



Gardening As a Therapeutic Intervention in Mental Health

Some of the findings of a gardening experiment conducted in a secure mental institution produced an evidence base which underpins what is generally described as horticultural therapy.

Enthusiastic gardeners argue that producing one's own food is a great tonic in a number of ways but specifically this project was interested in the benefits of increased exercise, increased knowledge and skills, and improved diet.

Not long after this project began, Mind (2007) published a report that used research data and case studies to demonstrate that ecotherapy is a simple, cost-effective means of improving well-being.

Alongside horticultural activities, a variety of options such as open air walks were also found to be helpful. Mind (2007) made several recommendations challenging service providers to consider ecotherapy as a viable treatment.

Burls (2007) described some of the benefits of ecotherapy as being associated with the relationship between a healthy environment and the person; the fact that the practice of ecotherapy itself enhances the environment is a secondary benefit.

Horticultural therapy is well established in the UK across a variety of health and social care specialisms. The charity Thrive, a small, national organisation that promotes horticultural therapy, runs two garden projects – one in Berkshire and the other in London. It also supports over 900 garden projects around the UK.

Johnson (1999) considered how horticultural therapy is used in a variety of settings from the published evidence. He noted that its efficacy in elderly care is most well proven but also drew attention to the dearth of research available to establish its benefit to people in a custodial setting.

While this project is not in this type of setting, many residents do come from the prison or secure mental health system and as such there are certain common characteristics. Johnson (1999) reflected on the importance of the physical environment and how people approach other living things.

Interestingly, Fieldhouse (2003) also found the plant-person relationship to be immensely important. He considered the importance of the evolutionary relationship between people and plants and advanced the view that people have a 'fascination' with plants.

Fieldhouse found a gardening group has two key benefits: the first involves cognitive benefits of enhanced mood, reduced arousal and improved concentration; the second is the social nature of the group – the need to cooperate with each other to achieve the end goal. Fieldhouse (2003) concluded that this type of intervention is beneficial because it focuses on skills and aspirations rather than symptoms and deficits.

Burls (2005) and Burls and Caan (2004) discussed the process of 'embracement' as being about social and personal growth. This process is linked with gardening activities and in fact the authors use the growth of a seedling as a metaphor for a person's own development.



The Phenomenon of Hope

One of the key factors associated with recovery is the phenomenon of hope. This is perhaps defined best by Miller (1992), who suggested it is the 'anticipation of a continued good state, or a release from a perceived entrapment. The anticipation may or may not be founded on concrete real world evidence. Hope is an anticipation of a future which is good and which is based upon mutuality, a sense of personal competence, coping ability, psychological well-being, purpose and meaning in life, as well as a sense of "the possible".'

There appears to be an intrinsic relationship between gardening and hope. The very action of planting a seed in the soil requires hope; by encouraging and in some senses almost imposing a sense of hope on to someone, a personal journey may begin.

It could be argued that many people in secure mental health environments have very little hope, little to hope for and for whom little is hoped. Encouraging these people to participate in activities essentially based on the practice of hope may well be highly therapeutic.

There are many reasons to conclude that gardening may be therapeutic – there is evidence for physical, cognitive and social benefits. However, there may be something in gardening associated with providing hope for those who may have little else to hope for. This might, ultimately, be the most beneficial aspect of gardening therapy.