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The Museum of Lost and Found Potential: putting faces to mental health statistics

An exhibition of items from people with mental health issues hopes to 'create some urgency' for government action

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There is a tree branch, a pair of riding boots and lots and lots of nail varnish. A chess board, a police constable's badge and a pile of colourful clothes. Ordinary, everyday things, mostly.

But to 16 people from more than a dozen countries around the world they have special significance, embodying what was lost - and in some cases what was found - in the baffling swirl of mental illness.

The Museum of Lost and Found Potential launches in London this week, marking World Mental Health Day with an exhibition that hopes to encourage empathy, action and even anger by showing what mental illness takes away - but also what can be retrieved if it is treated properly.

“I hope it will create some urgency,” says Jazz Thornton, one of the subjects, a New Zealander who has tried to kill herself a dozen times. Thornton is represented by a tree branch that saved her life during one of those attempts - and by a note she wrote to her future self during recovery on a psychiatric ward, entitled Dear Suicidal Me.

“These are tangible lives being lost,” Thornton said. “This will put a face to the statistics.”

Elisha London who, as chief executive of the group United for Global Mental Health, is the force behind the initiative, said: “This is the health issue that is killing our young people. Suicide is still illegal in 45 countries. Sierra Leone has one psychiatrist (for 7 million people).



Cecilia Ashaley seeks solace in a pedicure when she is depressed. The wall image is a likeness of the sky over Accra, fashioned entirely from nail varnish pots Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

“There is a lot of talk but the action is disproportionately low. We will take this to places where leaders are gathering, so that they touch it and feel it.”

There is much to touch and feel in some more interactive pieces, realised by the artist Nestor Pestana. A ticker tape display with heartbreaking vignettes from Timiebi, a Nigerian woman; a reconstructed shack that was home to a Nepalese victim of human trafficking; a bank of speakers that relate the compelling stories of all participants. “The whole exhibition is about empathy,” Pestana said.

Encouragingly, some of the subjects appear well on the road to recovery or at least to some acceptance and accommodation of what has happened to them.

Deeksha Chowdhury, a student from Delhi, endured years of bullying and torment because of her weight and a skin condition. A display of colourful garments represents her journey from an isolated teenager who always wore baggy black clothing to someone more self confident and outgoing.



An artefact at the Museum of Lost and Found Potential.
Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

For others, artefacts on display speak of their lowest ebb. Cecilia Ashaley, a Ghanaian teacher, is represented by a wall of nail varnish in colours to mimic the west African sky, because whenever she is struggling, she seeks solace in a manicure or pedicure.

“It represents me in my most depressed mood, when I think of things like killing myself,” she said by telephone from Accra (she says the UK Home Office denied her a visa to attend the opening of the museum). “I feel hopeless and not worth it. So I go to the nail bar to improve my mood.

“I love to share my experience to inspire other people not just in my country but people around the world. Having a mental condition does not mean you are ineffective, but with medication and therapy you can contribute to society.”



Graeme Moffat pictured here as a child. Photograph: Handout

Graeme Moffat, who lives in Glasgow, has a similar fall-and-rise story that dates back more than 25 years to the day he broke his back when he fell from a tree as a teenager.

He said: “I suffered in silence for so long because I thought I was alone. That’s how your mind works. I never want anyone to feel the way I felt when I thought it was just me. So I started being open about the journey I was going through.”

A grocery bag represents the lowest ebb for Moffatt when he collapsed in a supermarket. For him, the exhibition is about normalising mental illness.

“It’s OK to have tough times,” he said. “He can get through it. You can even gain from going through these challenges - you have more empathy, more understanding, you can end up so much stronger and more capable.”

Perhaps the saddest story belongs to Stuart and Annette Baker, whose daughter Mary killed herself after a three-year struggle with an eating disorder. The couple have been tireless advocates for suicide prevention and openness about mental illness in the eight years since.

Riding boots and an annotated book are the physical reminders of Mary’s life - a girl who loved to ride horses, play water polo, write poetry, dive. Remarkably, eight years after her death, her parents are still able to see beyond what was lost to glimpse what they have discovered.

“Mary’s potential was lost,” said Stuart, “but possibly there is purpose in what we have been doing. I’m hopeful that maybe we are about to see an improvement in what we are doing with our mentally ill.”



