



Profile

Stella Chan: soothing young minds through the power of art

Stella Chan's interest in psychology began when she went through a tough time as a teenager. "Everything just felt really difficult—I cried without a reason, and everything felt dim and dark," she remembers. "Looking back, I probably was depressed, but I didn't have the knowledge to know what was wrong." The experience gave her a sense of direction. "I wanted to learn more about psychology and how feelings work," she explains. "I hoped I could do something constructive about mental health."

Chan's psychology studies began at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She felt the next natural step was a clinical qualification, but then she won a life-changing scholarship to study at the University of Oxford, UK. At the time, as a citizen of Hong Kong, Chan could not pursue clinical training in the UK, so she was reluctant to go. What changed her mind was the advice of one of her professors: "You can be a guardian angel to look after knowledge." Chan always enjoyed the "process of thinking" involved in research and so her course was set. She followed her master's degree with a DPhil, also in Oxford. Chan also found love in Oxford—a British physicist, whom she married. Having started a family in the UK, clinical training became a reality.

Later, while completing a clinical doctorate at the University of East Anglia, UK, Chan began developing an idea that would become **Project Soothe**. In compassion-focused therapy, patients are asked to imagine soothing images but, when working with a patient with a brain injury who could no longer imagine pictures, Chan instead used photographs the patient had taken. "At the time I thought, 'Wouldn't it be great if we could create a standard set of photographs that other people could use', but I parked the idea because I didn't have research capacity then," she says.

Chan eventually returned to research. "Clinical work is really meaningful because on a case-by-case basis you help people—it's like doing a live show because you see the impact immediately," she explains. "Research is like making a movie—it takes longer, but you can go beyond one single case and think more widely and deeply to create something that's scalable." Those twin strands of clinical work and research came together when Chan joined the University of Edinburgh, UK, in 2012. After reading about "citizen science" projects in her husband's physics magazine, she decided to do the same in psychology, involving the public in her work.

The result, Project Soothe, became a collection of more than 800 photographs from people in 30 countries, and an analysis of which ones helped people self-soothe. The project won the British Psychological Society's Public

Engagement and Media Award. Workshops taught 200 children and young people about mental health and developing their critical thinking. Some of the young people then turned the results of Project Soothe into tools to help manage their mental health, including music and graphic novels.

Chan now works with Wokingham Borough Council, UK, to develop Project Soothe into tools for nurture assistants (normally classroom assistants) to use in schools, as well as in the wider social prescribing framework. "Social prescriptions have a big role in helping to ease the pressure on the NHS [National Health Service]," Chan says. "Rather than everyone waiting in the same queue, if we can triage people so they get directed to the right support for the intensity and severity of their mental health issues then we can stop them getting stuck in the system."

In 2020, Chan became Charlie Waller Chair in Evidence-Based Psychological Treatment at the University of Reading, UK. Chan still involves young people in her research. One new project is the **Reading Resilience Rucksack** to help young people spot when they're having mental health issues and build their resilience. The rucksack features tools—including animations and songs—based around the themes of sleep, physical activity, social relationships, and self-compassion, developed by young people to help them in their daily lives. In early 2024, the project will hold its first resilience fair for pupils moving from primary to secondary school, with pupils exploring the four themes and receiving resilience rucksacks.

The art and photography in her projects are reflected in Chan's personal life; her father, a firefighter, was a keen photographer, and she paints in her spare time, although she says her work is "only suitable for my parents' walls". Since moving to Reading, Chan has indulged her passion for nature in the nearby Chiltern Hills and enjoys paddling her inflatable kayak. She is also partway through a cookery journey, using Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days* as inspiration for dishes from other cultures.

"Having achieved one of my career goals in becoming a professor, I asked myself, 'What would I like to hear people say at my retirement party?'," Chan adds. "It would be lovely to win lots of funding grants and publish lots of papers, but what I'd really want to hear is that I'd made a difference in people's lives. Working with charities such as the Jasmine Foundation and Charlie Waller Trust to take this community-based approach is what motivates me now."

Peter Ranscombe



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For **Project Soothe** see <https://www.projectsoothe.com/>

For more about the **Reading Resilience Rucksack** see <https://research.reading.ac.uk/reading-resilience-network/resilience-rucksack/>