

Mental Health



The case studies below explore the many benefits that mental health service users – in hospitals, day centres and in the community – have gained from taking part in Walking the way to Health Initiative (WHI) schemes.

Getting out of the day centre

SCHEME: DAISY BANK WALKING GROUP,
MANCHESTER
REGION: NORTH WEST

Daisy Bank is a day centre for mental health service users in the Longsight area of Manchester. With WHI grant aid, Daisy Bank health walks have been taking place since 2002.

At first the walks were run by the centre but now they are entirely organised by the service users themselves.

Medication for mental health problems can lead to side effects that include weight gain and associated health issues. These issues can be compounded by taking little or no exercise. Daisy Bank's challenge was to make appropriate physical activities available and then motivate people to take part.

Two health walks a week are run from the day centre. The Wednesday walk is always to one of the local parks and is accompanied by a member of staff. On Friday, participants travel by



The Daisy Bank Wednesday walk – an incentive to get out and about in the local area.

public transport to a country park for a longer walk. A group of 6 to 9 walkers regularly takes part and several have also progressed to walking more in their day-to-day life. Four service users have now trained as walk leaders through WHI.

"Walking has become a big thing – it has been good for many of our clients who previously took very little exercise and were very dependent on the day centre for entertainment. Now there is an incentive to get out and about and explore the neighbourhood. The walks tend to be something people want to continue with."

MICHAEL GRIERSON, DAISY BANK MANAGER

Mental Health key facts

- Regular physical activity appears to relieve symptoms of depression and anxiety and improve mood. There is some evidence that regular physical activity may protect against the development of mild forms of depression. Regular physical activity is associated with improved self-esteem, particularly among young people. *Office for National Statistics (2000). Psychiatric morbidity among adults living in private households, 2000. London: Office for National Statistics.*

Mental Health key facts

- Exercise has been associated with reduced anxiety, decreased depression, enhanced mood, improved self-worth and body image, and improved cognitive functioning. *Biddle, S., Fox, K., Butcher, S. eds (2000) Physical Activity and Psychological Well-Being, London: Routledge.*

- Research shows that a supervised programme of exercise can be as effective as antidepressants in treating mild or moderate depression. *The Mental Health Foundation (2005). Up and Running?, London.*

Encouraging activity through hospital walks

SCHEME: **BARROW HOSPITAL WALKS,
AVON AND WILTSHIRE NHS**
REGION: **SOUTH WEST**

Barrow hospital is a 76-bed mental health hospital on the outskirts of Bristol. Although not in receipt of grant aid, the hospital has, through WHI, benefited from walk leader training for staff and support on all aspects of healthy walking.

People with mental ill-health often have significant differences in diet, higher levels of inactivity and a higher prevalence of smoking than those found in the wider population. This group are twice as likely to die from CHD and four times more likely to die from respiratory disorders. Rates of obesity, diabetes and hypertension are also significantly higher.

Amy Kingston, Louise Foxwell and David Fortune are the hospital's Sport and

Exercise Technicians and their role is to improve the physical health and well-being of the patients.

"Working in psychiatry, huge emphasis is placed on mental health and often, due to the nature of a patient's illness, physical health deteriorates as a result ... It is, however, not an easy task motivating people with severe mental ill-health to engage in physical activity."

AMY KINGTON, SPORT AND EXERCISE TECHNICIAN

Although the hospital has a well-equipped gymnasium with specialist staff on site, it is situated away from the wards and very few patients made use of it. Amy's department was faced with the problem of how to get people through the doors of the gym. Once they joined forces with WHI, a simple solution presented itself.

"We have set up a daily half-hour walk through the spectacular grounds here, stopping off at the different wards to collect people and finishing at the gym. Some patients then choose to go back to the wards but a large percentage stay on and do a session in the gym."

AMY KINGTON

The benefits that have arisen from these walks are considerable. The walks provide a low to moderate intensity activity with low risk of injury – ideal for people who are used to taking little or no exercise. They are also a great way of escaping from ward life and clearly help staff and patients to form better relationships.

"We walk every day come rain or shine. The walks have become an institution and 50% of service users now take part. The trust gained has helped people feel comfortable about speaking of major life events, medications and side effects. Such information has been invaluable to medical staff."

AMY KINGTON

As well as taking part in the walks, more patients are now choosing to walk within the grounds at other times.

Within the NHS, funding is always a consideration and the fact that these walks incur no overheads and require no specialist equipment means that they are sustainable and will continue into the foreseeable future.



The health walks at Barrow Hospital are a great way of escaping from ward life and help staff and patients to form better relationships.

Building confidence to join local health walks

SCHEME: LAWRENCE WESTON
WALKING GROUP, BRISTOL
REGION: SOUTH WEST

In Bristol there is a city-wide WHI scheme that has set up thirteen different walking groups in a number of locations. One of these is the Lawrence Weston Walking Group, in north-west Bristol, which organises health walks for the general public. A separate project involves mental health service users in Lawrence Weston and aims to get people comfortable with health walks so that they then have the confidence to join the mainstream walking group.

