, with increased uncertainty about physical survival, rising cases of anxiety, depression, stress, and loneliness, all compounded by hampered social connectedness, losses in educational attainment, and concerns for future employment opportunities.

In its focus on creative approaches to mental health literacy and responses to life's many and sometimes profound challenges, the book aims to close the gap between what we think of as “mental health problems,” that is as illnesses or diseases to be sorted out by trained professionals only, and what I have called “creative public health” (Crawford, 2020). Creative public health is about the public – and in this case young people – playing an active role in

their own mental health and well-being, and doing so by making fuller use of the social and creative assets around them. The book introduces the reader unfamiliar with this concept to the ways that the creative arts not only contribute to positive mental health, but may also be our best chance to advance understanding of and responses to mental health challenges. In a Clay Center film, Mark, the son of famous author Kurt Vonnegut, speaks to the fact that art, not medications or psychiatric treatment, saved his life (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcqmCXVuqYk>).

My book is of one of two halves, both important. The first part focuses on improving upstream knowledge about and responses to the difficult transitional period young people aged 17–24 face to reduce or counter the development of specific mental health disorders downstream. The second part examines downstream mental health literacy when particular disorders are already part of the lives of young people given that 50% of mental disorders begin by age 14 with 75% beginning by age 26. I will now set out in a little more detail each of these parts.

Chapter 2 provides a background and context to mental health literacy, and describes the campaign, *What's Up With Everyone? (WUWE?)*, cocreated with the fabulous Aardman Animations (*Wallace & Gromit*, *Shaun the Sheep*, *Chicken Run*, etc.). The campaign offers accessible upstream information on how to deal with what young people consider five key life challenges to their mental health and well-being: perfectionism, loneliness and isolation, competitiveness, independence, and social media. The campaign introduces each of these themes in an evidence-informed series of five original animations, with accessible information supporting young people to begin reflections or conversations with their friends, parents, and teachers, etc. The films were coproduced with young people aged 17–24, who are likely in transition to college, university, or the workplace when they face practical, emotional, and social challenges. Yet these animated stories are not limited to this age range. They are available at [www.whatsupwitheveryone.com](http://www.whatsupwitheveryone.com) (with mental health and help seeking advice) and (for younger audiences) on Aardman's YouTube Channel alongside Shaun the Sheep and other popular characters. The resources provide an engaging and popular format to make a difference to the lives of young people.

Aardman has a stellar history in film animation, winning numerous major awards and nominations including multiple Academy Awards, BAFTA Awards, Emmys, and many others. The company has prided itself on creating short films on mental health to advance literacy, not least “Share the Orange”

(Alzheimer's Research UK), "Bristol Ageing Better" (Isolation and Loneliness), and, more recently, "New Mindset," created for World Mental Health Day 2018, narrated by Stephen Fry. The public reach of these films is staggering, with "Share the Orange" alone viewed 22 million times with 2 million shares across social media and social support of celebrities, including Bill Gates, Lewis Hamilton, Sir Richard Branson, Jeff Bridges, and Sir Ian McKellen. Equally impressive is Aardman's "World's Largest Lesson" commissioned by the Gates Foundation as part of their support for the UN Sustainable Development Goals and which reached millions.

Similarly, in just the first few months after launch of *What's Up With Everyone?* (February 8, 2021), we reached over 17 million people! The campaign also attracted the support of prominent celebrities and influencers, such as actor and mental health champion, Stephen Fry, Dr Alex George (an A & E doctor and former *Love Island* contestant who advises the UK Government in his role as Youth Mental Health Ambassador), Michael Chakraverty (from *Bake Off*), Ovie Soko (the British professional basketball star), and many others. We were similarly delighted that the campaign won Best Content and Social Media at the prestigious Design Week Awards 2021!

There were 42 young people involved in the production of the animations, recruited by Aardman with support from the Mental Health Foundation and Leaders Unlocked, achieved by contacting organizations that work with young people, universities, and colleges across the United Kingdom and through posts on social media. The young people actively contributed to the development of scripts in a cocreative pilot and workshops, and provided feedback on how their ideas translated into animated characters. Working closely with Dan Binns, Director and Designer at Aardman, our young people and the wider project team created new, compelling characters related to the five themes (see [Fig. 1](#)): [left to right] Tai, Ashley, Charlie, Alex, and Merve. The experiences and voices of the young people were transposed onto these animal-based characters in a modern take on "cautionary tales" in a humorous and knowing style that evokes memories of childhood TV programs at the same time as using more adult themes and references.

