ember

the SHM foundation

Ember's Take on Wellbeing

Table of contents

01 **Introduction & Context**

02 **Ember's approach**

03 **The Ember Wellbeing Fund**
How it began

04 **Wellbeing stipends**
How were they used?

05 **The Ember Wellbeing Fund**
Integrating the learnings

06 **Conclusions**

07 **Looking ahead**

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare.”
- Audre Lorde

Community-led mental health initiatives (CLMHIs) fill critical gaps in mental health care globally, sustaining people and communities through locally and culturally grounded approaches.

Yet the sustainability of this work does not rest on individual resilience alone, but on the systems, relationships and resources that surround the individuals and communities delivering it.

Too often, the wellbeing of those doing this work is treated as secondary, rather than as a fundamental right and the foundation for lasting social change. Therefore, the teams behind CLMHIs are not always able to prioritise their own wellbeing, healing and care, a challenge which is often compounded by a culture of care work where service comes first, workloads are high, resources are limited, and stigma around mental health remains.

Working in mental health care can be emotionally demanding, often involving sustained exposure to distress, trauma, and crisis. Within CLMHIs, those providing care are deeply connected to the communities they serve, bringing lived experience, shared histories, and strong relationships into their work. This is a profound strength of community-led approaches.

At the same time, this proximity means that many of the people leading and delivering this work are navigating the same systemic challenges, such as poverty, displacement, discrimination, or conflict, that contribute to the need for mental health support in the first place, making the work both meaningful and emotionally challenging.

At Ember, we believe wholeheartedly in the importance of caring for the carers – of prioritising the wellbeing of the individuals behind CLMHIs. This commitment sits at the core of our work and is present in the ways we prioritise relationships over outcomes, and build partnerships grounded in trust, respect, connection, and deep listening.

Our understanding of wellbeing centres the interconnected factors that support people and communities to be well, whole, and to flourish. We see wellbeing not solely as a personal responsibility, but consider the wider conditions that shape how people and communities show up to their work, recognising wellbeing as holistic, interconnected, and central to collective flourishing.

Supporting wellbeing is not a one-off intervention, or a fixed destination, but an ongoing and evolving area of practice, shaped by reflection, listening, learning, and adaptation. This article highlights the importance of placing wellbeing at the heart of this work and offers insights on how we are approaching it.

Ember's approach

Ember's approach has long been shaped by relational ways of working that support wellbeing in practice, through flexible, relationship- and strengths-based approaches, though we did not always name this as wellbeing work.

In 2020, in the Covid-19 pandemic, we designed a set of internal values to guide our work during challenging times. Following this, we began to prioritise and articulate our commitment to wellbeing more explicitly, creating the Ember Wellbeing Fund; a dedicated pot of funding specifically aimed at promoting wellbeing activities and resources for the teams behind CLMHIs. This Fund was a direct response to what we were hearing from innovators; that wellbeing needed to be prioritised.



Ember Wellbeing Fund

How it began

2024/2025

Piloted in the cohort of 6 partners

We piloted the Ember Wellbeing Fund Impact Survey with the 6 innovators who were part of our 2024/2025 cohort, to help us understand the experience of innovators receiving this support.

Wellbeing Stipend
At the start of Ember partnerships, innovators are provided with a small unrestricted wellbeing stipend to be used towards their team's wellbeing. Innovators are encouraged to invest in the activities they feel will help their wellbeing most.

Tailored Wellbeing Support
Throughout partnerships, we also engage in discussions with team members of our partner organisations to more deeply understand their daily challenges. Where necessary, we then devise an additional package of customised support aimed at enhancing the wellbeing of organisations.

Ember Wellbeing Fund Impact Survey

86.8% of survey respondents felt that the support received through the Ember wellbeing fund improved their individual wellbeing either 'a lot' or 'to a great extent'. Only one person reported 'a little'. The rest reported 'somewhat' or higher.

97.4% of survey respondents felt that the support received through the Ember wellbeing fund improved their organisational wellbeing either 'a lot' or 'to a great extent'. All responses were 'somewhat' or higher.

Wellbeing stipends

How were they used?

Many organisations used the initial stipend to organise a team away day or retreat, incorporating fun, team building activities to support staff wellbeing, such as white-water rafting, creative activities, hiking, eating together, and even a visit to a goat farm.

