



The Grow Project

A report on the well-being benefits of
nature connection for people with
experience of mental distress

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DEAR
FRIEND...

13.6.2013

Dear friend,
I am so happy
that you are reading this
because it means that you
are a part of Grow! I have
rarely in my life found
somewhere that is so friendly,
easy-going, kind, fun-filled,
relaxed and safe. Being
a participant of Grow has changed
my life. I hope it changes yours
too. With lots of love,

Mental ill-health

Mental ill-health & associated distress are a vitally important issue in today's society. Up-to-date figures suggest that as many as 1 in 4 of us are likely to experience mental health problems in any given year (Mental Health Network, 2011; Mind, 2013).

'in Britain mental illness has now taken over from unemployment as our greatest social problem'
Richard Layard

At the same time there is ongoing controversy regarding both the efficacy of medication to treat psychological problems, & the quality & accessibility of psychological therapies (e.g. Rapley, Moncrief & Dillon, 2011).

'A growing number of psychiatrists suspect mental conditions are 'culture-bound syndromes' rather than exclusively biological'
Corrinne Burns, *The Guardian*,
May 20 2013

In the UK the prevalence of mental ill-health is occurring against a backdrop of far-reaching reform & cost-reductions imposed on health service provision, whilst the cost of drug prescriptions, particularly anti-depressants is increasing.

'The cost of anti-depressants has grown dramatically & between 2010-11, antidepressant drug prescriptions & their costs saw the largest increase of any drug category'
(Bragg, Wood & Barton, 2013: 4).

More generally there is a growing concern over existing models of mental ill-health & treatment; & greater focus on social, cultural & structural factors involved in mental ill-health.
(e.g. British Psychological Society Division of Clinical Psychology, 2013)

How to respond effectively & efficiently to mental health problems, & to encourage mental health & wellbeing, has clearly never been a more pressing concern than it is today. In the search for alternatives, one area in particular has garnered increased attention as a potential compliment or even alternative to existing treatment programmes — ecopsychology & ecotherapy.

‘There is now more need than ever to explore different preventative & curative therapies to add to the ‘toolbox’ of treatment options’
(Bragg, Wood & Barton, 2013: 4).

Ecopsychology



Ecopsychology, to state it at its simplest is the study of the relationship between humans & nature — an often-neglected aspect of psychology. Ecopsychology is also often considered as a foundation for an advocacy of the positive benefits of this relationship, & explores the

various aspects of how contact with the natural world from childhood to adulthood is central to psychological wellbeing (e.g. Barrows, 1995; Messer Diehl, 2009; Santostefano, 2008; Strife & Downey, 2009).

Ecotherapy

Ecotherapy is ‘an umbrella term for therapeutic techniques & practices that emphasise, in various ways, ‘the healing & psychological benefits of being in nature & natural settings’ (Jordan, 2009: 26).

Ecotherapy brings to the fore relationships that are neglected in traditional therapies, but may be important in a client’s life, for example the importance of animals & plants in their psychological life. In ecotherapy relationships to the more-than-human world are intertwined with other types of relationship (e.g. Hegarty, 2010). Ecotherapeutic practices include green infrastructure & exercise, the use of nature in healthcare settings, animal-assisted therapy & horticultural therapy.



Mind, Ecominds & Grow

Following National Mind's influential report on the benefits of ecotherapy (2007), the charity funded a number of ecotherapy programmes across the UK, with National Lottery support, under the banner of 'Ecominds'. The projects 'provide a range outdoor of outdoor green activities for people with mental health problems' (Mind, 2013). Projects are geared towards improving confidence, self-esteem, & physical & mental health. **Grow** was originally funded as one of these projects via Mind in Brighton & Hove. It is now an independent Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) with Big Lottery Funding in place until 2016.



How Grow works

Grow's 8 week 'Seasons' are based at Saddlescombe farm, a National Trust site in Sussex: a hidden gem on the South Downs Way. **Grow** is designed to support people with experience of mental distress to experience the wellbeing benefits of connecting with nature, in a safe & supportive group. **Grow** offers flexibility to choose from a wide range of activities to suit varying levels of mental & physical health, in beautiful rural Sussex. Beneficiaries are adults with diverse mental health experiences, & sometimes carers or family come along too.

