

# making sense



ecotherapy

## **Making sense of ecotherapy**

This booklet is an introduction to ecotherapy, a range of nature-based programmes that can help support your mental wellbeing. It describes the different types of programme available, how they can help and how to join them. It also offers guidance on how you can do ecotherapy by yourself.

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### What is ecotherapy?

Ecotherapy is the name given to a wide range of treatment programmes which aim to improve your mental and physical wellbeing through doing outdoor activities in nature.

Connecting with nature in this way can have lots of positive health benefits. For example, ecotherapy can help you manage an existing mental health problem, and could help prevent future periods of ill health, such as an episode of depression. You can use ecotherapy on its own, or alongside other treatments such as talking treatments or medication.

●● *I do ecotherapy to get sunlight onto my skin and into my mind. It shines light through the dark fog of depression.* ●●

**Note:** If you're considering making any changes to your treatment, you should always talk with your GP or psychiatrist first, so that they can advise you on how to make changes safely. It's not usually advisable to stop taking medication suddenly, whether or not you're starting another treatment. (See Mind's booklet *Making sense of coming off psychiatric drugs* for more information.)

#### Different terms to describe ecotherapy

The language around ecotherapy is evolving and sometimes different words are used to describe the same thing. For example, you might sometimes hear people use phrases such as:

- green exercise
- green care
- green therapy
- horticultural therapy.

These terms are often used interchangeably to refer to a whole range of outdoor activities, but sometimes might describe a specific type of ecotherapy programme (see 'What types of ecotherapy are there?' on p.6).

### What happens in ecotherapy?

Ecotherapy can take place in both rural and urban settings, such as parks, gardens, farms and woodlands. It can include activities that focus on:

- **Working in nature**, such as a conservation project, gardening or farming.
- **Experiencing nature**, such as enjoying the views on a walk or cycling through some woodland.

Formal programmes are usually a group activity and are run by trained professionals. These groups can be a mix of people of all ages. Participants may or may not have experience of mental health problems, but the main focus of the sessions is usually working together on the shared activity.

Some ecotherapy sessions follow a set structure, and include psychological treatment like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Others can be more informal, or vary depending on the time of year and what work needs doing. Sessions include varying amounts of physical activity, depending on the type of programme.

It's also possible to do informal ecotherapy on your own, without being led by a professional (see 'Can I do ecotherapy by myself?' on p.17).

👉👉 *It gives me structure, makes me utilise the daylight and get out of bed. It gives me something outside of myself to nurture and look after and that helps me to better look after myself.* 👉👉

### What types of ecotherapy are there?

The main types of ecotherapy programmes are listed alphabetically in the table below, including a brief description of what might happen in a session.

It's usually the role of the programme or group leader to make sure that you understand clearly how the programme works. They should be available throughout the programme to answer any questions you have about the activities and to monitor how things are going for you.

Programme	What does it involve?
<b>Adventure therapy</b> (adventure activities focused on psychological support)	Fairly strenuous physical activities incorporated with psychological exercises. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• It's usually done in a group.</li><li>• Might include activities such as rafting, rock climbing and caving, as ways to build trust and raise confidence.</li></ul>
<b>Animal assisted interventions (AAI)</b> (spending time with animals)	Being in spaces such as farms where you will come into contact with animals. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Spending relaxed time with animals, feeding or petting them.</li><li>• Can be used to assist mobility and improve coordination.</li><li>• It's less structured than animal assisted therapy (AAT).</li></ul>
<b>Animal assisted therapy (AAT)</b> (building a therapeutic relationship with animals)	Formal therapy using guided contact with animals such as horses or dogs. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The focus is on the interaction and bonding between you and the animal.</li><li>• It's led by an experienced therapist.</li><li>• Could be one-to-one or group therapy.</li></ul>

