

TOWARDS A HAPPIER LIFE: THERAPEUTIC HORTICULTURE AS A MEANS OF MENTAL HEALTH REHABILITATION

Background

In this country 1 in 4 adults at some time suffer some form of mental health problem. The majority recover and lead normal lives. Those who suffer from severe forms of mental health problems are not so lucky.

A study carried out in East Dorset (published December 1988) assessed the quality of life of people with long-term mental illness (with a history of more than three years). It established a case register of over 100 people – of those surveyed 17% were employed in full, part-time or voluntary work, 51% were unemployed and wished to change this and the remainder were retired or did not wish to work.

Research has shown that many people who have experienced mental illness over a period of time have a strong desire to work, many stating that finding a job was the most important thing they wished to achieve in their lives. Those in employment emphasised the importance of social networks established through work.

The mental health of the unemployed has been shown to deteriorate in comparison with the health of those who are working. Studies also show a positive and highly significant association between unemployment and suicide rates – the risk of suicide attempts being ten times greater in those not working than it is amongst the employed.

However, despite this strong desire to work and much evidence of the benefits of being in employment, many people with mental health problems find it difficult or impossible to compete on the open job market due to the pace and pressure of the commercial world as well as the stigma and prejudice attached to their illness.

In the past, people with mental illness were cared for in large mental hospitals that provided them with a home, a social life and a job, but in a sheltered and isolated environment. The buildings and grounds of these institutions were extensive and allowed the development of hospital farms, laundries and industrial units where the patients worked. These jobs provided a purpose in life and built self-esteem, both of which were vital in maintaining good mental health, and went some way to prepare people for employment in the outside world.

Under the philosophy of caring for people in the community, the larger hospitals have been closed and smaller, local units being developed. It is, therefore, vital that each community provides facilities to support and nurture those with problems.

The original concept of the Sheltered Work Opportunities Project was formulated by a group of concerned individuals engaged in the care and support of people who had suffered from a mental illness. Their aim was to develop a scheme to educate and rehabilitate by providing a range of occupations and vocational opportunities through the medium of horticultural therapy.

A committee was formed of local people from a variety of backgrounds, with sympathy and understanding for mental health issues. They were fortunately joined by the Director of a large local nursery business – it was his continuing input that enabled the project to get off the ground and to progress. He suggested that Cherry Tree Nursery specialise in the production of shrubs as these provide work and sales throughout the year.

Management Structure

SWOP is a company limited by guarantee and managed by a Board of Trustees which meets on a regular basis. The Board is made up of a representative from the Dorset HealthCare NHS Foundation Trust, a treasurer, a horticultural adviser and a local councillor.

A Management Committee consisting of a trustee, a member of staff and representatives of the volunteers undertake day to day management. Regular family meetings are also held to keep everyone involved with what is going on – anyone can call a meeting if they wish. Minutes of Trustee and Management meetings are available.

Funding

SWOP is a registered charity and relies on fund-raising for salaries and major projects, while sales of plants now cover the considerable daily running costs. The aim is to produce and sell 100,000 high quality shrubs annually but the project will always need to fund-raise to supplement this. Financial support has also been provided by Dorset HealthCare NHS Foundation Trust and local Social Services.

Cherry Tree Nursery volunteers

Work started at Cherry Tree Nursery in 1990. At this time there were four volunteers and a part-time member of staff, who all started clearing the site. Cherry Tree Nursery now has 150 volunteers on its books. They are referred by various agencies principally Dorset HealthCare NHS Foundation Trust, also the Employment Service, Social Services, Richmond Fellowship, and other voluntary agencies. The criteria are: that they have a mental health problem and want meaningful occupation, and that they can make their own way to the project. Some live in their own homes, others are in sheltered accommodation or hostels for the homeless, or come directly from hospital as part of their move into the community. Approximately one third of volunteers live on their own but all volunteers express feelings of low self-esteem, isolation and loss of motivation and purpose.

'I just watched TV and went for walks'

'I used to stay in bed all day. I just used to eat and sleep'

'When I joined Cherry Tree I was in the early stages of recovery from a long period of 'disintegration of myself' '

The aim is to provide a sympathetic yet realistic and purposeful working environment, offering either a 'stepping-stone' back to open employment for those who need to regain skills and self-confidence, or a sheltered working environment for those who may never be able to compete in the open job market but for whom opportunities to contribute in a meaningful way are crucial to their ongoing mental health and stability.

