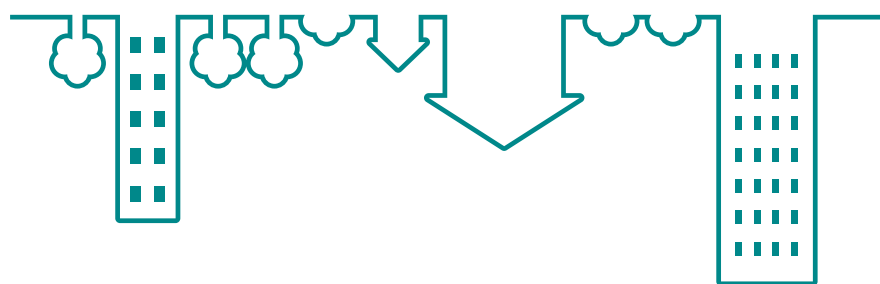




SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES – HOW URBAN NATURE CAN HELP



A city's green spaces and everyday nature are rarely considered as assets for people who experience mental health difficulties. Our project builds on evidence that nature can make a difference to people's everyday wellbeing and to their broader mental health. We think that, for city-dwellers, urban nature should be recognised and used as a wellbeing resource throughout different phases of mental health care and recovery.

OUR RESEARCH¹

Nature can be a great help to people with mental health difficulties. Urban green spaces and everyday nature such as trees, wildlife, water and views around a city can offer people respite from overwhelming built environments and difficult personal experiences. People with mental health difficulties can find that nature, even in a city, helps them feel 'safe', 'unjudged' and 'connected' to the rest of the world.

"I hear voices that come from the cars, the traffic in the city. But when I'm out fishing, I don't hear them. I just hear the birds and all the voices have gone."

Mick

WHAT PEOPLE TOLD US – 5 KEY IDEAS

1

WHAT WELLBEING BENEFITS DOES NATURE OFFER?

There is no single wellbeing benefit from nature for people with mental health difficulties. The most common wellbeing experiences we heard included: feeling connected to the rest of the world (both human and non-human); connection to seasonal and life cycles; feeling companionship from aspects of nature – trees, wildlife, pets and birds; feeling solidarity with urban nature (it can struggle but sticks around); remembering positive memories of special places and people; feeling like nature doesn't judge you; nature can give permission for emotion; nature as a buffer, helping you cope with people; calm; gratitude; headspace.

2

WHAT NATURE EXPERIENCES HELP?

There is no single nature-based activity that works for everyone. People talked about different nature-related things to do or ways to be, including: getting away from the busy city centre; being alone in woods and parks and local green patches; walking; remembering stories and songs about nature; socialising and being around others in parks; sitting on benches near some nature; being near trees; noticing small nature details; growing things; touching an animal's fur; watching birds and insects; listening to trees; anthropomorphising things (imagining stones have feelings; seeing faces in tree bark); jogging along a canal side; visiting places in and around the city that mix up history and heritage with nature; doing nature based wellbeing interventions - perhaps prescribed or run by a healthcare practitioner or perhaps facilitated outside healthcare settings (people may need a choice).

3

WHAT PLACES AND ENVIRONMENTS HELP?

Places and experiences of urban nature were usually 'everyday', not often special or spectacular: observing trees' life cycles in parks, streets and gardens; hearing birdsong; going to well-kept parks which seem full of 'life'; places with benches, cafes and toilet facilities; green and colourful routes through the city; views across the city; looking up at skies; animals (city farms, pets) and wildlife; water (natural and designed water features); for some the wilder edges of the city, for others well-manicured parks and gardens; minute pockets of nature in a crack in a pavement; a small stone or twig brought indoors.

4

HOW IS NATURE INTEGRATED INTO EVERYDAY LIVES?

When carers, family and support workers use greenspaces themselves, share nature stories and offer access to even small, local nature experiences (moss on walls, fallen leaves, new shoots), this can help people connect with both their local places and others' experiences. It can help build confidence and gain cultural access to nature. Nature based interventions in existing health care (GP and specialist mental health care) are valued by people with mental health difficulties. We heard of existing interventions including walking groups; gardening for mental health; visits to city farms; arts-based nature groups. However, people were not usually able to take as much interest in or gain benefit from nature during times when they were especially unwell.

5

HOW CAN THIS WORK FOR AN INDIVIDUAL?

Age and life stage, time available and the extent of a person's own caring responsibilities affect what works. Whilst some people will enjoy gardening or health walks, unfamiliar outdoor experiences, traditional nature conservation, high effort physical activity and exposure to extreme weather are unlikely to be good starting points. Some people benefit from places that feel wild and untamed, whilst others find these places distressing, preferring well-maintained parks instead. Nature was never thought of as a 'cure'. People told us that urban nature experiences can be helpful alongside, and only occasionally instead of, their other forms of care and medications.

