

Should we fix something that never really worked?



**February - August 2023
Balmy Army London
Led by Amina Jama, Cecilia Wee
and the vacuum cleaner**

Nishat K

Samira

Shanaz

Yazrah

Forhana

Arin

Bhav

Evie M

Hawwa

Zainab

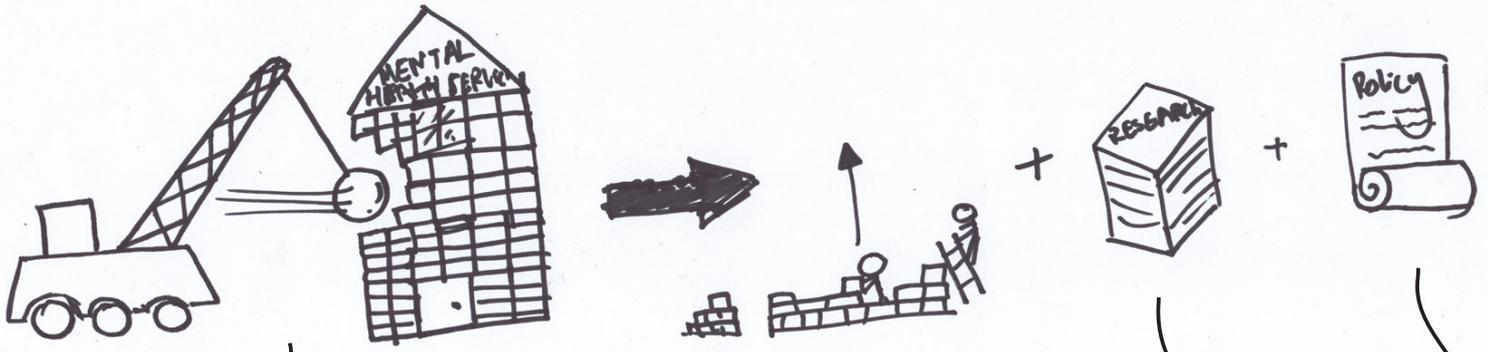
Shane

Ash

Chicken Nugget

Safiyah

REFORM



Shajida

Nishat T

Maiya

Ela

Xenia

Anida

Bean

Violet

Deanna

Josiah

Emma

Phosphene

Fariha

Inaaya

Evie F

‘Should we fix something that never really worked?’

2.8 Million Minds: A Sharing

With more and more young people struggling with their mental health in London, 2.8 Million Minds is a process to support young people to make art and activism that changes how mental health is experienced and supported.

Creating healthy and bold ways for young people to lead, mental health disabled artists and diverse arts organisations are working together to attempt to imagine and make real spaces for mutual care, safety and radical visions of mental health. A multi year approach, building from the local to the whole capital, 2.8 Million Minds is led by artist and activist the vacuum cleaner, alongside partners including Chisenhale Gallery, Bernie Grant Arts Centre, and Whitechapel Gallery, and is being supported by the Mayor of London’s culture team.

We are taking and are inspired by disability justice and mad pride approaches to mental health. Asking ‘how can young Londoners can use art to begin to radically re-imagine mental health support, justice and pride?’.

This is our mad and messy zine, accompanying the sharing on 12 August 2023, filled with the words, experiences and calls for change from 30 young artists.

Please be aware that this zine will feature discussion of mental health and experiences of mental health services, and may include references to experiences of disability, racism, sexism, queer phobia, classism and other systemic violences



Let's Talk About CAHMS

Child and adolescent mental health services. I was a CAMHS kid, and during my time as a service user, I experienced and witnessed many unbelievable failures from the community which was supposed to support and protect, me and other young people.

My first experience of CAMHS included confidentiality being broken, and then they didn't contact me for 6 months, during which I had multiple crisis and was admitted to an inpatient unit.

In the unit, I witnessed more young people being left alone in crisis. I heard staff members talking negatively about other patients.

I was told that I had traumatised several staff members. Staff would often be mad at young people for displaying symptoms of their struggles.

A staff member crossed professional boundaries with a patient, several times, and faced no disciplinary action.

Young people were often told to aid each other during crisis, which was extremely traumatic for all involved.

Staff would regularly say unhelpful and often triggering things to or in front of patients.

The management team, kicked out nearly a whole ward of young people who weren't making progress, because they had an impending inspection and the patients were making them look bad. "Allegedly".

