



For better
mental health



executive summary

Ecotherapy

The green agenda
for mental health



Mind week report, May 2007
www.mind.org.uk/mindweek

Executive summary

Background

With this report Mind calls for a new green agenda for mental health, following growing evidence in support of an accessible, cost-effective and natural addition to existing treatment options – ecotherapy.

Ecotherapy is a natural, free and accessible treatment that boosts our mental wellbeing. Whether it's a horticultural development programme supervised by a therapist or a simple walk in the park, being outdoors and being active is proven to benefit our mental health.

As the cost and prescribing of drugs continues to rise, and 93 per cent of GPs say they have prescribed antidepressants against their better judgement owing to a lack of alternatives, ecotherapy needs to be seen as a clinically valid option that can play a vital part in patients' recovery.

Three of the Government's six key priorities set out in the recent Public Health White Paper were to increase exercise, improve mental health and reduce obesity – we believe that implementing this green agenda would go some way to achieving all three.

To view the report in full or to see the data from the University of Essex, go to:

www.mind.org.uk/mindweek

Key findings

Mind has commissioned two studies from the University of Essex, the results of which are published in the report. These studies confirm that participating in green exercise activities provides substantial benefits for health and wellbeing.

Green exercise at local Mind groups

For the first study, 108 people involved in green exercise activities with local Mind groups were surveyed. The activities included gardening projects (52 per cent), walking groups (37 per cent), conservation work (7 per cent), running (3 per cent) and cycling groups (1 per cent).

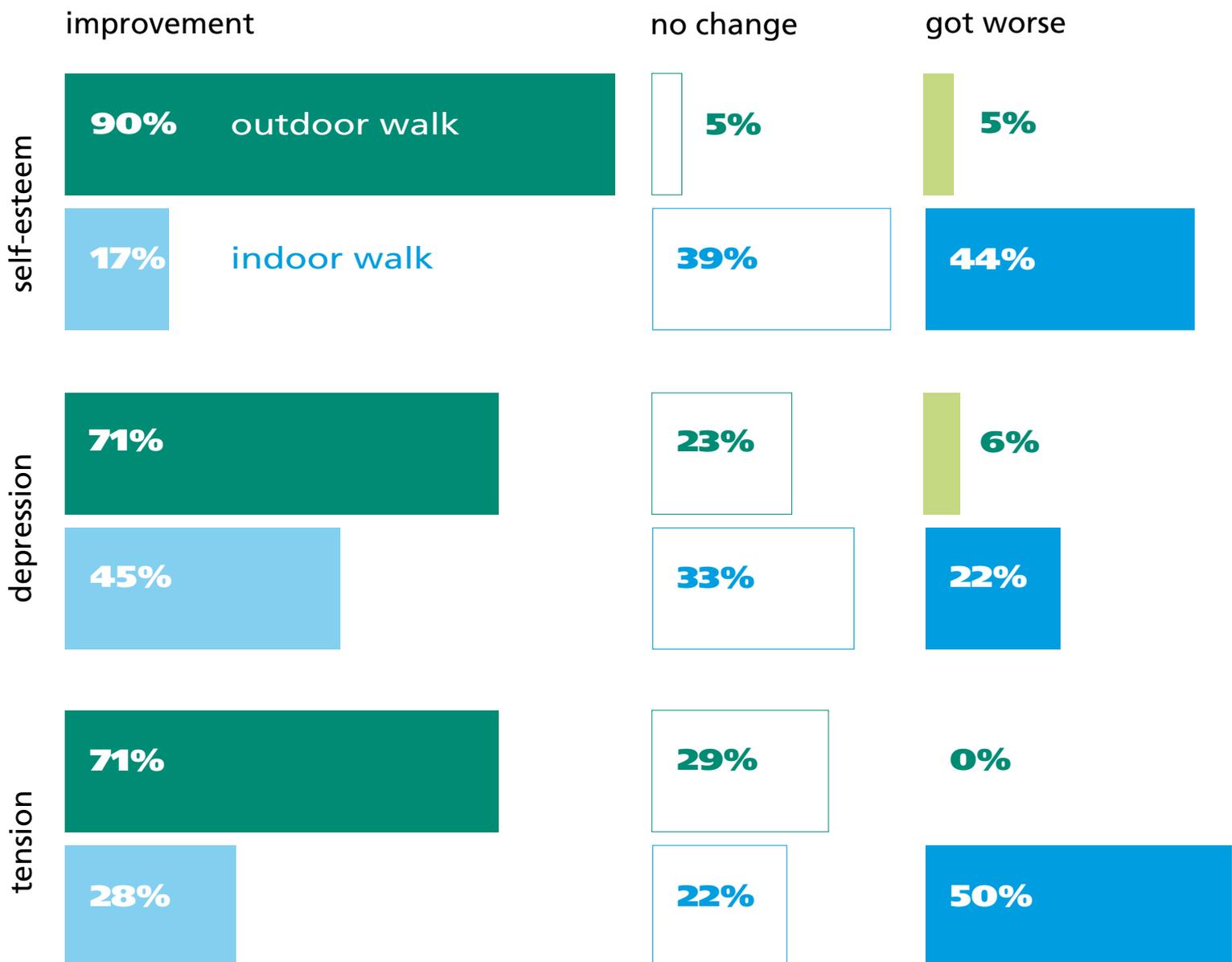
- 90 per cent of people who took part in Mind green exercise activities said that the combination of nature and exercise is most important in determining how they feel.
- 94 per cent of people commented that green exercise activities had benefited their mental health. Some of their comments included:
 - “I feel better about myself and have a sense of achievement.”
 - “I am more relaxed, have better focus of mind, greater coordination and greater self-esteem.”
 - “It improves my depression, helps me be more motivated and gives me satisfaction in doing things. Since starting the project I have been able to improve on my quality of life. Coming here has helped me overcome most of my problems.”
- 90 per cent of those surveyed commented that taking part in green exercise activities had benefited their physical health. Comments included:
 - “My fitness has improved, I feel refreshed and alive.”
 - “I feel as though I can do things without being tired. I am more active, I want to join in things and my body is looser and more agile.”