Programme	What does it involve?
<p><b>Care Farming</b> (working on farms)</p>	<p>Looking after farm animals, growing crops or helping to manage woodland.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sessions generally run for half days.</li> <li>• Many farms hold open days with taster sessions for you to go along and try things out before joining a programme.</li> <li>• There are several hundred care farm sites in the UK, in both rural and urban areas.</li> </ul> <p>The Care Farming UK website provides more information (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22).</p>
<p><b>Ecotherapy</b> (strengthening your relationship to nature)</p>	<p>All programmes listed in this booklet can be considered types of ecotherapy, but in its strictest sense, a formal ecotherapy (or eco-therapy) programme is where a trained therapist leads you through different activities to develop a balanced relationship with nature that benefits your wellbeing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sessions can be adapted to suit different levels of mobility and fitness.</li> <li>• Sessions often include some type of formal therapy, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or other talking treatment (see Mind's booklet <i>Making sense of talking treatments</i> for more information).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Environmental conservation – sometimes called Green Gyms</b> (combining physical exercise with conservation work)</p>	<p>Protecting and conserving natural spaces and habitats.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tasks vary depending on location and time of year.</li> <li>• Sessions include plenty of breaks and you can work at your own pace.</li> <li>• The group leader will show you how to exercise and use tools safely.</li> </ul> <p>For more information, contact The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22).</p>

Programme	What does it involve?
<b>Green exercise therapy</b> (doing exercise in nature)	<p>Physical activities in green spaces, such as walking, running and cycling.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can include a range of walks from gentle strolls to strenuous hiking.</li><li>• Usually run by a trained leader.</li></ul> <p>For more information, visit the websites for Let's Walk Cymru and Walking for Health (see 'Useful contacts' on p.23).</p>
<b>Nature arts and crafts</b> (doing art in or with nature)	<p>Artistic activities which might take place in the natural environment, and use natural materials such as wood, grass and clay.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• You might work directly in the environment and create permanent installations outdoors.</li><li>• You might use the environment or scenery as inspiration for artwork.</li><li>• Often forms part of other ecotherapy sessions, such as social and therapeutic horticulture (STH) or environmental conservation.</li></ul>
<b>Social and therapeutic horticulture (STH)</b> (gardening)	<p>Gardening or growing food in allotments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• You can choose from a variety of tasks.</li><li>• Can be adapted to suit a wide range of abilities and mobility levels.</li><li>• Usually takes place outside in community gardens or nurseries, or inside village halls and libraries.</li><li>• Run by qualified and experienced tutors.</li><li>• Could lead to work experience such as selling produce at a market garden, or the opportunity to take horticulture qualifications.</li></ul> <p>For more information, visit the websites for Carry on Gardening, Groundwork and Thrive (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22-23).</p>

Programme	What does it involve?
<b>Wilderness therapy</b> (being out in the wild)	<p>Spending time in the wild with a group, doing physical and group-building activities such as making shelters and hiking.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A structured and supported opportunity to challenge yourself in a wilderness or remote setting. Building a relationship with an outdoors environment is central to this therapy.</li><li>• Usually involves some therapy to help you improve your self-awareness and remove mental blocks that are holding you back.</li></ul> <p>For more information, visit the Wilderness Foundation website (see 'Useful contacts' on p.23).</p>

👉👉 *I just joined a group called Get up and Grow. [Now I] look forward to Tuesday afternoon even if I'm having a tough time – I always seem to come home happier.* 👉👉

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## How can ecotherapy improve my wellbeing?

People join ecotherapy programmes for all sorts of reasons, and you might get something completely different from one activity from someone else. However there are some common benefits associated with ecotherapy and its combination of outdoor activities and nature.

### Improves mental health

Ecotherapy can make a significant difference to how you feel, for example by helping you feel more grounded, providing an alternative perspective on life and helping your mind and body to relax. It can:

- reduce depression
- reduce anger
- reduce feelings of anxiety and stress
- improve your mood and self-esteem
- increase your emotional resilience.

You might also find that ecotherapy benefits your wellbeing by providing a therapeutic space where you don't have to talk about your problems, or even think about them – instead there is more space to learn new skills, develop new interests and make new friends.