Some of the teams held wellbeing sessions facilitated by a psychologist, yoga sessions, journalling sessions, or debriefing sessions. One team used the stipend to build a continuous wellbeing program including a variety of activities.

> **The Staff Mental Wellbeing Trip proved to be a resounding success, achieving its objective of providing a refreshing break for our dedicated team.**
>
> **The shared experiences, heartfelt farewells, and adventure activities strengthened the bond among colleagues. This trip not only contributed to individual well-being but also fostered a sense of unity and joy within the team.**

> **The wellbeing stipend was spent on a picnic and all members of staff were able to participate, and all staff expressed a lot of joy and happiness through participating in team building activities.**

“We are not resting to be productive. We are resting simply because it is our divine right to do so.”
- Tricia Hershey

‘A refreshing break for our dedicated team’

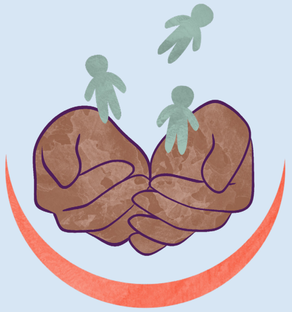
What we learnt

Taken together, these approaches reinforce our view of the wellbeing stipend not as a one-off ‘intervention’, but as a springboard to build on team wellbeing practices.

We recognise that wellbeing activities feasible with a small stipend, such as retreats, are not a complete solution to organisational wellbeing, nor do they resolve the systemic challenges teams may be facing. However, they can be an important starting point. In systems that rarely encourage or empower teams to invest time or resources in their own care, and where organisational outcomes are prioritised over the wellbeing of the people delivering the work, dedicated funding for staff wellbeing can make a meaningful difference. Crucially, we’ve seen that when teams are given resources specifically to support their own wellbeing, it helps them grant themselves permission to pause, reflect, and care for themselves. This, in turn, can support the integration of wellbeing into everyday practice and the wider organisational culture. It can also provide an opportunity to zoom out and engage in the big-picture thinking on vision, strategy, innovation, and creative thinking which day-to-day work may not necessarily allow, but contributes to organisational sustainability.

We therefore see the stipend as a way to support organisations to pause, and to begin or continue conversations about what wellbeing means for them. Rather than prescribing a single model, the stipend supports teams to reflect on their own wellbeing priorities, and to explore what their specific wants and needs are, both now and in the longer term.

> **...to have the chance to come together as a team to share and open up, that’s one thing that we have been able to achieve thanks to Ember and the wellbeing fund.**



Wellbeing ≠ Luxury

The way funding is currently structured often results in wellbeing being treated as a luxury – Many teams shared that their wellbeing had rarely been considered before, despite the clear need, reflecting a wider sector culture in which care is rarely named or resourced explicitly.



Prioritise Wellbeing

Wellbeing support encouraged teams to prioritise their wellbeing – While teams clearly understand the importance of wellbeing, they do not always feel able to prioritise it.

When wellbeing support is offered, it can be deeply permission-giving, creating space for teams to pause, reflect and care for themselves without guilt.



Stronger Recognition

A call for more sustainable, ongoing advocacy and funding for wellbeing support – What we heard most clearly was the need for stronger recognition of wellbeing as essential to this work, alongside sustained, ongoing investment.

Normalising the importance of team wellbeing, and acknowledging that it is both legitimate and necessary, is crucial. Treating funding for wellbeing not as a one-off add-on, but as a shared responsibility and a call to the wider sector to embed care, sustainability and dignity into how this work is funded and supported.

The Ember Wellbeing Fund

Integrating the learnings

The Wellbeing Fund sits within a wider, relationship-led approach to partnership, grounded in trust, flexibility and care. Through this work, and through conversations with innovators in our network, we have been hearing a recurring message: that **alongside wellbeing support at an organisational level, there is a deep desire for connection with others doing similar work, and for spaces that reduce isolation and enable shared learning.**

In response, we began thinking more intentionally about the connective tissue between organisations, and ways to support the expansion of community. This has led to the development of a number of initiatives in collaboration with like-minded individuals and organisations, focused on peer connection and collective creativity and care. These efforts reflect a shift from supporting organisations in isolation, towards nurturing the wider ecosystems that sustain this work.