"People experiencing mental ill-health can struggle with low confidence, self-esteem and expectations. Moreover, those who have been in the system for a long time can lose the concept of control over their physical health."

SIAN DAVIES, WHI BRISTOL

Walking outdoors, in an informal setting with no pressure and in the company of others, can help to address many of these interrelated issues and all sorts of benefits can flow from the enjoyment of walking.

The project came about because Dave*, one of the volunteer walk leaders with the Lawrence Weston Walking Group, was a service user of Rethink (formerly the National Schizophrenia Society). He spread the word about the benefits and accessibility of health walks to Rethink, which works on a one-to-one basis with mental health service users in their own communities.



The Lawrence Weston scheme seeks to help people become comfortable with health walks so that they then have the confidence to join the mainstream walking group.

Sian Davies, of WHI Bristol, then met with Dave and community workers from Rethink. The interest in health walks was explored and Dave became the cornerstone of a pilot project of walks set up specifically for service users in Lawrence Weston. People attended when they were able to and when life wasn't too difficult. Feedback from service users and staff showed that the walks were greatly valued and had become a focal point in the week. Mental and physical health improvements were noted – two service users not only enjoyed doing a lot more walking but also lost significant amounts of weight. Social inclusion was another major benefit of taking part in the health walks.

Practical problems have meant that the development of the pilot project has been restricted. The walks have had to stop in term time when many service users are at college, although plans to continue walks

in the holidays are in hand. The good news is that a number of service users from the Lawrence Weston Rethink now regularly attend mainstream walking groups.

"Exciting leading edge research is now showing a clear link between walking and positive mental health. For those of us involved in WHI, this is nothing new - we see the evidence every time a walk takes place. We know how much the scheme has benefited people – they tell us!"

SIAN DAVIES

There is potential to develop specific health walks with Rethink and other mental health organisations throughout Bristol. However, once funding for WHI Bristol runs out, future developments will depend on alternative sources of finance being found.

*name changed

Mental Health key facts

- There are strong reasons for promoting exercise therapy as a first-line treatment for mild or moderate depression - exercise has far fewer negative side effects, is a sustainable recovery choice, promotes social inclusion and is a popular treatment. *The Mental Health Foundation (2005). Up and Running?, London.*

- Walking can reduce anxiety, depression and loneliness. It can also promote neighbourliness, increase confidence, stamina and vitality and hence boost people's quality of life.

Mental Health

GPs encouraging walks for mental well-being

SCHEME: BLYTH VALLEY WALKING TO HEALTH

REGION: NORTH EAST

Blyth Valley Walking to Health scheme not only runs 7 led walks a week but also regularly organises very popular away days.

All the weekly walks are local and urban, taking people through their town streets and green spaces. They take place every week of the year, regardless of weather or national holidays and 200 people attend each week. The scheme has been featured on national and local television.

Half the population of Blyth town live within some of the most deprived wards in the country, so local people face a wide range of social and economic problems. A lot of people of all ages live alone, and many are contending with low self-esteem and mental health problems.

Alan George, co-ordinator of Blyth Valley Walking to Health, became fully aware of the scale of the problem when he was asked to take part in a workshop on mental health issues in Northumberland. He ran a session on walking and mental health and was surprised to find that two-thirds of the participants were people who took part in his health walks.

"I hadn't realised until then that GPs were recommending the walking scheme to their patients for mental as well as physical reasons and I understood how much benefit people were deriving from the social side of the walks."

ALAN GEORGE, CO-ORDINATOR,
BLYTH VALLEY WALKING TO HEALTH



Blyth Valley Walking to Health scheme on an away day trip to Craster – people derive immense benefit from the social side of the walks.

Alan recognises the importance of health walks as a setting where people can not only improve their fitness but can carry on informal conversations as and when they choose.

All Blyth Valley walks are open to everyone and the need to welcome people in and make them feel at home is now stressed as an important part of the walk leader's role.

Changes in the confidence and mental well-being of walkers can be significant and local doctors are among the scheme's biggest advocates.

The scheme was grant aided to the end of September 2005. It has, however, made such an impression on the community that Alan's post, as walks officer with Blyth Valley Borough Council, will continue.



The Walking the way to Health Initiative (WHI) aims to improve the health and fitness of those who take little exercise or who live in areas of poor health.

WHI has helped to create more than 350 local health walk schemes and has trained over 18,000 volunteer walk leaders. Since 2000, it is estimated that we've encouraged over a million people to walk more.

Health Walk: a purposeful, brisk walk undertaken on a regular basis and carried out for the purpose of improving health.

This is one of a set of WHI case studies. For further information please visit our website.

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