During the pilot phase of the project participants met fortnightly, but due to popular demand **Grow's** closed groups now run weekly, with the same group of people meeting for two months.



Information is provided on health, wellbeing & community resources, & people are supported to develop their connection with nature further by joining mainstream community eco-projects & accessing the surrounding countryside independently. After being part of a closed group Season people can continue on to **Grow's** new 'drop-in' days based at Stanmer Park, which also offer a wide variety of nature based activities & heart-felt community, as well as close links to other eco-projects at Stanmer Organics. People who've been on a **Grow** Season can attend the drop-in days as & when they want to, for as long as they like.



Each **Grow** season has included participants experiencing a range of mild to moderate & enduring mental health difficulties — including depression, anxiety, PTSD, bi-polar, borderline personality disorder, hearing voices, eating disorders, OCD, & self-harm. There is also provision for people with physical health issues, with landrover rides to less accessible venues & a gentle activity option always available. The two project staff & two additional volunteers offer a high level of support, alongside the heart-warming peer support that develops within the group.

Grow & the University of Brighton

The School of Applied Social Sciences in the University of Brighton has a Division of Psychology, Psychotherapy & Counselling. Within this division Matthew Adams, a psychologist & Martin Jordan, a psychotherapist, have worked together for a number of years in teaching & researching ecopsychology & the human-nonhuman nature relationship. Matt & Martin visited **Grow** on a number of occasions & were invited to participate. We were immediately affected by the positive emotions, openness, trust & sense of belonging in the group & were keen to work with **Grow's** directors - Julie Wright & Jo Wren - further.

The Community University Partnership Programme's On Our Doorsteps initiative funded time & space for Matt & Martin to collaborate with **Grow's** directors & participants in the project. **Grow** has subsequently worked with the University of Brighton in a number of ways:



Connecting **Grow** with the University's student volunteer programme

Developing publicity & media advocating **Grow** in the context of empirical evidence in support of ecotherapy

Grow directors & participants sharing experiences with undergraduate students

Collaborating in the ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of **Grow** for its participants



This collaboration is the primary focus of this report



A day in the

*Saddlescombe farm, outings to NT properties, or lovely local countryside such as Wolstonbury Hill or Cuckmere Haven



The day starts at 10.15 with a warm welcome, tea & chat, at the pickup point. The project coordinators & volunteers give out wellies & warm/waterproof clothing when needed & then we board the minibus.



Transport to & from the site* is provided, travelling together by minibus.

Once we arrive we discuss options for the day & have a group check-in.



Whatever the weather we will work out a plan together that meets people's needs.

We have a warm indoor space to use on really rainy days, where we can toast marshmallows over the fire, drink hot chocolate & tell stories.

About 4.30pm we do a group check-out, reflecting on how the day has been for each of us, & also sometimes how we might carry the benefits we've experienced into our daily lives.



We share a healthy picnic lunch, making our own sandwiches with a choice of vegetarian food, or heating a big pot of home-made soup over the open fire on particularly cold days.

We also encourage people to share their skills & have had some wonderful sessions led by volunteers & participants, including gentle yoga & belly dancing!



life of Grow

This is a chance for people to say briefly how they're feeling & what they need/want from the day.



There is always a planned choice of activities, including a more physical option & a gentler alternative, to suit varying moods, energy levels & physical abilities.



conservation tasks such as scrub clearance with a bonfire

green wood-working with the wood we have cut



mindfulness/relaxation & ecotherapy exercises

Even though it's been a long day there is always a general reluctance to leave this magical environment, but we get back in the minibus, looking forward to a good night's sleep after a beautiful day.



moving sheep to a new grazing site



gentle or more strenuous guided nature walks



Having two project coordinators & two volunteers on hand means that there is enough support to enable smaller groups to do different activities, or for someone to sit/walk with participants on their own if that's what is needed.

www.growingwellbeing.org.uk

tea & chat or time alone



The Project Directors

Jo & Julie's perspective on the rewards & challenges of being involved in **Grow**.