The wider project team prepared the website platform information with feedback from our young people. Then the research team evaluated the impact of the animated stories on young people's mental health literacy, their trust in the content of the films and online content, the use of digital storytelling in mental health, and the emotional responses to the resources on social media (see Research Discoveries below).



Credit: ©Aardman Animations Ltd.

**Fig. 1. Characters in *What's Up With Everyone?***

In Chapter 3 the focus turns to supporting young people's responses to the downstream challenges of mental disorders. While Chapter 2 explores the contribution of animated stories in advancing upstream mental health literacy, here we outline creative components to downstream mental health literacy, exploring new possibilities for managing mental health disorders and possibly avoiding them in the first place. For example, creative practices such as music making (with the human voice or musical instruments) can have profound, lifelong impact on mental health, increasing young people's positive sense of self, self-expression, emotional intelligence, and openness to new experiences. Yet we need our young people to know about all this.

The notion of literacy has, of course, a more general history and use, not least in relation to being literate, that is, having the skills of understanding and using language and communication. Montoya (2018) defines it in granular fashion as follows: "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts." Also, in a broader sense than applied to mental health alone, health literacy continues to be a concern and challenge, a term that NMC (2018) defines specifically as: "the degree to which individuals can

obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions” (p. 39).

Kutcher et al. (2016) define mental health literacy as “understanding how to obtain and maintain positive mental health; understanding mental disorders and their treatments; decreasing stigma related to mental disorders; and, enhancing help-seeking efficacy (knowing when and where to seek help and developing competencies designed to improve one’s mental health care and self-management capabilities).”

## MENTAL HEALTH AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people face multiple and significant barriers regarding their mental health. They may be unaware that they are mentally unwell, need help, or even be in denial about their deteriorating mental state for various reasons. They may also feel stigmatized, struggle to recognize symptoms, doubt that help and understanding will be forthcoming, question professional expertise in mental health (including biological- or counselling-based explanations), worry about confidentiality, or have previous experience of poor quality support or treatment. Importantly, even though young people may be emotionally intelligent, they can lack mental health literacy. Other factors that can impact on accessing support include family and cultural biases and beliefs about mental illness that they may subscribe to or the feeling that their seeking mental health assistance is a betrayal of their family. Young people may believe that a label such as ‘mental problems’ will go on their permanent record; or fear it will prevent them from getting good jobs, insurance, or allow them to travel freely. In many cases, ethnically diverse young people who experience racism and more likely their parents have a deep distrust of the healthcare system, due to unethical practices, and the experience of inferior treatment. Immigrants are another group that fear mistreatment or reporting to border control authorities should they seek the help of mental health services.

There are about 1.2 billion young people worldwide with the majority living in less developed countries. Mental illness, mental distress, and low well-being are a continuing and growing burden to society, with mounting concern about how this affects young people, not least university students (IPPR, 2017; Pereira et al., 2019). The growing burden of mental illness facing society is clear with the rise in mental disorders set to cost the global economy \$16 trillion by 2030 (Patel et al., 2018). Young people, in particular, are at risk, with 20% of adolescents experiencing a mental health issue in any year,

with suicide as the leading cause of death for young people aged 20–34 (ONS, 2017). Data in the United States show that most deaths by suicide occur without the individual in mental health treatment.

Importantly, the majority of young people do not receive appropriate interventions at a sufficiently early age despite the largest survey of students by Pereira et al. (2019) posting alarming figures for anxiety, loneliness, substance misuse, and thoughts of self-harm or self-injury. This revealed that a third felt they had a mental health issue requiring professional help but only 37% were aware of school or university mental health services. Encouragingly, 60% stated they would access online expert psychological help if rapidly accessible. That said, there is likely to be a marked disparity between the openness of young people to seek mental health services and resistance on the part of many parents. With the ongoing challenge of funding mental health services, there is fertile ground for innovation, especially in the area of creative, online approaches to mental health literacy as proposed here.

This volume actively encourages young people to take the position of learning about and contributing to their own mental health, supported by family, friends, and health professionals (if needed). It aims to empower them in decision-making and to trust their own solutions rather than ticking the “grown up boxes.” Current indicative literature bears out the relevance of this ethos to addressing young people’s mental health (e.g., Children’s Commissioner, 2017; Curran & Hill, 2017; Svindseth & Crawford, 2019). As such, this book marks a critical reframing of public mental health initiatives for young people. It promotes discussion of how young people, parents, and practitioners working in or with concern for young people’s mental health, scholars in arts and humanities, and social, medical, and health sciences can rethink responses to mental distress and well-being, utilizing diverse resources and strategies, not least those available through the creative industries such as Aardman. As indicated earlier, we can conceive of this combined approach as part of a new era of creative public health (in this case creative public mental health) with the potential to transform young people’s lives – an emphasis that springs from the field of health humanities, to which we now turn briefly.