The list goes on and on and on. The system designed to keep us safe, was causing us more harm.

I, like many others, did not deserve to be abandoned by services because I was not prepared to use the skills they were trying to force me to accept. Help is only helpful, when the recipient is ready to accept it. Forcing coping skills onto fragile young minds, is not an effective treatment option.

However, one of the more effective treatments I experienced in the unit was, the period in which outside facilitators regularly came to the ward and taught us how to use art as our voice.

We played games, we had serious and controlled discussions about difficult topics. Some people made drawings, some people wrote poems and texts, some people danced, a song was written; and we took all of that energy, all of our pain and anger and sadness, and we turned it into something amazing, that we could share with others.

We made our voices heard. We turned our whispers into roars, and we made people listen. And it felt amazing. Not just sharing our work, but the whole art making process. Week after week, I watched a group of young people come together to make art, even when things were hard.

Art project Fridays was the highlight of our week; and even though it was difficult in the beginning, more and more people started to open up and actively participate; over time.

Having that creative outlet was so important, putting the young people in charge of the project gave power to those it had been ripped from. And the most beautiful thing about making art is its ability to morph into whatever you want.

Art is subjective, there is no right or wrong. It awakens the senses, and opens up the mind to creativity and the power of our imaginations.

We had the choice to not make anything if we didn't want to, but even when we did we had that reassurance that we were in control, and that is what made us feel safe.

That is what making art can do for your mental health, and the health of others. This project started in a little room, with a handful of young people, and since then we have grown and taken our message to places like Parliament, Somerset House, Lewisham liberty festival, the BBC disability podcast, and now here, at the Whitechapel Gallery.

We aren't sitting around, waiting for the system to change, anymore; we are rising up and fighting for the mental health care we deserve. This is why this project and others like it are so important.

This is how we make change.

-Nemo

BIG CHANGE

LITTLE CHANGE

SYSTEM CHANGE

LOUD CHANGE

COVERAGE

What it is not/ Why is this my reality

Violet: it's not low mood

Bean: i look around me on the street

Violet: it's depression

Bean: as i see people getting on with there life

Violet: it's an inability to function like a human being

Bean: walking with direction.

Violet: it's feeling everything and nothing at the same time with no escape

Bean: however much i wished this was my reality, it is NOT

Violet: isolated from everyone, desperately wanting a life line but not having the energy to leave your bed

Bean: it's far from it

Violet: it's not attention seeking

Bean: i wonder around the streets

Violet: it's asking for help

Bean: aimlessly

Violet: crying out in pain while everyone around you goes about their day as if you don't even exist

Bean: heart pacing, hands shaking

and my world is spinning

Violet: my utter despair is not “hormones”

Bean: the thought of having a consistent support system in my life has withered away.

Violet: it feels as if something has taken over my brain, forcing me to sink into this whirlpool

Bean: a camhs worker who is willing to work with me and make the effort,

Violet: it's not an overreaction

Bean: a pro-active social care team,

Violet: it's how i feel after every single day trying to contain my emotions in a tiny jar and sometimes the lid bursts

Bean: an emotionally safe environment to live

Violet: and i'm sorry if that's hard for you it's not an overreaction

Bean: getting out of my bed

Violet: but i am not too much to deal with if you would actually listen to me and not label me as dramatic when i let what consumes me take over for just a second

Bean: mentally stable

Violet: it's not a “complex case”

Bean: receiving adequate care for my mental health

Violet: it's someone that has been through shit that you would never understand and refuse to attempt to

Bean: unfortunately this is the opposite of my reality

Violet: i am not too complicated for help

Bean: unfortunately this privilege is not one i can afford

Violet: i am not "treatment resistant"

Bean: although we all learn from a young age that life isn't fucking fair.

Violet: i am in pain and maybe taking a bath doesn't work for me

Bean: although i didn't realise for the majority of my teen years i would be in and out of mental health hospitals.

Violet: but then again, does that work for anyone?

Bean: that i would have move to a new location in the country every year.

Violet: my personality is not disordered

Bean: restart my life over and over again after being given up

Violet: it's feelings overwhelming crashing down on you every second of every day

Bean: as a non-binary young person in care with complex mental health needs the injustice and discrimination i have faced is harrowing

Violet: it's being refused treatments by professionals because you're too much for them

Bean: i would never wish the pain i have felt on a single person, besides racists

Violet: it's not not feeling like myself but not knowing what myself actually feels like

Bean: this pain is one that will shatter you.

