Case study: Green Therapy for Survivors of Torture

Using ecotherapy to work with people who have experienced trauma

One of 130 projects funded by Mind through Ecominds; a £7.5m Big Lottery Fund grants scheme that used nature and green activities to improve physical and mental health.
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Summary
Freedom from Torture – a medical foundation for the care of victims of torture – uses horticulture to rehabilitate severely traumatised men and women. Now known as the Natural Growth Project, it provides social and therapeutic horticulture in north London where individual psychotherapy and therapeutic work happens alongside gardening and working on an allotment. Participants told an independent evaluation¹ that it gave them peace and distracted them from memories and worries; therapists found it enhances the healing process as people to take steps towards recovery and mourn what has happened to them.


What is it about?
The Natural Growth Project works with people who have survived torture, helping them to:

• improve their mental and social wellbeing
• get involved with the local community
• increase and nurture their skills
• understand more about mental health issues.

The project offers four weekly therapeutic horticultural activities:

1. There are two gardening psychotherapy groups where clients work together on the same plot of land. The groups are facilitated by a psychotherapist. Both groups are mixed gender and currently one group is mainly men, who like to do a lot of physical work such as digging.

2. Participants work on an individual plot of land on an allotment and are visited while working on it by a psychotherapist for an individual discussion. This group also share lunch together. Some work on the allotment during the week too.

3. Individual therapy for people not well enough to be in a group takes place when the person and psychotherapist garden together; they use what happens in the garden as a way in to talking about how the person is feeling.

4. A practical gardening group run by a gardener for people who are having therapy or treatment at the centre and want to learn about gardening.

The participants
The project typically works with refugees and asylum seekers from across the world who have experienced torture and imprisonment, many have seen their family and neighbours tortured and murdered. There are usually more men than women as it is mostly men who are affected by torture and reach the UK.

Participants are referred to Freedom from Torture for treatment for physical and mental health problems and receive advice on benefits, housing and legal issues – the horticultural project is one of a range of therapies that are available. The psychological trauma resulting from torture takes many forms. It is common for people who have survived torture to experience symptoms such as recurrent nightmares, insomnia, flashbacks, panic attacks, anxiety, depression, and disassociation.

About the participants
- 57 people took part and all are using the Freedom from Torture mental health services
- 40 are male and 17 female
- 57 are from black and minority ethnic groups
- The majority are aged 26 to 55 years
- 57 are refugees or asylum seekers
The difference it makes

An independent evaluation of the project in 2013 identified five positive changes that both participants and therapists said they had noticed:

• improved mood and reduced agitation
• increased belief that people can achieve something
• increased social interaction with others and involvement in social activities
• learning new skills
• improved physical health.

The change in mood was significant for most people - they said they felt more cheerful, less worried and anxious, and therapists said they noticed that people smiled, whistled or sang while they worked. People who have experienced torture can find it hard to experience pleasure again so being able to smile and feel satisfied is a big breakthrough.

The project has helped people who are isolated and alone make friends who they see outside of the project. They also get to know local people on the allotment. This enables participants to build a support network for themselves. Seventeen participants have become volunteers in the garden and allotments and some are teaching others about gardening.


Project successes

Therapists say that the garden almost always helps people to become calm. Sometimes people are too distressed to continue with a therapy session, but a walk in the garden, smelling flowers and herbs restores their sense of self. Participants say the mix of therapy and doing something purposeful in the garden helped them to heal.

The use of nature as a metaphor has sometimes helped people to express what words cannot, for example one participant created a memorial garden for his family. The growth and renewal of the garden has become a symbol of hope for the future and often therapists use what is happening in the garden to start a therapeutic conversation. Participants’ enthusiasm and confidence as gardeners often grows and they begin to feel responsible for the plants and proud of what they have achieved. It is part of their recovery process and several participants talk about this in a film made by the BBC about the project.

“A change that is common to all groups is an increase in attention span. I’ve seen people turn away from a job in despair in their first few sessions, just sit down and say they can’t do it.”

Horticulturalist
Five ways to wellbeing according to participants:

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<th>Five ways to wellbeing</th>
<th>What participants say happens for them</th>
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| Connect with others     | • Feel less isolated and able to make and meet friends  
                          • Meet others in the community especially at the allotment  
                          • Re-learn and re-experience trusting others |
| Be more active          | • Enjoy doing physical work; strength and stamina improved  
                          • Take fewer painkillers  
                          • Feel relaxed and less tense |
| Take notice of the world| • Gain a sense of achievement – see the results of their work  
                          • Are able to take pleasure in the world around them  
                          • Re-kindles a sense of hope |
| Keep learning           | • Learn new skills and re-visit existing skills and knowledge  
                          • One person is studying Environmental Science at university  
                          • Gain confidence about learning in a new country, circumstances and language |
| Give to others          | • Some are volunteering in green community projects  
                          • Support each other  
                          • Participants made a mosaic for a local park |

**Top tip**

At the beginning of a session I let them work in the garden and be with nature first. By the end of the session people feel better in themselves and therefore in a better position to think and talk about difficult experiences.

Natural Growth Coordinator

I chose the gardening group because when I see everything grow green my mind gets relaxed, peaceful, empty. I feel it.

Participant

**Project details**

Started in 1992 and ongoing.

Staffed by two part time psychotherapists (one coordinates the project) and a horticulturalist

web: freedomfromtorture.org