## HEALTH HUMANITIES

In discussing creative approaches to upstream and downstream mental health literacy, this book draws on health humanities, a fast-growing field pioneered by the author back in 2006. It comprises multiple traditions for improving and

advancing health and well-being through a democratizing, activist, practical, and inclusive mission to apply the arts and humanities to support and transform health and well-being (see Crawford et al., 2010, 2015, 2020). The *What's Up With Everyone?* campaign is congruent with the ambition of the health humanities to mobilize the skills, knowledge, and understanding available through the arts and humanities to enhance people's biopsychosocial health and well-being. It underlines the value of social, emotional, and cultural assets for health and well-being with or without medical prescription.

As such, the field of health humanities encourages the use of creative practices alongside other resources on offer from professional health and social care services, treatments, and interventions. Creative practices in the arts and humanities (including crafts) offer a rich and diverse set of activities and resources to improve the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities. We know, intuitively, just how important creative activities are to our day-to-day lives. Without creative industries and creative practices it is hard to imagine what kind of societies would be possible. If we reflect for a moment on how our own lives would be affected if we were suddenly robbed of music, films, reading, theater, and so on, how much poorer would we be? How vulnerable mentally would we become? How would we deal with the slew of stress in our lives without creative and cortisol-busting off-ramps and all the social connectedness they bring? In our book *Cabin Fever: Surviving Lockdown in the Coronavirus Pandemic* (Crawford & Crawford, 2021) we note the vital role that creative activities play as an antidote to social isolation. During the pandemic, we saw children painting rainbows, the recognition of the contribution of health and social care staff through public murals, and musicians performing online and in the street to lessen the burden. This phenomenon was not simply the activity of individuals, but also often in a context of social engagement with others. The collective production of arts and humanities inspired individuals and fostered attachment between them. At this time, as digital natives, young people may well have had the advantage in using media in new and creative ways compared to adults beyond the Millennial group!

We joined in with online gaming or even discos to break the silence, confinement, and tension of our cabin lives. Unexpected prisoners, billions of people took refuge in a litany of creative activities or consumption of these such as reading books, listening to music, or watching films. Many people enduring the long lockdowns in many countries will have come to realize that "the arts and humanities are the public's greatest route toward health and

well-being” (Crawford & Brown, 2020, p. 401). One of the mainstays of social connectedness in that time and across history has been the making and sharing of stories. It is to storytelling that I now turn, not least because it is this creative activity that is at the heart of nearly everything we do as humans and integral to trying to advance mental health literacy among young people through the campaign *What’s Up With Everyone?*

## STORYTELLING AND MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY

We all like a good story! Listening to and “[t]elling stories is as much part of us as breathing air” (Crawford et al., 2004, p. 11) and we are, as Wilson (2017) notes, “storytelling animals” (p. 10). Stories are key in helping us understand our environment, experiences, and relationships (see Wilson, 2022). They help us build and convey our identities, the building blocks of our selves. They have been the cornerstone of virtually every spiritual text and oral tradition in most every culture around the world. They convey meaning, stimulate conversations and engagements, and encourage creative ways of learning about ourselves, our community, and our place in the universe. Furthermore, in a complex, uncertain, changing, and seemingly contradictory world, stories “are uniquely suited for dealing with mess – not the fruitless task of tidying it up, but helping us navigate our way through it – because stories themselves are inherently messy” (Wilson, 2017, p. 17).

There is growing interest in how stories and metaphor are core to life and can help people negotiate mental health (e.g., Gottschall, 2012). Importantly, stories can also “fundamentally subvert and shift existing power relationships” (Wilson, 2017, p. 18; see also Wilson, 2006), including those that predominate within healthcare contexts. These kinds of issues are at the heart of the campaign *What’s Up With Everyone?* Here we brought the focus on young people’s stories about life’s challenges rather than those of adults. With colleagues at the Storytelling Academy at Loughborough University, the campaign included the creation of an archive of young people’s stories, valuing their perspectives on life’s challenges and mental health. Archives of stories relating to the healing aspects of stories and mental health are available in many other places too. For example, check out Anne Brewster’s Health Story Collaborative and the Clay Center in the United States.