Violet: but i'm a human and i shouldn't be reduced down to a label

Bean: breaking every corner of your life and diluting your sense of self till you are left disconnected to everything you once enjoyed

Violet: i am not being difficult

Bean: although this is the reality

Violet: i am trying to fiure my shit out before everything becomes too much

Bean: not JUST for me

Violet: i am not a revolving door patient

Bean: collectively camhs, nelft and tower hamlets council have failed me

Violet: i am a person with thoughts and feelings just like you that needs extra support sometimes

Bean: this isn't acceptable

Violet: i am not an angry person

Bean: this isn't healthy

Violet: i just have so much rage in my core at the failings of the mental health system

Bean: this should NOT be normalised

Violet: at what was supposed to be "care" and "safety"

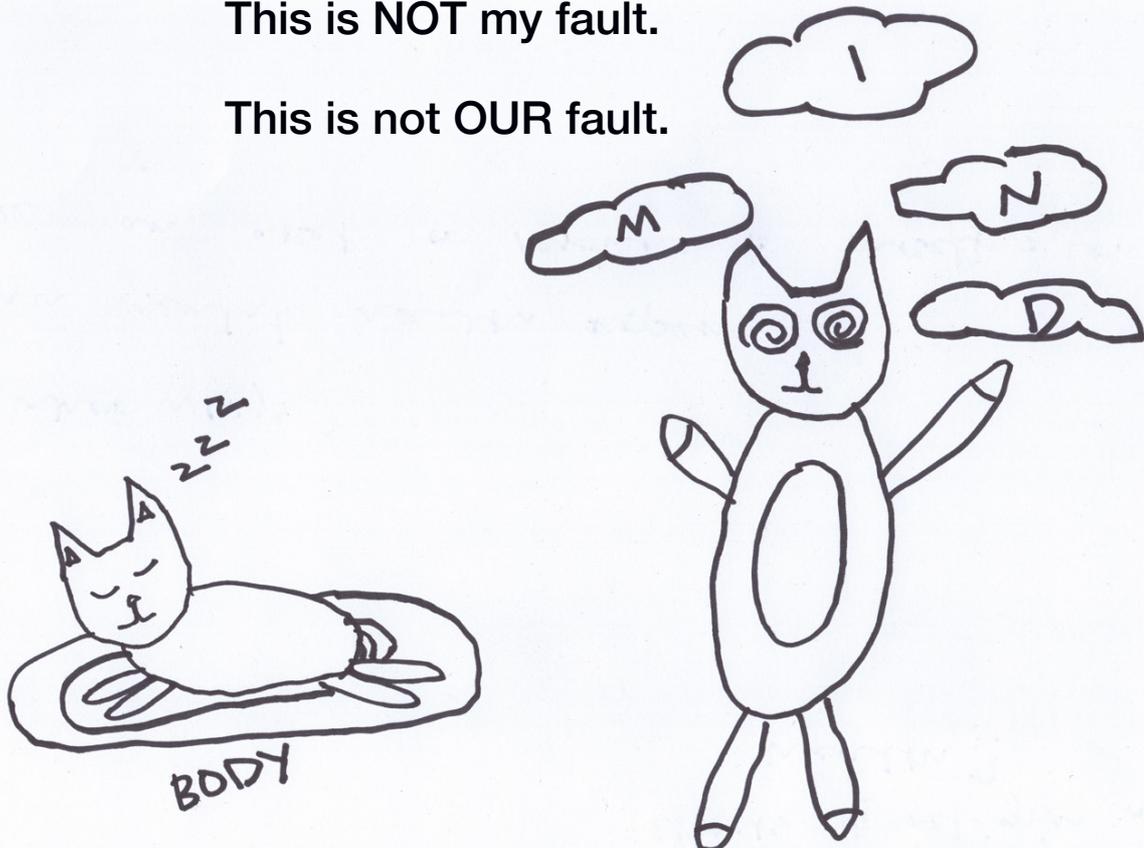
Bean: this is a problem having to get solved by those who've been FAILED by the system

Violet: that has affected me and will affect me for the rest of my life

Bean: a problem CAUSED by incompetent and greedy people with authority and power

This is NOT my fault.

This is not OUR fault.