### How does ecotherapy reduce depression?

Research into ecotherapy has shown it can be a successful treatment for mild to moderate depression. This is thought to be due to a combination of:

- doing more physical activity, which is known to have many physical and mental health benefits
- getting more regular social contact with people, which can reduce loneliness and boost self-esteem
- being surrounded by nature, which can boost your overall mood and sense of wellbeing.

Environmental conservation programmes and care farms in particular (see p.7), have been shown to reduce anger and depression and improve self-esteem. Evidence also suggests that being more active in nature can improve your mood far more than doing similar exercise indoors.

See Mind's booklets *Understanding depression*, *Understanding anxiety and panic attacks*, *How to manage stress*, *How to increase your self-esteem* and *How to improve and maintain your mental wellbeing* for more information on these topics.

●● *I have depression, anxiety and BPD. [Doing ecotherapy] has allowed me somewhere that is my safe place, a place of my own, where I can be quiet and peaceful. The act of growing and caring for something else helps me to stop thinking about what is going on in my head.* ●●

### Can it help with severe mental health problems?

If you experience a more serious or long-term mental health condition, such as psychosis or ongoing suicidal feelings, there may be specific programmes that are set up in ways that can support you. Some gardening and conservation projects offer increased support from psychiatric staff and may involve a more long-term commitment.

●● *Being at a supported gardening project has transformed my life and saved the life of my partner who had attempted suicide four times before she regained hope.* ●●

### Improves physical health

Ecotherapy can improve your physical health through:

- regular opportunities for physical exercise
- spending time in the fresh air, which can increase your energy levels
- using up excess stress hormones in your body
- relaxing your nervous system by being in a calm, natural environment
- increasing your stamina and fitness.

(See Mind's booklet *How to improve your wellbeing through physical activity and sport* for more information on the benefits of being more active, and how to increase your activity levels safely.)

●● *I volunteer at a community garden project and have done the beginners course there. [It] helps me get out of the house and be around people again. Sometimes it is hard [...] but when I get there I immediately feel comfortable being in the open air and around the plants.* ●●

### Develops your social life

By participating in an ecotherapy project, you could:

- meet new people
- lessen any isolation and loneliness, and increase your sense of belonging
- build your peer support network
- create more of a structure to your week
- make connections with people, which may develop into long-term friendships.

Many gardening and walking groups are open to everyone, rather than being specifically for people who experience mental health problems. Going along to an introductory session, if there's one available, could be a gentle way of trying these out.

👤👤 *I saw an advert on Twitter for a free 'taster' session for Nordic walking and it was near where I lived, so I went along. It gives me a scheduled reason to go outside for a walk and interact with people.* 👤👤

### Builds confidence

Ecotherapy could also help build your confidence through:

- enabling you to meet and overcome new challenges
- trying new activities and learning new skills, which can increase your confidence to try new things in other areas of your life
- increasing your motivation to stay active
- providing the satisfaction of completing tasks and contributing to positive change for yourself and the environment
- potentially providing opportunities to gain qualifications.

👤👤 *My sister encouraged me to volunteer after I moved to a new place and didn't want to go out much... I didn't think I was a 'gardener' before, but now I have a lovely garden, and am heavily involved with the allotment, too!* 👤👤

## Strengthens your connection with nature

For example, you can:

- spend more time outside in all weathers
- learn about the natural cycles of the year
- tune into the sights, sounds and smells of the natural world
- create habitats for wildlife
- become aware of your wider connections with animals, plants, trees and different landscapes
- work with natural materials such as wood and clay.

●● *Nurturing something else into life has really helped my wellbeing – gently caring for something helped me learn to care for myself.* ●●

## Helps you practise mindfulness

Mindfulness is a type of therapy which involves becoming more aware of yourself in the present moment. Bringing your attention to the natural world around you can help shift your focus away from thoughts that might be stressful or upsetting.