In addition, the scale of response to our 2024 call-out - over 1,800 applications received and 936 CLMHIs interviewed - powerfully reinforced our belief that there is a vast and growing ecosystem of innovators in community-led mental health, responding to unmet needs in community mental health care. It also highlighted how widely wellbeing support could strengthen and sustain this work.

In response, we created the 'Caring for the Carers' Awards; unrestricted wellbeing stipends that, like the wellbeing stipends we send to partners, act as a springboard for beginning conversations around wellbeing, healing and care, or building on existing wellbeing practices.

2025 and onwards

Connective tissue

- 1st peer circle piloted with innovators using art-based approaches to mental health care
- 'Courageous Change' programme with 64 Million Artists piloted with innovators working with LGBTQIA+ communities

Caring for the Carers Awards

- Based on an overwhelming response to our 2024 call out, and the team interviewing 936 innovators in community-led mental health, we piloted the Caring for the Carers Award, an unrestricted wellbeing stipend, recognising the incredible work of 20 organisations, for whom prioritising wellbeing was a challenge.

Increased investment into the wellbeing stipend & tailored wellbeing support

[Our team] spent the morning painting ceramics, finishing off our morning with pizza and the best ice-cream in our province. It was really special. There was so much laughter, connecting and celebration in being together.

Thank you so much for enabling us to do this. We really value these times when we get an opportunity to step away from a normal workday to play together. It was good for our souls.

We were able to organize a special outing for the team and our volunteers, not just to talk about well-being, but to experience it together. It was the first time we were able to hire a car just for the team, and we even added our logo to it. That simple gesture gave everyone a deep sense of pride and unity. It truly felt like our team.

We played games, shared a lovely meal, and spent time in a relaxed and joyful atmosphere. Many of the team said they felt truly spoiled, like they were on a company team building, enjoying good food, laughter, and quality time together. It was a rare and precious moment.

It also had a deeper impact, it strengthened their sense of belonging and motivation. Some even told me they now feel excited to come spend time with the team, even when there's no work to be done, just to be together.

Conclusions

01
Wellbeing as a fundamental right

Crucially, acknowledgement that wellbeing, healing and care are fundamental human rights shifts the perspective from treating wellbeing as a luxury, to a necessity.

02
Wellbeing as essential to organisational sustainability

Ongoing investment in wellbeing recognises that organisational sustainability is inseparable from the wellbeing of the people doing the work. Supporting wellbeing not only helps teams to feel well and cared for, but can also enable reflection, strategic thinking, and stronger team retention in roles that are often shaped by high emotional and practical demands.

03
Wellbeing as essential to sustaining social change

Sustained social change depends on the people and communities that carry it over time. At Ember, we believe in the ripple effect – that if people and teams are cared for, that care ripples out into the wider community. Prioritising wellbeing is therefore not solely about organisational sustainability, but about supporting the long-term continuity and collective capacity needed to drive meaningful change.

04
Prioritisation matters

Prioritisation of values and practices related to wellbeing matters because it is deeply permission-giving. Many of our partners have shared that they had either not previously considered their own wellbeing, or would not have felt able to ask for support, reflecting a wider sector culture in which wellbeing is rarely treated as a priority.

Alongside funding, there is a need for a wider cultural shift that creates the conditions for care to be prioritised; recognising team wellbeing as essential, normalising it, and ensuring organisations have the time, flexibility, and resourcing needed to embed it, rather than requiring it to be continually justified.

05
The need for ecosystem support

What is clear is that this is not only about individual organisations embedding systematic wellbeing practices, but also about the wider ecosystem in which community-led mental health initiatives operate, including the relationships, peer connections, and spaces for shared learning within it.

For CLMHIs to continue doing the crucial work they do, they must be able to prioritise their own wellbeing, which requires wellbeing support to be normalised across philanthropy, and opportunities for connection and mutual support to be intentionally resourced, rather than treated as optional extras.

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06

The need to fund ecosystem support

Supporting wellbeing requires investment beyond individual organisations, into the wider ecosystem that sustains CLMHIs. This includes funding for peer networks, and spaces for connection and collective reflection and shared learning, which all play a crucial role in reducing isolation and pressure on individual organisations, and enabling collective care across community-led mental health.