We are a collective



...of like-minded individuals that want to make change for the better, not only for ourselves but for the people who come after us. Although all of our experiences are different, many of us have found accessing mental health support challenging, sometimes impossible and have found that when we do get through, we do not get the care we need.

We have been working together, meeting every fortnight for the last six months, coming up with different ways to get that support from each other, exploring what is needed together, and creating an open space to discuss these issues. We want the space we have made to be an example for other groups to start thinking about how they can help themselves and those around them.

First, we tried to understand what made each other feel comfortable. Through that, people began to open up.

We then talked about the mental health system and our experiences in school, in CAMHS and elsewhere. Having listened to what people have said, I don't think the system was designed to work for people like us. They think there is a formula like we are a problem to be solved. But we're not the problem.

On this project, what I have found special, is its uniqueness, the general care and openness from everyone. We have all been through a lot in our lives; we've all had trauma. But no comparisons are being made. No one is competing in terms of the pain they have endured. We're all on an equal basis. We accept each other's differences.

Some of us have intense social anxiety. For example, I sometimes find being in groups larger than 3 or 4 people difficult. Other people feel the same way.

So this BIG group was a bit scary for some of us. But we still turned up, and that has been a big step.

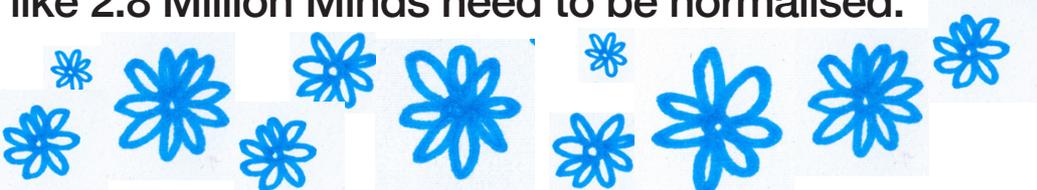
When it comes to new people, some of us have trust issues. This project, however, felt strange in a good way. Regardless of knowing each individual personally or not, there was a shared sense of purpose - passion for change, for ourselves and for those that come after us. Each time I work on 2.8 Million Minds, it is different for me. Despite my issues with being able to let people in, here I feel I can be myself.

There are challenges in this process. For many people, it was hard to come in the first place. Not just because of what we are currently going through but because of what we went through in the system in general, which, unfortunately, can be a big factor in losing hope. Sometimes you'd think, what's the point? How are things ever going to change? Pushing past that, coming again and again, and giving so much to the project and each other - even when it was unclear where we were heading - is why I am so proud of everyone.

For the sharing today, you will see different viewpoints, private feelings, and experiences. You will have an insight into our world. You need to come with an open mind and heart. Please come to the space like you would if you were coming to see your friends and family.

The fact that we need to fight every time just to make this happen is frustrating. What do we want? We want greater awareness. We want more stability - to know that this is something we can have without having to ask. We want spaces like this for young people to be second nature in our city. There may be no such thing as 'normal', but I believe spaces like 2.8 Million Minds need to be normalised.

- Aniq



Creative Mental Health

Mental health you say, or maybe you don't
Because apparently it's an unspoken phenomenon
One that is phenomenal and yet, can be so cynical
Cynically looked at, thought of, dealt with

Dealt with? As if it's a problem to be solved,
That only occurs in those who cannot manage their own mind
But, what if the damage that occurs isn't mine –
What if it's a result of the lack of time...

Time that is spent assuming those
with mental health disorders are out of order -
Out of the order of society
When maybe society is just out of order itself.

Mental health isn't just for a few, it's for us all -
We all have it, we all need it,
we all must be believed and given the space
and energy to not concede
and be told you can't achieve,
because your mind sees the world differently,
deals with time and the pressures
put upon us differently.
It's a lot – the world is a lot.

A lot of beauty, a lot of wonder,
but also a lot of space, a lot of blunder, to get lost in
If we are thought of as a problem, rather
than perhaps a creative vessel -
one that has so much to give, to bring,
to be joyous about.

My point is we aren't to be blamed, but we get shamed,
we get ignored, we get pushed to the bottom of a pile of
those who are more critical, more entitled to help.
Quit telling us we aren't worse off enough to be helped,

but are too bad to be seen as a human being -
there is nothing wrong with seeing the world in a different way,
seeing the world through an artist's eyes.
Through a creative mind – one which should
be allowed to thrive.

Mental Health, how about
Creative Health -
it's beautiful, it's a gift,
but we need to be seen as human,
humane, not insane.



