



The IOL National Conference includes a meeting of the Outdoor Adventure Therapy Professional Practice Group that will offer an opportunity to further discuss issues raised by this article.





Woodlands Offer Hope for People Suffering with Severe Mental Health Conditions: Measuring the Impacts

by Jane Acton



Diagnosed with psychosis in her 20s, Marie was able to come off her anti-psychotic drugs with the support of her GP. On speaking of the impact this experience, Marie said, "I think it will probably last me all my life quite frankly." Marie had taken part in a project designed to help build self-esteem and resilience using immersive activities in natural spaces.

What follows is an explanation of project of which Marie was a participant and reference other similar work taking place in UK. The question to the outdoor learning community is can we work collectively to measure impacts to support the mental health of the nation. Enough evidence from across the UK will give NHS commissioners the confidence to prescribe outdoor learning.

What did we do?

Referred by their Community Mental Health Nurses (CMHN) and other health professionals eight adults voluntarily took part; two women and six men each diagnosed with severe and enduring mental health issues including schizophrenia, psychosis and depression. The project had a retention rate of over 80% and everyone who completed the six weeks also achieved a Level 1 Forest School certificate, despite all but one having had no previous formal qualifications. Some participants become Nature Workshops volunteers working for the owners of the woodlands and they and the owners undertake accredited Outdoor First Aid and risk assessment training.

Marie 48, has a diagnosis of psychosis and at the time of attending the sessions with Nature Workshops was also dissociating regularly. She has a history of childhood abuse and was referred to the project by her CMHN. The impact of the programme on Marie's wellbeing led, shortly after her time in the woods, to be able to come off her antipsychotic medication with the full support of her GP.

“*Hopefully I will continue doing some sort of thing even if it's going to walks in woods or something. It's like inspired me for that as well*” *“I really couldn't wait, saw my CPN yesterday and I was like “I can't wait, I'm going tomorrow”.*

Paul, 52 has a 30 year history of drug and alcohol abuse and prior to attending sessions with Nature Workshops had undergone two separate stays in rehabilitation units.

“*it was very empowering and left me with a very, very good feel for being out in the woods and for being around people ... I'm really glad I did it.*”

The activities were iterative, participant-focused and included survival skills, cooking over a fire, and reflective play. Those attending were also encouraged to take inspiration from the woods and try their hand at creative tasks:

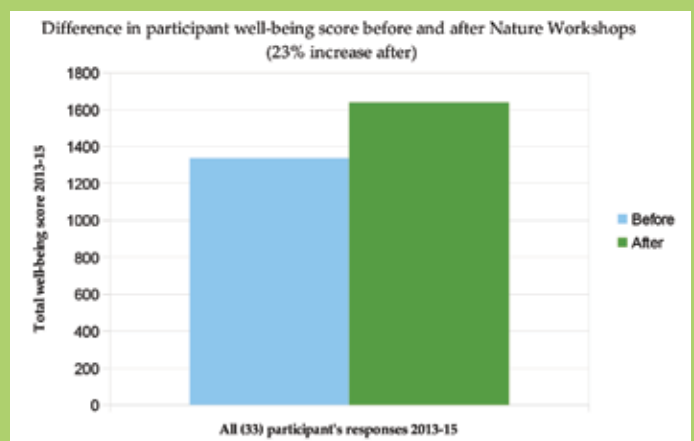
“*I carved a wooden spoon from some cherry wood, it's the sort of thing I wouldn't even have attempted before, but it was really good for me to sit down and make the best wooden spoon I could. It's in my kitchen, I use it!*”

The project took place in a community woodland in West Cornwall owned by the Wildlife Trust, participants attended one day a week for six weeks for a total 30 hours of contact time. Nature Workshops, a South-West based social enterprise set up and ran the programme being a specialist in delivering workshops and training in natural spaces focusing on improving health and wellbeing among vulnerable people of all ages.

How did we measure?

The impact of the programme was measured using the quantitative Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Well Being Scale (WEMWBS), along with various qualitative measures including a Nature Connectedness scale. Using a set of well being indicators and coded transcripts from interviews before, during and after the intervention allowed for baselines set using the WEMWBS and also expressed hopes and expectations to be revisited. The research shows the participants, their referrers and Nature Workshops' staff all found the sessions helped develop practical and personal skills. There were measurable improvements in self esteem and resilience. The most significant improvement were in helping people feel optimistic about their future and increasing their feelings of closeness to the natural world. This research has been published in Royal College of Nursing Mental Health journal, February 2016 .

Following the success of this project Nature Workshops have worked on several programmes in woodlands, moorlands and beaches across South West England targeting individuals with mental health problems. Their combined WEMWBS data gathered to date has shown a 23% increase in wellbeing after attending the programme.





Collective working

As part of the Dose of Nature programme Nature Workshops have been linked with similar activities across the UK. The Mersey Forest project for example, also not for profit is looking at giving the drug companies a run for their money using the same data gathering and marketing techniques to reach GPs and the vulnerable groups they serve. They too are using WEMWBS to measure the impacts of the natural world for adults. They have specific standardised models of intervention using spaces across Liverpool for walking, woodland learning, cycling and gardening.

According to one GP Surgery Practice Manager in Cornwall modern record keeping techniques now allow for annual costs of patients to be easily measured from one year to the next. In addition the easy to use WEMWBS scale was designed for population data gathering. It is unlicensed and therefore free to use. We could decide a parameter such as total number of hours and establish a simple online process to upload the data. With enough strong quantitative evidence of lives changed and money saved by NHS we could help Commissioners in their decision making. While early intervention and community healthcare are being re-packaged as 'social prescriptions' to save money for the NHS, many of us have seen and benefited from the powerful health benefits of the natural world. It beats taking tablets any day!

(Names have been changed.) ■



REFERENCES

- Acton, J (2016) 'Out of the Woods: spending time among trees in the open air could prove therapy for patients' RCN Mental Health Practise, Vol 19, No. 5, February 2016.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Acton (Bsc Botany MA Environmental Anthropology) works as an Ethnobotanist at Nature Workshops. If you interested participating in a collective measuring project please make contact with Jane. To access the full report of this project, details about training or how to set this up in your area please contact Nature Workshops by email at admin@natureworkshops.co.uk or see at www.natureworkshops.co.uk.

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