The volunteers work in the many varied areas of the Nursery, not only in horticultural work but also in other areas including office work, carpentry, mechanics, sales and marketing, refreshment and deliveries. There is no time limit to their stay at Cherry Tree.

When a volunteer comes to Cherry Tree Nursery to start work, their key goals and objectives are discussed and a plan agreed. Their progress is reviewed and revised informally in the light of their growing confidence and new found abilities and they are encouraged to develop new skills and a working routine. This can involve anything from arriving at work on time, to following a return-to-work programme with realistic daily targets to be completed.

Training

Often the key to employment or to improved self-esteem is the acquisition of appropriate skills and/or certificated training.

It is important to recognise existing skills and encourage volunteers to use them to make a positive beneficial contribution to the nursery, which improves their self-worth. In a nursery of this size and complexity a very wide variety of skills can be employed to the benefit of the project. Not only can existing skills be developed, but new skills can be acquired e.g., propagation, which is the basis of all commercial wholesale nursery work. We work to very high standards to produce top quality hardy nursery stock which equates to the standards found on any good nursery. We offer on-site literacy and numeracy training and basic computer skills.

We feel it is important that volunteers have high quality training and as part of their integration into the community undertake it in a college-based environment. We have therefore developed close links with the local horticultural college and the local college of further education where many of our volunteers study for certificated courses. We provide backup support and related work experience. Courses include Amenity Horticulture, Hard Landscaping, Estate Maintenance, Bookkeeping, Desk Top Publishing, Information Technology, Carpentry, and Business Administration.

Because we recognise the importance of this certificated training we have established our own Bursary to financially support volunteers with training costs, examination fees etc.

Other services offered to volunteers

- A Benefits Advice clinic held weekly
- Help with housing, budgeting
- Help with job search
- Legal advice when necessary
- Access to specialist medical help
- Support and advice from staff always available

Liaising with Government Agencies

This is a very important part of our work. A number of our volunteers are signing on for the Job Seekers' Allowance and a close relationship with the local Job Centres is essential. The informal relationship we have developed with Employment Service staff at our Open Days and joint training days have proved invaluable.

Volunteers participate in Employment Rehabilitation Schemes and Government Training Schemes for the unemployed e.g. New Deal. If necessary, we accompany volunteers to assist in completion of their Job Seekers Agreement.

'People with mental illness are stigmatised and picked on when they go to a job centre – they are unable to express themselves and the job centre/benefit agencies are not very helpful'.

We offer help with job search and arrange placements with landscapers, nurseries etc. We can refer people to the Disability Employment Adviser for Employment Rehabilitation or for Supported Employment through the local Community Employment Service.

Benefits of being at Cherry Tree

Perhaps the most beneficial result of coming to work at Cherry Tree Nursery is the development of social networks. Social events and outings are organised regularly e.g. Christmas Party, visits

to local nurseries, barbecues, camping weekends. The nursery also sells plants at shows in the community where volunteers participate fully.

Motivation and Stimulation

'I find the variety of work very beneficial indeed as opposed to a day centre where there would not be enough to stimulate me.'

Self esteem

'My whole life has changed and I feel a respected member of the community.'

Advice and support

'I have been helped by the staff and Cherry Tree on numerous occasions with benefit problems, etc. They have also played a big part in helping me sort out suitable accommodation.'

Choice and variety

'I do a variety of tasks at Cherry Tree all of which I enjoy doing – propagating, labelling plants and cutting back.'

Independence

'With the help of people at Cherry Tree I have gradually moved forward and am now living an independent lifestyle and not in sheltered accommodation as before.'

Social Networks

'I have made a lot of new friends who I can go and visit after work ... I didn't have this sort of social life before coming the Cherry Tree.'

Stigma

'I don't feel as though I carry any sort of stigma here which I have felt in other working environments.'

We recognise that moving on to work is only a partial measure of success and that improvement in quality of life is the most important factor. However it is interesting to note that during our nine years of operation fifty-three people have successfully moved on into full-time employment, seventy-six into voluntary or part-time work and twenty-eight into full-time or part-time training.

Due to the generous fund-raising efforts and support of volunteer and various organisations Cherry Tree has been able to expand and help more people. The project has enhanced the quality of lives and widened the range of opportunities available to many adults whose lives have been disrupted through mental illness. We are always delighted to welcome visitors who wish to learn more about the work of our project.

Published in 'A Life in the Day' vol3 issue 1 Pavilion Publishing (Brighton) Ltd February 1999