We are us and us is more than a label,
us is a collective of joy and creativity -
let us sore, let us fly, let us ride,
on the wave of life that comes our way,
on the path that we decide.

Yes, give us support, give each other support,
support and listen to one another,
but let us be defined as the normal
that we decide. What gave you the right
to tell us that you know what we should be,
how we should be, what we should see,
how to be free - you don't.



You don't know us like we know
ourselves -let our energy
and creativity flow. It brings us joy,
it brings us hope, it brings us
together and allows us
to be apart.



A part of something bigger,
something better, something
with the power to change
how we look after, how we define
and how we talk about what mental health
means to us.



What our experiences mean to us -
we experience the world through a creative eye,
it may not seem that way all of the time,
but believe me when we are given the chance to shine,
there's no stopping what we can be,
what we can achieve.

I mean, just take a look at the wonder
around that you can see,
what we, have designed, have created,
have brought out of our minds.

Does this seem like a room full of people
who have lost all sense of space and time?
No – we are the creative future,
just give us the space, the time,
and the belief to rise.

- Emma



I Was Told

That day I sat on the steps of my childhood grove
That grew heads of stone,
With salt water on my cheeks,
And rolled up jeans.
Hardly seeing through misty eye panes,
(It had just rained you see)
The once-off bicycle lay on its side,
It had barely seen beyond our street,
Yearning for the open park,
A hunger in its hollow pipes.

I have a big heart, I was told.
“Big enough to plant a garden of flowers!”
Is what she told me then.
“Tulips, Crocuses, and Daffs.” She beamed,
So I could ignore how she stuck that plaster down
With a practiced ease on weeping skin.
“They’re still growing you see?”
Is what she told me,
“Patience is key!”
Back when Time was still my friend.

On this day, I sit on the steps of a different grove.
There are no heads of stones to talk to this time,
Just heads of hair (but stones all the same).
Their hearts beat as one,
Yet mine, it doesn't dare to flinch.
She told me I have a big heart,
Enough space to grow a whole garden of flowers,
I just had to wait for them to grow big and strong.



Would she be disappointed then,
If she saw how I tore those flowers root from stem?
Would she understand then,
If I told her they were shriveled up and dead?
She told me I have a big heart, and
I guess she didn't lie, but she never told me that
This heart that swells so big, will bleed so well?

Now that I think about it,
What was her name I wonder?
Hm, whatever,
Gone with the wind I suppose.

Now, look at me—
No, I mean really look at me.
Can you see the broken mess playing pretend?
Pretending it's whole and well
It's ok, you can laugh, look, I'm laughing too!
Let's bond over laughing at me together.
It's all you ever seem to do.
Though, that's ok, it doesn't hurt,
If no one sees the tears fall in the forest,
Did it ever really happen?

I'm happy that you have something to laugh about,
I like your laugh, did I ever tell you that?
But I'm getting off track.
Do you see me?
If the floor fell out from below me,
Do you think I would notice,
Or would it just be another Tuesday for me?
Maybe that's too hard to understand.
Do you understand me?
If a train was coming for me
Do you think I would move,
Or would I...
I think you get the idea.

-Arin



We Deserve More



Josiah: Dear listener,
What is the limit of mental health?
The limit of mental health is limited as they say it is.
We can go over the limit of that specific limit that is listed
by doctors, healthcare professionals,
I have all day.

People with mental health look for,
They search for, they reach for, lunge for one thing: hope.

Hoping that one person, one call, one text,
Anything really
Will come their way and notify them that they are not
alone,
And everything will be okay.

Jida: Dear mental health,
No one takes it seriously.
In our mind, it's a rollercoaster.
Speak about you out loud, they'll say 'she's a boaster'.

Aniqa: Dear education system,
You strive for perfection, you make it seem so simple,
So elegant.
People will fight for it, bury themselves for perfection.
This fantasy, this illusion.

Dear Rishi,
What are you doing mate?
Grading our lives on 9-1 or A*-F is burying us.
Making us hide as if we are weak, as if we have failed,
That is what we grow up believing.
Rishi, think about your best and worst day in office,
Would you want us to grade that? Well... you've failed.

Emma: Dear ...

It's not about finding all of the answers straight away,
It's not about a quick fix.

We deserve more than being told these 6 free sessions
of therapy we can give you is the answer.

We deserve more than being told

ALL: Your 'best' is not good enough!