BeMindful provides more information about how to practise mindfulness, to help you decide whether it's right for you (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22).

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## What might I consider before starting a programme?

There's a lot to think about before signing up to an ecotherapy programme. The information in this section will help you to think through some of the most important questions that you may have. You might also want to ask a friend, family member or support worker to help talk through your decisions with you.

### Do I need to be referred?

This depends on the programme. For example, with Green Gyms and health walks you can often get in contact and join immediately. However with care farms and horticulture groups there may be a referral process or a waiting list.

### Who can refer me?

When you first contact a programme they will tell you if there is a particular person who needs to refer you. Some programmes require a referral from your GP, whereas others may accept a referral from someone you see regularly, such as a social worker, occupational therapist or community psychiatric nurse (CPN).

If you attend a day hospital or day centre, you can ask your care coordinator or named worker to help.

👏👏 *I saw a leaflet [at my local Mind] asking for volunteers – it took me a while to get up the courage but I was so glad when I did.* 👏👏

### Are there any costs involved?

Some programmes such as certain Green Gyms, health walks and horticulture groups are free. Others, such as care farms, may charge varying amounts. You might be able to get financial help to cover some costs of a treatment programme. For example, if you receive a Personal Budget it may be possible to use this to cover your costs. (See Mind's online booklet *The Mind guide to Personal Budgets for social care* for more information.)

### What do I need to ask the programme leader?

Once you have decided that you want to join a specific programme, it could be useful to have a chat with the group leader or other members of staff who can answer any questions that you have. You might want to talk through the following areas:

### Details about the sessions

- What happens in a session?
- How many people will be in the group?
- What level of physical mobility or fitness will I need?

### Practical information

- Do I need any equipment?
- Will I receive training? If so, what will that be and when will it be held?
- Where are the sessions held, and what are the travel arrangements?

### Commitment

- How long are the sessions?
- How long does the course last?
- Are all the sessions compulsory or is there a drop-in option?

### Finances

- Does it cost anything to do the programme?
- Do you know where I can get financial help?

### Application process

- Is there a formal application process? If so, what is it?
- Do I need a referral to join this programme? Who can refer me?

### Support

- Have people with mental health problems done this programme before?
- What mental health support is offered on the programme? Does this change at any stage?
- Will there be anyone I can go to if I need extra support?
- Can I bring someone with me for support?

### Further opportunities

- Are there opportunities to study for qualifications as part of the programme?
- Will I get any work experience through this programme?

### Is this the right time for me?

This is a very important question to consider before signing up to an ecotherapy programme. If you have recently been ill or are dealing with a mental health crisis, you might want to wait until you feel more stable before taking on a new challenge. Take your time and find out what's available. This way you can notice if the idea of joining up is feeling too stressful.

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### How can I find an ecotherapy programme near me?

There are lots of ecotherapy programmes across the UK. Good starting points to help you find out what's happening near you might be:

- Search 'find ecotherapy near me' on Mind's website. We provide an online list of organisations that offer ecotherapy programmes in England and Wales, including local Minds. Our directory is searchable by region.
- Contact relevant organisations directly. See the 'Useful contacts' section in this booklet on pp.22–23 for a list of national charities that provide ecotherapy programmes. Lots of these organisations provide online maps or databases so you can see where the nearest programmes are to you.

### What if there isn't a programme near me?

If there isn't an ecotherapy project running anywhere near you:

- It might be worth asking your local Mind if they would consider starting one – you can find details of your nearest local Mind on our website.
- You might be able to find other kinds of outdoor volunteering opportunities through the Do-it website (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22).
- You can also consider doing ecotherapy informally by yourself (opposite).

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## Can I do ecotherapy by myself?

If it's not possible for you to be part of a formal ecotherapy programme, or you don't feel ready to join one, there are still lots of ways for you to enjoy nature by yourself.

Don't worry if some suggestions in this section don't feel right for you – just try to find one or two that do, or adapt one so it feels like something you can manage. These ideas might also help you think of other activities you could try.