Outdoor versus indoor exercise

The second study looks at the role the environment plays on the effectiveness of exercise for mental wellbeing. Twenty members of local Mind associations took part in two walks in contrasting environments to test the impact on self-esteem, mood and enjoyment.

The green, outdoor walk was around Belhus Woods Country Park in Essex, which has a varied landscape of woodlands, grasslands and lakes. The indoor walk was around a shopping centre in Essex.

Percentage of people who experienced improvements, no change or worsening in feelings of self-esteem, depression and tension following the outdoor and indoor walks.



Ecotherapy – the green agenda for mental health

Why ecotherapy?

For the one in four people in England and Wales who will experience a mental health problem at some point in their lives there are few treatment options immediately available. In 2005, 27.7 million antidepressant prescriptions were written in England, at a cost of £338 million to the public health service. Ecotherapy, a treatment that is free of unpleasant side-effects, offers a cost-effective and natural addition to existing treatments.

Last year, *The Depression Report* by Lord Layard drew attention to the economic costs of mental distress and the lack of treatment options. The report made the case for “a new deal for depression and anxiety disorders,” pointing out that three-quarters of the six million people in Britain diagnosed with these disorders were not receiving treatment. Of those that were, most were prescribed pills when they would have preferred therapy.

Public and political concern about treatment availability has focused on the lack of access to talking treatments, particularly cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Mind has discovered waiting lists of up to four years for CBT in some parts of the country. This is a cause for serious concern. It is important, however, not to lose sight of other preventive and therapeutic interventions that have a key role to play in tackling mental distress. Despite the current prominence of green issues in virtually every area of policy debate, ecotherapy is still not widely regarded as a serious treatment option.

Few GPs will consider a local conservation project or rambling group as a treatment option for people with depression, often because there are no local schemes to which patients can be referred. Care plans or social care assessments do not generally consider providing support to access green space. And town planners and architects often fail to allow for accessible green space in their designs.

The principles behind ecotherapy are not new. In the past, mental health institutions were often situated in pleasant gardens and natural landscapes. But these considerations no longer play a significant role in the planning of urban and rural space – in the design of hospitals, the treatment and care of people experiencing mental distress, or the identification of public health and social care priorities.

Many of the over 200 local Mind associations across England and Wales run green projects – including walking, gardening and conservation work. The thousands of people who use our services place great value on these kinds of activities, and report that they have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing.

A solid evidence base is essential to promote the benefits of ecotherapy. More and more evidence has been emerging in recent years, which demands a serious response from policy makers and service providers. This report draws together the evidence and takes seriously the personal testimonies of people who have experienced mental distress and have benefited from ecotherapy.

With commentators and politicians arguing for more focus on wellbeing and less on wealth, it is time to take a proper look at the potential of green approaches to mental health care and promotion. Against this background, our report has three aims:

1. to provide an overview of the evidence for the therapeutic role of green exercise
2. to present new research confirming that green exercise improves mental health and wellbeing
3. to set out the policy implications and call on politicians and other decision-makers to bring ecotherapy in from the margins of Britain's mental health policy.