Nishat: Sometimes the best thing you can do to rebuild
A broken system is to take a wrecking ball to it all.

Jida: In a world where they sugar coat it
or use fabrication

We just wanna express our emotions,
let it be mental liberation.

Josiah: Sadly, we have become normalised to
seeing and not caring for the struggles we've never
experienced. When you haven't been in those shoes or in
that position, or in that mind.

Nishat: When one minute for you doesn't equate to
50 thoughts.

Josiah: Leaving us with no support or trust, and
losing all hope. Ruining and collapsing
the mind and the world.



ALL: WE DESERVE MORE!

Emma: We deserve spaces for
expression, for calm,
for chaos, for art
for love.

Spaces in between the
business of life – to just be,
to just exist, to just thrive.

We deserve to be more than just a tick in a box –“you fit
this, you fit that”

Now you are defined forever by the label we give you,
but now you must wait,

Nishat: Wait,

Jida: Wait,

Josiah: Wait

Aniqa: Wait,

Emma: Still waiting, to be given time
to do something about that label you have given us.

We deserve walls to throw paint onto,
We deserve rooms to make music in,
We deserve pages and pages to write on,

A way to show our inner most selves that does not cost
us the waiting time or the spending of money.

Aniqa: We deserve our own perfection.
The driving force that can't be measured.
We all have flaws, all have demons,

We all have battles that we're trying to conquer,
Our imperfections are what make us unique,
What makes us beautiful,

We are all beautiful and strong.
We are perfectly imperfect.

Jida: There are select few people out there, wanting all the collapsed minds and worlds to be rebuilt. For all those struggling or misunderstood to be seen, to be heard.

Josiah: Reform, start over,
and if you can't find a valid solution,
look for that guidance of light.

Bring yourself out of the darkness.
Name it hope.

Nishat: 'I am a survivor',
'I am proud of my achievements',
'I am grateful for everyone',
'I am happy and radiant'.
I say aloud as I read my deck
of positive statement cards.

Emma: We deserve ourselves, each other, the
time and space for support, for messiness, for beauty,
escape, for being held, or for being left alone.

We deserve a kindness unto ourselves.

One that you have never afforded us,
But that will not stop us.

Josiah: So I ask you,
I ask the doctors and medical professionals
And those who look up the term mental health
And don't prioritise it.
The true background and meaning of it,
I ask you again
What is the limit of mental health?

Aniqa: Is there ever gonna be a change?

Jida: Define mental health - is the pen right or the paper?

Josiah: Our experiences of mental health are all so unique and come from different places.

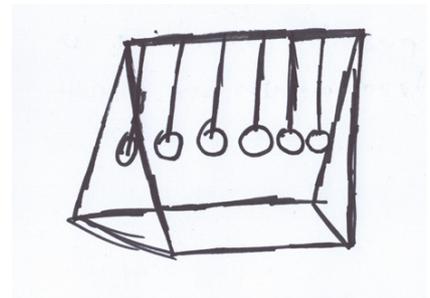
Emma: Why then should there only be one solution? System?

Nishat: Not all mental health looks the same and that's okay.

Jida: Don't define us by how we behave or how you see us – listen instead.

Josiah: The truth lies under the mask of the lived experience.

Emma: We've all got so many masks, who is to say which is the right one.



“Had Enough” Song by Naomi, Shane, Evie and Ash

Try to stick us in a box
But we don't quite fit
Making sure the doors are locked
So we can't get in
Cause if we're not gonna bend to their will
They'll ship us off with countless pills

