

PERMACULTURE ACTIVITIES TOWARDS MENTAL HEALTH THERAPY

Mental Health

“Mental health includes emotional, psychological and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices.” It can also affect how an “individual realizes his or her potential, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”. Mental health is an important aspect in every person’s life, from childhood, adolescence through to adulthood.

How could permaculture serve as therapy?

- European Union Cooperation in the field of Scientific and Technical Research Action published these conclusions:
 - Research has demonstrated correlations of well-being in greencare settings
 - Research has shown that being in the garden lowers stress more than being outside in hard surface areas
 - The sensory, emotional stimulus of the natural setting is shown to reduce the negative external stimuli of life in the town
 - Permaculture takes this beneficial effect of being outside and in the country, and reinforces it
- Studies reported in the Journal of Health Psychology in 2012 also show that people who feel a connection to nature are indeed happier



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- Places that serve as permaculture therapy not only include gardens, but green gyms, rural crafts, wilderness therapy, forest schools and environmental restorations
- According to Clare Cooper Marcus, one of the founders of the field of environmental psychology, one of the reasons why nature may be so successful at reducing stress is that it puts the mind in a state similar to mediation
 - When engaged with nature, people tend to un-wind, stop obsessing and worrying, and brings them into the present moment which has been shown to be very effective at reducing stress

Ulrich, a pioneer in the field of therapeutic environments at Texas A&M university, found that patients recovering from gallbladder surgery who looked out at a view of trees had significantly shorter hospital stays, fewer complaints, and took less pain medication than those who looked out at a brick wall

Challenges

- Permaculture activities are often overlooked as a form of therapy, as it isn't widely used
- Therapeutic community programs that involve 'greencare' have been disregarded and not seen as a relevant part of statutory services
- Contact with nature is important to human beings and is often overlooked in modern living conditions



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Benefits of permaculture designs as mental health therapy

- New skills can be learned and new experiences encountered
- Combination of fresh air and physical nature of the tasks energises the physical body while simultaneously reducing stress
- There is a physical impact, providing fitness through muscle toning and calorie burn
- Positive effect of a hard day's manual labour includes improved sleep, which is often problematic for people with complex needs diagnoses
- Gardening also improves motor skills, helping hand eye co-ordination and benefiting core strength
- Exposure to sunlight increases vitamin D production – the positive can be seen in people who suffer seasons affective disorder (SAD) and has been proven that lack of sunlight improves the likelihood of clinical depression
- Humans are social creatures and maintain physiological and emotional health by interacting with one another
- Improve teamwork, communication, learning to trust each other, develop positive relationship and support one another
- Permaculture not only helps the mental stability of its users, but benefits the surrounding environment
- Contact with nature has positive effects on well-being, with physical, psychological and spiritual benefits
- The therapy uses the outdoors to stimulate, calm and enable people with complex problems to live lives that are more controlled and positive

Case Study

Forest Farm Peace Garden

A Permaculture Ecotherapy garden in Hainault, East London, who are members of Permaculture Association

“Forest Farm Peace Garden is a Social and Horticultural Therapy (SHT) project on a permaculture site in Hainault, East London. We work with a broad cross-section of supported clients and buddy volunteers to promote mental and physical health, social inclusion, intercultural awareness, and environmental sustainability. Our aim is for all activities to have a benefit for both our clients and the environment”

- Throughout the Peace Garden are many ongoing projects such as; growing organic vegetables, caring for fruit trees and berry-bearing shrubs, working with beehives, tending the herb garden and organising workshops and events that welcome and share skills with the community
- Peace Garden offer 2 free days of free training focused on permaculture, mental health and practical organic horticulture skills in order to become a ‘buddy’
- Buddies make a huge impact to the well-being of clients by helping make their garden safe and a welcoming space for all by helping with running practical activities and being available to those who need extra guidance
- The program enables clients with low-level mental health needs, such as depression, anxiety and low self-esteem, to set goals for themselves at the beginning of the program which they’d like to achieve, with regular check-ins with their Ecotherapy Worker

- Each week different clients are responsible for food and drinks – gathering vegetables and herbs from the garden to make soups, salad and tea
- The project gives all a chance to learn more about healthy living, cooking and nutrition as well as gardening
- Both clients and buddies benefit from making new friends, sharing experiences, learning skills and being active outdoors together

Redbridge Concern for Mental Health “Forest Farm Peace Garden provide exemplary support to mental health service users. They integrate vulnerable people into a supportive community, and adequately equip their volunteers with a skillset suited to working with mental health service users.”



Forest Farm Peace Garden

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Journal Articles

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