

Tackling loneliness in the community through nature-based activities

A service evaluation of the Flourish ecotherapy group at Livability Holton Lee and an assessment of GPs' awareness of nature-based activities.



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Background:

Loneliness is a comparable risk factor for early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.¹ It is estimated that at least 1 in 20 adults in England are lonely.² Applying this to the Dorset population, this means that approximately 32,191³ adults could be suffering with loneliness.

In light of the significant number of people affected by loneliness, more emphasis needs to be placed on how health professionals can help tackle the detrimental effect it is having on health.

Research has found strong links between nature and the improvement of mental health and wellbeing.⁴ Therefore this project considers whether GPs could be using nature-based activities to alleviate loneliness.

Aims and objectives:

This project was done in collaboration with Natural Choices. Natural Choices is a programme led by the Dorset Local Nature Partnership. It encourages and enables, people to support and improve their physical health and mental wellbeing through local nature-based activities (e.g. nature walks, gardening, Park Yoga).⁵ People can self-refer to the organisation or be referred via health professionals and referral bodies.

The aim of this project was to look at whether nature-based activities could be used as a community resource by GPs to tackle loneliness in Dorset.

The objectives were to:

1. Provide evidence for health professionals of the benefits of nature-based activities on health and wellbeing.
2. Explore GPs' knowledge of and attitudes towards referring patients to nature-based activities.
3. Make recommendations on how to encourage more GPs to make use of nature-based activities.

Method:

A service evaluation of Flourish ecotherapy was carried out. Flourish is a horticulture and wellbeing project run by Livability at Holton Lee and is also part of the Natural Choices programme. Participants get to undertake a range of activities such as gardening, conservation work and arts and crafts.⁶

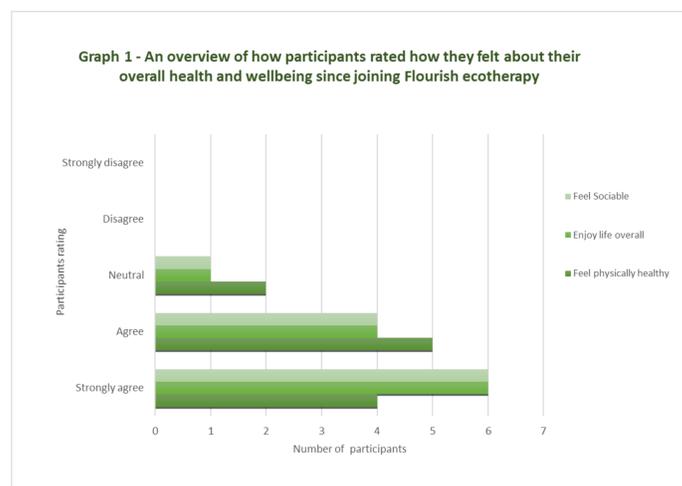
An activity survey was developed using questions adapted from the Stepping into Nature Project, 'Evaluation Framework' 2018 and distributed to those attending Flourish via letter by the management team at Livability Holton Lee.

In addition to this a GP survey was developed and distributed to GP trainees (ST3) during their teaching session.

Results:

11 out of the 30 clients attending Flourish responded to the survey.

Surprisingly, none of the participants surveyed had been referred to the nature activity by their GP or through the Natural Choices programme. Results showed that 91% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed they felt sociable and enjoyed life overall since joining the Flourish ecotherapy group. In addition to this, 82% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed they felt physically healthy since joining Flourish (Graph 1).



Using the UCLA 3-item loneliness scale (Hughes et al 2004), results also showed that 64% of the participants did not class themselves as lonely since joining Flourish.

Livability Holton Lee



Image created by Emma Browning, Manager of Flourish, Livability Holton Lee

Of the 34 GP trainees who completed the survey:

1. The majority (62%) said they were 'not confident' they had the tools necessary to help their lonely patients.
2. None had heard of the Natural Choices programme.
3. 94% had never referred a patient to nature-based activities.
4. 91% agreed that they would consider referring a patient to Natural Choices / a nature-based activity in the future.

The GP trainees' suggestions on what could help increase the number of GPs referring patients to nature-based activities included; more awareness about what was available in the local area, knowledge about the activity, an easy referral process, more time and resources, and statistics to support the benefits.

Conclusions:

Overall there was a positive response from the participants in the Flourish ecotherapy group. All of them reported some benefit to their overall health and wellbeing as a result of being involved in a nature-based activity. Notably, the results from the GP survey showed that more needs to be done to raise awareness amongst GPs of these nature-based activities in the local area and the benefits.

Recommendations for the future include:

- Improve GPs' knowledge of the benefits of nature-based activities – e.g. through delivering talks presenting evidence from research projects such as this.
- Build stronger connections between GPs and services that provide nature-based activities – e.g. through more publicity, hosting talks at GP practices, sending out a newsletter about the Natural Choices programme.
- Creating an easier referral process for GPs – more direct methods for GPs to refer lonely patients to the programme e.g. developing information leaflets to signpost patients.

References and Acknowledgements:

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3. Estimated based on the Dorset County adult population of 643,820. Dorset Statistics. Area Profile for Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole. (2019) <https://apps.geowessex.com/stats/AreaProfiles/County/dorset-bournemouth-and-poole>
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5. Dorset Local Nature Partnership. Natural Choices. (2019) https://www.dorsetlnp.org.uk/Natural_Choices
6. Livability at Holton Lee. Flourish. (2017) <https://holtonlee.org/wellbeing-projects/flourish/>

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