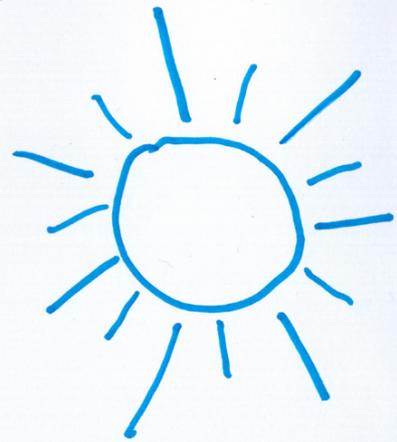
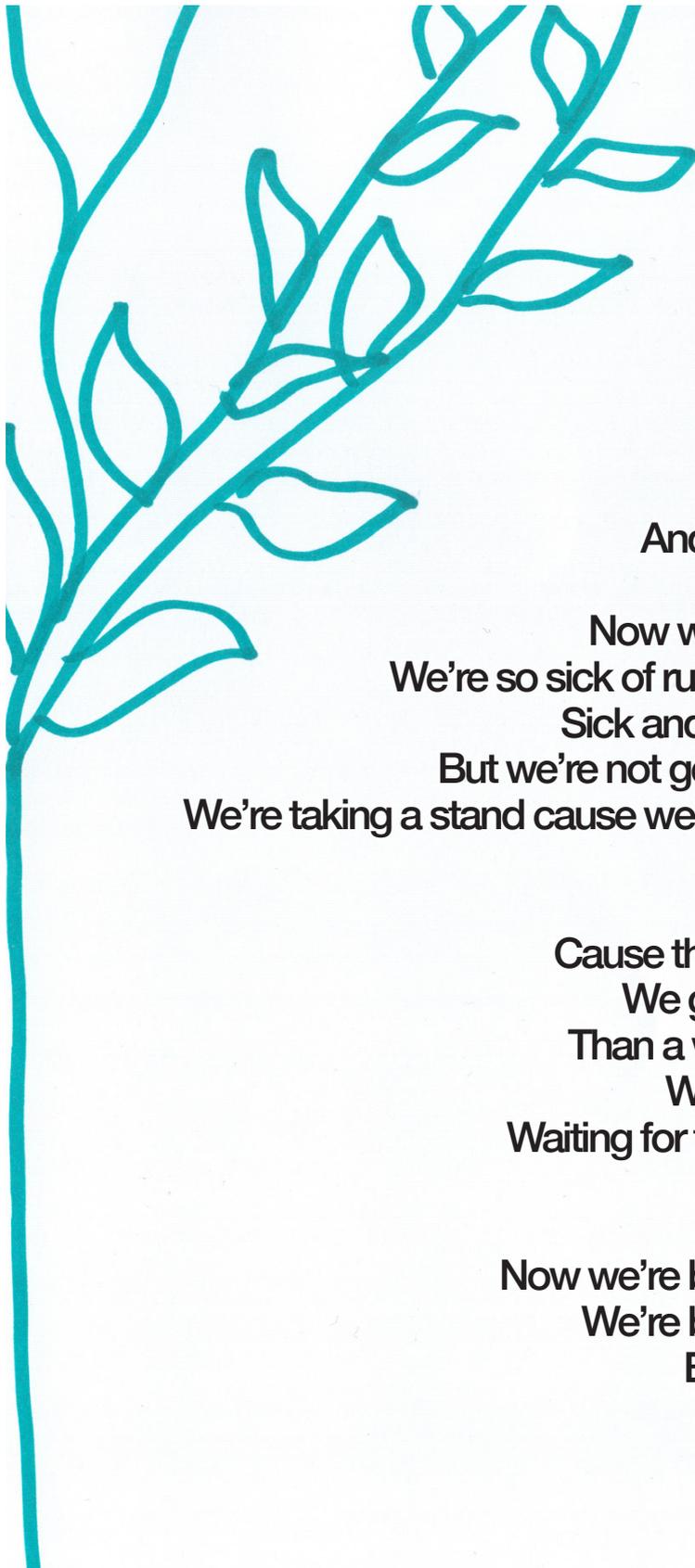
Say the system's there to help
But we're on our own
Cause the system doesn't care
If we're feeling low
They tell us call them on the phone
But we've memorised the dialling tone

Something's got to change
To keep our young minds sane

We're rising up
And we're not backing down
We've had enough
Now we're taking over this town
We're so sick of rules that don't make sense
Sick and tired of being oppressed
But we're not gonna be ignored anymore
We're taking a stand cause we got something to fight for

Try to tell us we're not sick
Think that they know best
If we say we're in a crisis
They say we're just stressed
They say we should get over it
Cause we will always be like this

What they see is not real
Stop telling us how we feel



We're rising up
And we're not backing down
We've had enough
Now we're taking over this town
We're so sick of rules that don't make sense
Sick and tired of being oppressed
But we're not gonna be ignored anymore
We're taking a stand cause we got something to fight for

This is our revolution
Cause the system's got to change
We got to find better solutions
Than a warm bath and cup of tea
We're tired of sitting around
Waiting for the system to let us down
We're rising up
We've had enough
Now we're bringing the system down
We're bringing the system down
Bringing the system down