07

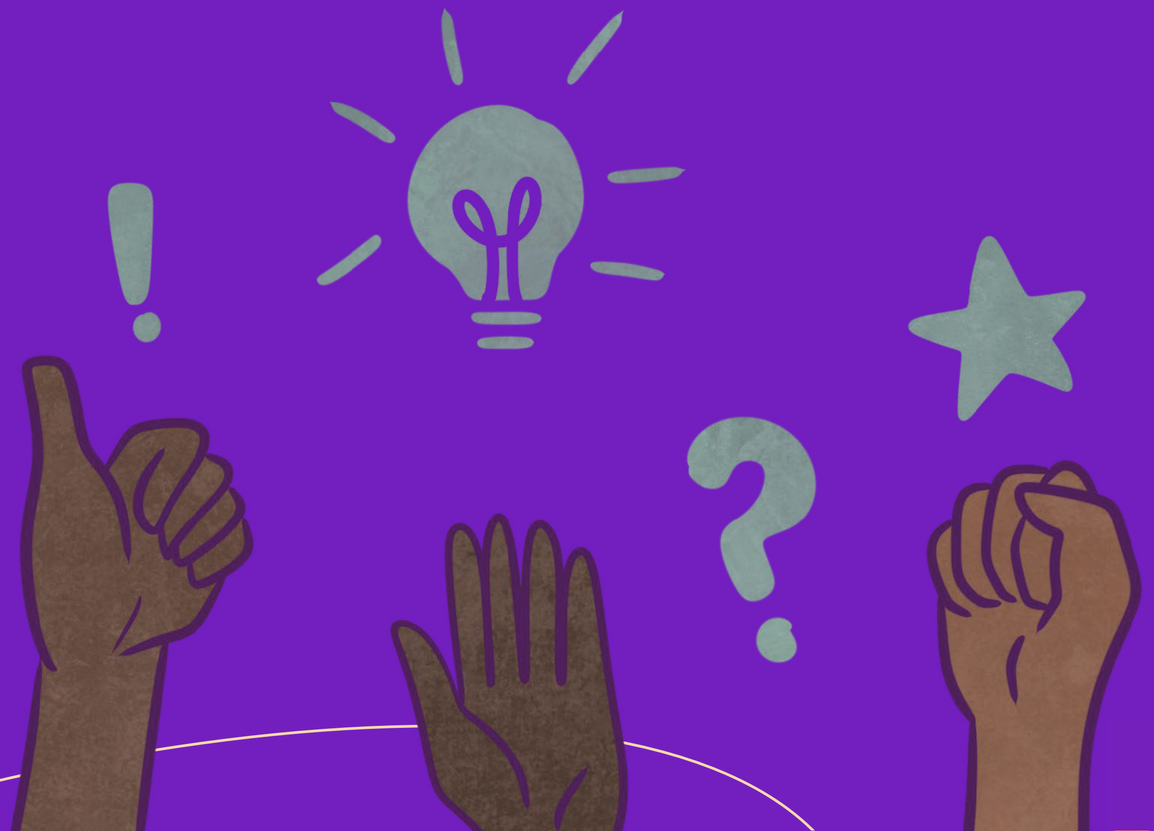
Local, culturally grounded approaches are essential

There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to wellbeing. The importance of deeply listening to the needs of teams is paramount, to understand the factors unique to the context they are operating in. Effective wellbeing support cannot be standardised or scaled and must be locally defined, culturally rooted, and community-led.

Looking ahead

This area of our work is continuously evolving.

We continue to learn alongside our partners and other innovators in community-led mental health care, and to reflect on what meaningful wellbeing support looks like across contexts. As we learn, we will continue to adapt and deepen our approach to wellbeing, healing and care, and to share more as the work develops.



A call for shared learning

This is a call to the wider philanthropy sector to approach wellbeing as a space for curiosity, learning and collective reflection, rather than as a set of fixed ‘best practice’.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to wellbeing, and there is a shared responsibility across the sector to learn together and to contribute to a deeper understanding of what meaningful wellbeing support can look like in philanthropy.