Mary Baker, with brothers Henri and Jack, a year before she took her life. Photograph: Baker family

Visitors who pass through this coming week will be invited to leave a 40-second message spelling out what action they want their governments to take. By the time a single person has finished their recording, another person will have taken their life somewhere in the world.

The exhibition is at Unit 6, Covent Garden, London, WC2H 9JA, until 15 October and then travelling internationally.

In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie. In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at www.befrienders.org.

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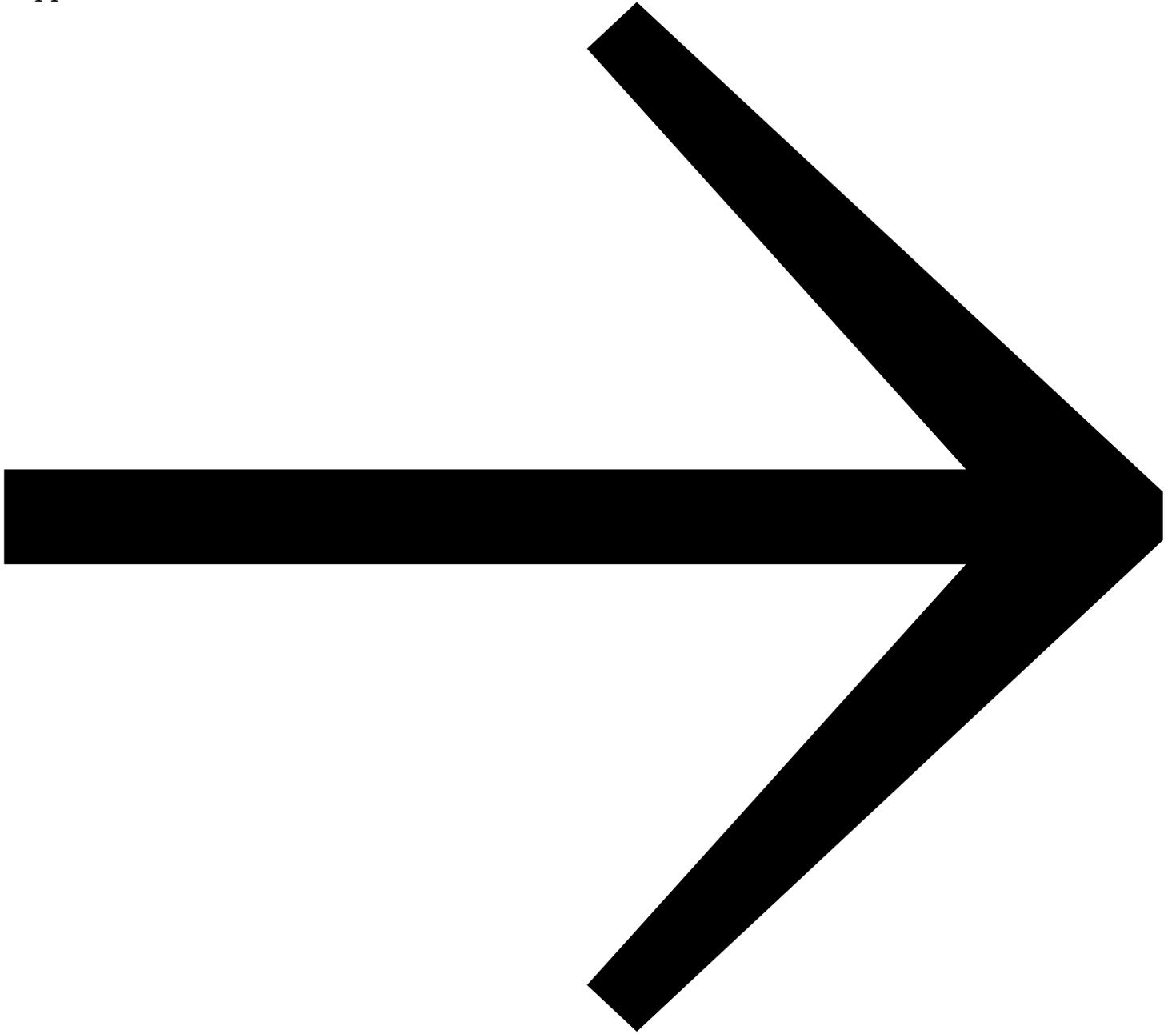
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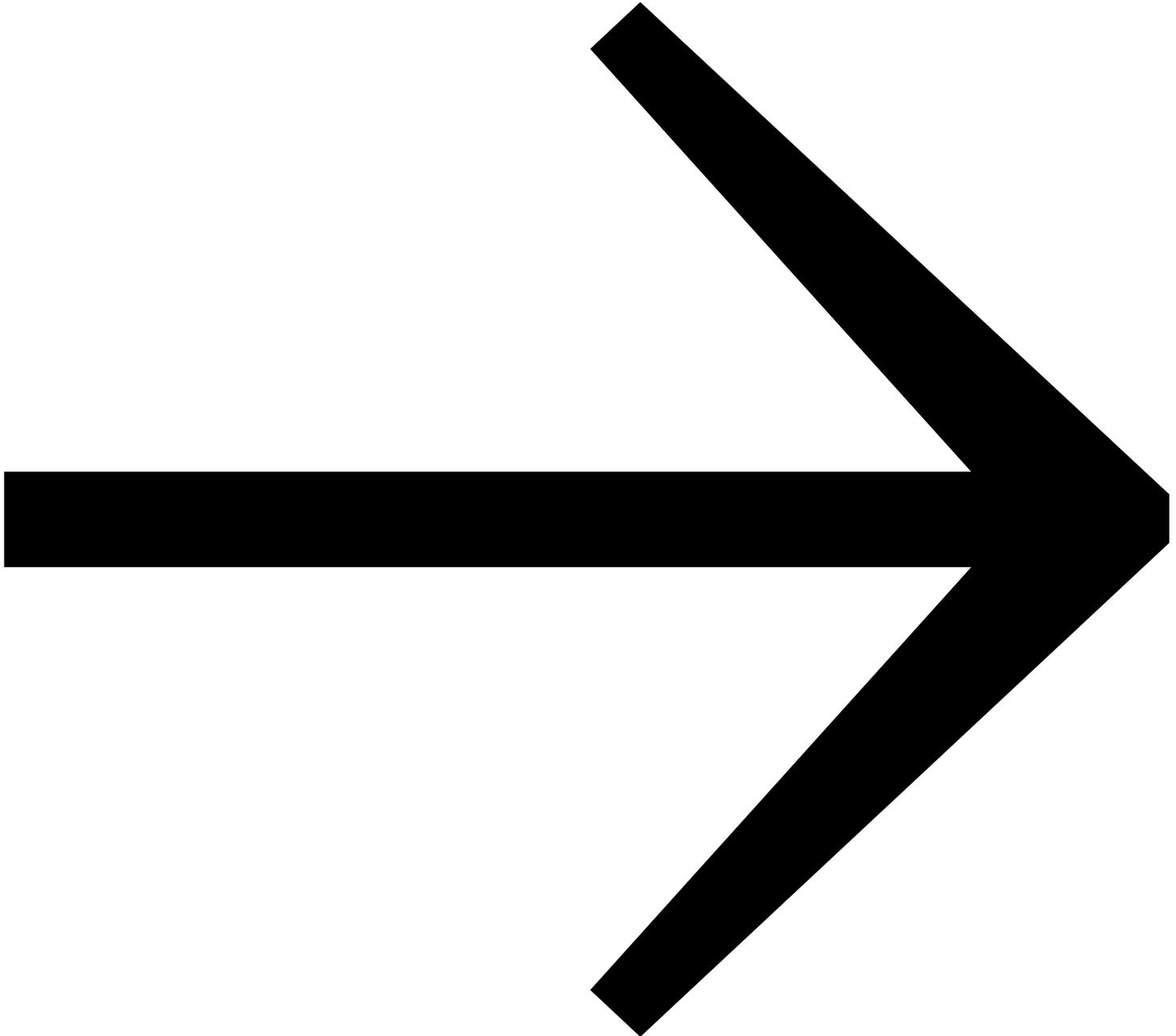
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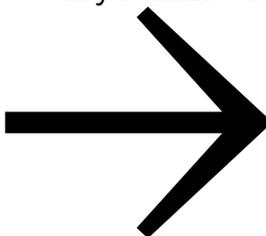


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