### Bring nature into your home environment

- Collect natural materials such as leaves, flowers, feathers, tree bark, seeds, and anything else that you like to decorate your home and use in art projects.
- Create a comfortable space to sit in in your home where you can look out over a view of the sky or a tree.
- Grow plants on your windowsills.
- Take photos of your favourite places in nature and set them as your phone and computer backgrounds.
- Try to do more everyday activities in front of a window so that you can see the sky (for example ironing clothes, chopping vegetables, brushing your teeth, drying dishes or daily exercises).
- Download some recordings of your favourite natural sounds such as birdsong or waves.

🌱🌱 *[I started out] by just finding an empty and unused space in the garden outside my window and tending to it.* 🌱🌱

### Try horticulture at home

- Create a growing space at home. If you don't have a garden, invest in a window box or plant pot and plant some salad leaves or herbs – even keeping a small container on your windowsill can help.
- If you don't have a garden yourself, you could offer to help a neighbour with their garden. If you want to cultivate a vegetable patch, you could suggest you split any food you grow between you, or share a meal together.
- If you have flower beds, try planting some vegetables amongst the flowers. Many varieties of vegetables have attractive flowers for part of the year and might even add to your display.
- Put your name down for an allotment or consider applying to share one.
- Join a local community food growing project if there is one in your area.
- Go fruit picking in the countryside, or find out about urban food foraging and get some tasty food for free. For example, in late summer and early autumn you might find lots of wild blackberry bushes growing in urban spaces, and some of the trees you walk by every day on your street might actually be apple or cherry trees.

**Remember:** if you're going fruit picking or foraging, be aware that not all wild plants are safe to eat. Make sure you only eat anything you've picked yourself when you're certain you know exactly what it is. If you're not sure, ask an experienced forager to help you.

## Get close to animals

- Go for walks in the countryside by rivers, fields and trees, and look out for wildlife. If you don't live near open countryside, look out for urban wildlife in your local park, such as squirrels, fish, insects, ducks and other birds.
- Visit your local community or city farm. The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens can help you find a community farm near you (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22).
- Go bird watching by yourself or with others.
- Offer to be a pet sitter in your local neighbourhood, volunteer to be a dog walker for a local dog shelter, or ask if you can borrow a friend's dog for occasional evening or weekend walks.
- Hang a bird feeder outside one of your windows. If you have the space you could build a small roosting box on a tree or under a windowsill so that you can watch baby sparrows or blue tits when they leave the nest. The RSPB provides more information on feeding and sheltering birds (see 'Useful contacts' on p.23).
- Think about whether owning a pet would be the right thing for you. Many people find caring for a pet every day brings lots of benefits, but you need to be sure your home environment and personal circumstances would be the right thing for the animal as well as for you. If you don't own your home, it's also important to check if you're allowed to keep pets.

●● *I can't always get myself out much so I spend time walking my dogs or just being in my garden. It has helped me to remember that when you strip away all life's complications you are left with the best bits: trees, plants, sky, flowers and animals.* ●●

### Do your bit for the environment

- Go on a litter picking walk in the park or on the beach.
- Plant something outside the front of your home so that everyone who walks by can enjoy it.
- Plant flowers for the bees and berry bushes for the birds in your garden.
- Build an animal habitat – put up a birdbox, create a hedgehog house or create a pond if you have enough space. Even a small pond can offer a home to lots of creatures, such as newts and pond skaters.
- Volunteer at an environmental conservation project.

### Do more activities outdoors

- Build a ten minute walk into your daily routine. If you take any regular walks to work or college, see if you can plan the route so that you take in a local park or river.
- Visit the coast and go beachcombing (searching along the shoreline for interesting things).
- Enjoy an outdoor picnic and include anything you can from your own herb, vegetable or fruit garden.
- If you have a garden, create a space in it that you enjoy sitting in or find a favourite spot in your local park to sit and watch the scenery.
- Sit under a tree in silence for a while, lean back against it and feel it supporting you.
- If you do regular exercise such as running, jogging, tai chi or yoga, experiment with doing it in a local park.