Previous research

- A supervised programme of exercise can be equally as effective as antidepressants in treating mild to moderate depression (Halliwell, 2005; Richardson et al., 2005).
- A report by the Chief Medical Officer stated: “physical activity is effective in the treatment of clinical depression and can be as successful as psychotherapy or medication, particularly in the longer term.” (Department of Health, 2004)
- 93 per cent of GPs have prescribed antidepressants because of a lack of alternative treatment options (Hairon, 2006).
- In 2005, 27.7 million antidepressant prescriptions were written in England, at a cost of £338 million to the NHS (Hairon, 2006).
- The Department of Health (2004) estimated that a 10 per cent increase in adult physical activity would benefit the UK by £500 million per year, saving 6,000 lives; this calculation does not include the potential economic impact of improved mental wellbeing.
- On average adults expend 500 fewer calories per day than 50 years ago; this is the equivalent of not running a marathon every week (Eurodiet, 2001).

References

Department of Health, Physical Activity; Health Improvement and Prevention: Chief Medical Officer (2004), *At least five a week: Evidence on the impact of physical activity and its relationship to health*, 1–128

Eurodiet (2001), 'The Eurodiet Reports and Proceedings', *Public Health Nutrition*, Special Issue 4: 265-436

Hairon N. (2006), 'PCTs poles apart over depression services', *Pulse* 9 March

Halliwell E. (2005), *Up and Running? Exercise therapy and the treatment of mild or moderate depression in primary care*, Mental Health Foundation, London

Richardson C.R., Faulkner G., McDevitt J. et al. (2005), 'Integrating Physical Activity Into Mental Health Services for Persons With Serious Mental Illness', *Psychiatric Services* 56 (3): 324–31

World Health Organization: http://www.who.int/mental_health/management/depression

Conclusion

The World Health Organization predicts depression will be the second greatest cause of ill health globally by 2020. The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health estimates the cost of mental distress in a single year in England alone at £77 billion. The British Government states that one in four of us will directly experience mental health problems. Is it conceivable that a therapeutic intervention that can substantially reduce the human and other costs of mental distress is available on our doorsteps? Should people with experience of mental distress be routinely referred for green exercise, social and therapeutic horticulture or a period of time on a care farm – instead of, or in addition to, drugs and psychological therapy?

We believe the answer to all these questions is 'yes'. The evidence base is growing stronger, our concern about the environment is increasing and the 'green care' movement is gathering momentum across Europe. Policy makers, opinion formers and health and social care professionals should not lag behind. We need to develop mental health policy and practice in such a way that we are able to reap the potentially massive human and economic benefits of a new green agenda for mental health.

Ecotherapy is emerging as a clinically valid treatment option for mental distress, and a core component of an adequate public health strategy for mental health. The new research presented in this report shows green exercise has particular benefits for people experiencing mental distress. It directly benefits mental health (lowering stress and boosting self-esteem), improves physical health (lowering blood pressure and helping to tackle obesity), provides a source of meaning and purpose, helps to develop skills and form social connections.

While there are successful projects in the UK, including many funded by Primary Care Trusts, ecotherapy is still on the margins of mental health policy and service provision. Against this background, Mind is proposing a 10-point plan to provide a framework for ecotherapy within mental health policy and to set the parameters and objectives for policy development in this area.

Mind's recommendations

1. Ecotherapy should be recognised as a clinically valid treatment for mental distress.
2. Allocation of health and social care budgets should be informed by cost-benefit analysis of ecotherapies.
3. GPs should consider referral for green exercise as a treatment option for every patient experiencing mental distress.
4. Access to green space should be considered as a key issue in all care planning and care assessment.
5. Referral to green care projects – such as green care farms – should be incorporated into health and social care referral systems.
6. Inequality of access to green space should be addressed as a human rights, social justice and discrimination issue.
7. All health, social care and criminal justice institutions should be required to ensure access to green space.
8. Designing for mental wellbeing should be recognised as good practice for architecture and town and country planning.
9. The benefits of green exercise should be promoted by public health campaigns, targeting young people in particular.
10. Ecotherapy projects should be evaluated to collect data and continue to build an appropriate evidence base.



For better mental health

For details of your nearest local Mind association and of local services, contact Mind's helpline, MindinfoLine on 0845 7660 163, Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech impaired or deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Text direct, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, MindinfoLine has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

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Mind will campaign on green exercise and mental health. The campaign will start with Mind week (12 to 19 May), the theme of which is 'Fly a kite for mental health', and run until mid September 2007.

The campaign has the following aims:

- To raise awareness of the proven benefits for mental health of green exercise amongst service users, GPs, PCTs/Local Health Boards, Local Councils, mental health professionals and town planners.
- To encourage campaign audiences to take up the recommendations made in this report.
- To engage our networks, including local Mind associations and Mind in Action members in campaigning at a local level.

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