"Are parks ok places for a grown man to cry if he's not harming anyone? Because I can cry and get emotional in a park – the beauty – but it doesn't feel ok in a city centre round the shops and people"

Hamid

WHAT YOU CAN DO – 5 STARTING POINTS

1

Carers, support workers, mental health nurses, occupational therapists and other health practitioners – it is possible to **do what you already do but add nature in**. Add easy opportunities to experience nature and green spaces. For example, could you talk while planting some bulbs, while sitting under a tree? Do you normally work with artists and therapists – could they take a nature focus? When planning outings, include visits to an urban nature place or very local nature experiences. See what local nature groups offer already. A person with mental health difficulty might like to lead a walk in a familiar area for others in a group.

2

Include as part of regular person-centred care, getting to **know an individual's history of being outdoors and experience of nature**. One person's chaotic and hostile wild place is another person's safe haven. A busy family-oriented park is a welcome environment for some but dispiriting for others. Identify whether someone will benefit from the order/wildness in a landscape and know that physical and mental access to outdoor nature is not always achievable during the toughest times. Use stepping stone activities, especially creative activities, perhaps starting indoors in bright safe spaces with outdoor views, to help people appreciate what works for them already. For example, there may be birdfeeders, visible from indoors, or a tree that changes through the seasons. Offer nature films, programmes, photos or digital resources in people's accommodation or in group activities. How can people have opportunities, indoors or just outside the door, to enjoy the company of animals or care for plants?

3

Use nature experiences and time in green spaces to help people feel **connected to the wider world and, sometimes, to other people**. When individuals use nature for their own wellbeing, they talk about being able to 'face' people, to identify with other non-human aspects of the natural world and feel part of something. Can seasonal change or regular nature events and moments be noticed regularly or recorded creatively? Think about how people might notice plants, animals, distant views and skies, weather, seasonal change in easy ways, in every day settings around home or health care environments? Try setting up nature-focussed groups that can help people feel a sense of belonging and more supported in going outdoors. You might have nature or place-based conversation clubs that can help people feel connected to their city, to other people and to positive memories from the past. It's also ok if people get more benefit from nature if enjoyed alone; the sense of space and connection with animals, plants or other nature can have a strong wellbeing benefit and aid a person's day to day functioning.

4

Nature is welcomed as way of talking and thinking about personal experience, rather than focusing on illness; people can find it helpful to use **nature as metaphor, symbol and for sensory self-care**. Creative activities can help people identify with other aspects of nature (e.g. feeling like an animal, a tree, a flower, a storm). Can sensory activities based around nature objects indoors and landscape features outdoors help people talk about their mental health experiences? The location of therapies and interventions can make a difference, for example are there places with sounds from nature that people enjoy? Feelings about seasons and weather may be quite powerful and attending to how people feel about seasons can help in planning for appointments and therapies. Winter darkness can be dreadful for some but for others, the cosiness of winter can feel supportive. Even in cities, textures and sensory qualities of nature can be experienced through plants, water features and things that don't seem like 'nature', such as stone and sky.

5

Barriers to accessing urban nature can be very great in times of poor mental health. When you **direct resources towards overcoming barriers**, this will help nature become more accessible. For example, can you enable or support transport options to natural environments around the city; how can you help people with confidence in different weather conditions and seasons? Listen to people's stories about fears and phobias around different environments. Some green spaces may be avoided because of the people associated with those places; can people be supported to help 'reclaim' those spaces? Think about 'stepping stone activities' to access nature, perhaps start doing these indoors. Friendly cafés with easy access to water features, plants and flowers can be good places to start. The work you do is important and anything you do to help create a mental health friendly city is worthwhile including supporting or challenging design, building and maintenance decisions made by city authorities.

¹ IWUN, (Improving Wellbeing through Urban Nature) was a large 3-year research project exploring if and how urban nature helps people with their mental health and wellbeing.

Total 43 participants with mental health difficulties

Female=28 (65%); Male=15 (35%); Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic Origin=10 (23%); living in areas classified as urban deprived=29 (67%)

35 people took part in one of 4 six-week creative nature and wellbeing courses, run for people with mental health difficulties. The 4 courses were with: adults living with a range of mental health problems; young people experiencing mental health problems; women with peri natal mental health difficulties; people living in NHS residential care for mental health

8 participants who took part in interviews told us they had mental health difficulties.

"See that twig I carry in my
pocket – there's something real.
It's not in my head"

Lou

"Trees just chill you out.
You don't have to impress them.
They just are."

Jen

ABOUT IWUN

Improving Wellbeing through Urban Nature (IWUN) brings together five strands of research:

- An epidemiological analysis of links between greenspace and health
- In-depth interviews and workshops to explore people's connectedness with nature
- Using a smartphone app to find out whether people feel better when noticing good things in their environment
- Interviews with professionals and community groups to identify interventions to increase wellbeing
- A cost-utility analysis of selected interventions

An accompanying document, Five Principles for Policymaking, is available at www.iwun.uk/publications

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