- If you usually drive short distances, try to walk, run or cycle instead whenever possible. To plan a route, visit the Sustrans website (see 'Useful contacts' on p.23).
- Suggest to a friend that you go for regular walks together. If you can, find routes that have nice cafés so you can sit and appreciate a beautiful view. Visit the National Trust's website for ideas (see 'Useful contacts' on p.23).
- Give yourself a sensory outdoor workout – find things to look at, listen to, taste, smell and touch. For inspiration visit the Let Nature Feed Your Senses website (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22).

**Remember:** if you're planning on heading out on your own for much longer than you usually would, or walking somewhere you don't know well, keep your safety in mind:

- **Let someone know where you're going**, and when you plan to be back.
- **Take your phone with you**, and make sure it's fully charged.

👁️👁️ *I go and sit by the ocean or in a wood or forest, close my eyes and listen to the sounds [...] Being out in natural environments makes me feel more connected to life and think clearer.* 🗣️🗣️

## Useful contacts

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### **Mind**

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393  
(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)  
email: [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)  
web: [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)

Our Infoline offers mental health information and support. We can provide details of Mind's Legal Line and help you find local services near you.

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### **BeMindful**

web: [bemindful.co.uk](http://bemindful.co.uk)  
Information about mindfulness and mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR). Guidance on how to learn mindfulness, including course listings.

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### **Care Farming UK**

web: [carefarminguk.org](http://carefarminguk.org)  
Online directory of local care farms.

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### **Carry on Gardening**

web: [carryongardening.org.uk](http://carryongardening.org.uk)  
National charity helping anyone with a disability start or continue gardening.

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### **The Conservation Volunteers (TCV)**

web: [tcv.org.uk](http://tcv.org.uk)  
UK conservation projects and Green Gyms.

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### **Do-it**

web: [do-it.org](http://do-it.org)  
UK volunteering opportunities, including environment and conservation options.

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### **Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens**

web: [farmgarden.org.uk](http://farmgarden.org.uk)  
Information and directory of city farms that offer therapeutic gardening and farming activities.

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### **Groundwork**

web: [groundwork.org.uk](http://groundwork.org.uk)  
National charity which offers environmental volunteering opportunities to enhance local communities.

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### **Let Nature Feed Your Senses**

web: [letnaturefeedyoursenses.org](http://letnaturefeedyoursenses.org)  
An organisation that links farms and nature reserves to help people connect more with food, farming and nature.

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### Lets Walk Cymru

web: [letswalkcymru.org.uk](http://letswalkcymru.org.uk)  
Network of health-walk schemes in Wales.

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### Walking for Health

web: [walkingforhealth.org.uk](http://walkingforhealth.org.uk)  
Network of health-walk schemes in England.

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### National Trust

web: [nationaltrust.org.uk](http://nationaltrust.org.uk)  
Lists walks and open gardens, parks and estates that you can visit.

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### Wilderness Foundation

web: [wildernessfoundation.org.uk](http://wildernessfoundation.org.uk)  
Offers facilitated courses in wilderness therapy.

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### Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

web: [rspb.org.uk/](http://rspb.org.uk/)  
Campaigning and conservation projects to protect wildlife and restore habitats.

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### Sustrans

web: [sustrans.org.uk](http://sustrans.org.uk)  
National charity supporting people to cycle, walk and travel more by public transport.

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### Thrive

web: [thrive.org.uk](http://thrive.org.uk)  
Charity that runs gardening projects for people with mental health problems. Also runs the Carry on Gardening website, which provides information on gardening with disabilities.







## Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk) or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit [mind.org.uk/shop](http://mind.org.uk/shop) or phone 0844 448 4448 or email [publications@mind.org.uk](mailto:publications@mind.org.uk)

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web: [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)

# Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

**Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393**

**info@mind.org.uk**

**mind.org.uk**

