



Green Walking Project Case Study

South London and Maudsley (SLaM): Forest Therapy Group

Project Description

In 2017, staff at the Bethlem Royal Hospital started a green walking group with a mindfulness component and integrated forest therapy. This initiative came out of a discussion between interested clinicians, availability of green space on hospital grounds, and staff members' previous experiences in forest therapy. Then the programme was integrated into the existing Bethlem occupational therapy (OT) structure, working around pre-existing scheduled activities. Additional green-space activities available on site are: horticulture, tending to orchards, perinatal walking group, dog walking group, existing nature trails, and ad-hoc walking groups across units.



An interested specialist registrar, the head of occupational therapy of Bethlem, and occupational therapists from various wards worked together to initiate the project. The walking group involves, on average, 2-4 patients total from units across the site: forensic, older adult, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), general adult, and perinatal. After conducting health and safety risk assessments and creating a group protocol, the project was able to proceed and recruit OTs across wards. The interest of staff helped drive the project while the OTs on the ward making referrals to interested patients ensured the group was utilised.

At least one patient needs to be present for the activity to occur and two staff members, one to lead the group and one to support (e.g. boundary keeping with patients shifting attention, managing group dynamics). The activity usually lasts an hour with about 30 minutes of walking, but that is flexible depending on the response of the patient to the walk and desire to explore the meditative component. Between weeks, the route of the walk changes. With patients new to the site, it is important to support patients by showing them around the site, so they will feel comfortable to utilise the space in the future by themselves.

The walking group has been evaluated with before and after questionnaires using Likert scales. The questionnaires showed positive feedback from patients about the walking group.

Other green space activities and walking groups have been started in the SLaM Trust and have been led by a range of staff including OTs, exercise staff, nurses and other ward staff, volunteers and service users.



Benefits

Patient Outcomes: Through engaging with green spaces, patient outcomes can improve, particularly by boosting well-being and encouraging healthy behaviours (Branching Out, 2009).

Environmental/Financial: The creation of and participation in the walking group is a low-cost activity. A well-attended walking group places value in green spaces and protects them.



Social: By introducing green spaces on the hospital grounds to the patients in the setting of a walking group, patients could feel motivated and capable to engage with green spaces on their own or in the future after discharge. This group also provides staff an opportunity to spend time in green spaces. The space also offers patients and staff a chance to socialise and be outside of the clinical setting.

Financial Appraisal

For this project, no separate funding was required.

Barriers encountered

Challenges to operating the walking group were:

- Communication between OTs and the wards needed to be established to make wards aware in order for new activities to be adopted.
- Pre-existing OT schedules did not have space for a walking group to be added.
- Patients and staff without a pre-existing relationship and comfort with green spaces felt challenged when joining the group and beginning the walks.
- The transition from inpatient environment to a green space is deeply important and could be a significant barrier particularly for wards situated in urban environments.



Risks

Risk assessments are conducted at the time of patient referral to the group by the OT. Risks for patients include personal injury, mental health crisis, and wandering off or intentionally leaving the group.

What the team had to say

“This was an incredible opportunity for me to spend time with service users exploring Bethlem’s green spaces. For some, going out on unpaved paths was a new experience so it was important to be sensitive to people’s different relationships with the outdoors. However, by emphasising the experience of moving slowly, we could take the time to become comfortable as a group. It was also incredible to see how, with gentle guidance, service users became familiar with how lightly resting one’s attention on the natural world can be a calming experience.” – Dr. Jacob Krzanowski.

For more information please contact:

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References

Branching Out. (2009). *Branching Out: Resource Guide Greenspace and Conservation on Referral*. ForestryCommission Scotland. Retrieved from <https://www.gcvgreennetwork.gov.uk/publications/237-branching-out-resource-guide-greenspace-and-conservation-on-referral>