Julie

Developing **Grow** has been a massive learning curve for me. Six years ago I started exploring the idea with a friend, but it really blossomed when Jo came on board a year later. Joining with her skills and enthusiasm, and getting support from Graham at the National Trust, brought **Grow** to life. It still took three years of discussions, planning, consultations and writing funding bids before the first activity day finally happened. The process brought me up against so many of my own limiting beliefs, sometimes I thought I'm just not capable of doing all this. But I felt so passionately about what we were creating that I had to learn to trust myself, to persevere in a way I never previously had. And now, to run a project like this is a dream come true. I'm constantly learning new skills, which is challenging but exciting too. I love being outdoors with the groups twice a week, being in nature with such a warm-hearted community is marvellous. I feel incredibly fortunate to spend time with the people who come on **Grow**, they are a daily inspiration to me & it's wonderful to see the positive benefits **Grow** brings for them. I feel like I'm doing something good in the world. The support we have received from volunteers, benefactors & other organisations is amazing, people seem to really warm to the idea. There are still plenty of challenges - difficult situations in which I am aware of how important it is to behave with heartfelt integrity, the sadness of hearing stories of trauma, and seeing people I care about having dips in their mental health. But through **Grow** I have developed a new sense of trust that things will work out for the best, even if it really doesn't feel like that at the time. And so far it's working out beautifully. . . .



Jo

'When Julie & I first started thinking about the **Grow** project I knew instinctively how beneficial being out in nature was for me on a personal level which was why I thought it could work. Over the last couple of years what I have seen time & time again is the very real transformation that occurs within people when they are out with us on **Grow** & this has just confirmed & cemented my belief of how nourishing nature & the sense of community that we create can be. Working with CUPP has helped us understand some of the theoretical reasons why this magical thing that we see happening on a weekly basis happens. There are challenges to running the group — sometimes people are quite unwell when they arrive with us in the morning but it's very gratifying to see how they relax throughout the course of the day. It's also been quite a personal challenge to take the small project that we had & grow it into something more sustainable, & we've had to learn all sorts of new skills to enable us to do this but it's been a fascinating journey & is always made worthwhile by a lovely day out on the hills with the group!'

User involvement

Grow has always had an ethos of meaningfully incorporating user involvement in terms of how the project is developed, run & evaluated.

Developing

Grow began after extensive local research & consultation, which engaged a wide variety of people with mental health issues via local user involvement projects & events. Their views helped to develop the initial project ideas into a practical & attractive format. Once activity days were running the project continued involving people in the design of the days, listening to what groups wanted at the beginning of each Season & giving a choice of activities every day.

'Grow has a high level of consensus-based decision making'

Following the success of the pilot phase came a 5 month project Development Season – run with 14 previous project participants / volunteers, which co-created a robust & sustainable expanded version of Grow. During this Grow transitioned to become an independent co-produced community group, with 4 volunteers sitting on the new Management Team.

Evaluating

Evaluation forms were co-designed by potential participants at the beginning of the pilot & were further improved by volunteers during a Development Season. As well as using feedback forms participants are asked about how **Grow** can evaluate the project in accessible & enjoyable ways. Previous ideas trialled have included keeping project journals, putting together case studies, producing promotional films, fun feedback events & creative feedback boards. The management team regularly review feedback make on-going improvements.

"Knowing that my input is helping to build a bigger & better Grow is very exciting"

Running

Grow encourages previous participants to move on to become volunteers, encouraging people to develop roles according to their interests, talents & goals to suit their needs as well as the projects. Volunteer roles have included;

- Peer support on the activity days
- Leading group activities
- Presenting at promotional workshops
- Lecture slots at Brighton universities eco-psychology module
- Management team member
- Social media

Grow now offers volunteers an induction + additional training + a mix of one-to-one & group meetings with volunteers to support them & gain feedback, including a brief & de-brief on every activity day. In the future the Director's intend to offer volunteers the chance to move into paid employment with **Grow** via supported freelance work opportunities.

'I discovered people value my input more than I realise, it's really helped my confidence'

Existing research

The therapeutic benefits of contact with nature are increasingly acknowledged. The study of ecotherapeutic interventions for adults with, or at risk of developing, mental health issues, is one particular strand of research (e.g. Gonzalez et al. 2009; Mind, 2007; Wilson et al., 2009; 2010; 2011). Evidence indicates that access to forms of ecotherapy is associated with improvements in depression, reductions in anxiety & aggression & related benefits (Wilson et al. 2009). As a result there are increasing calls to recognise ecotherapy as a clinically valid treatment for mental distress (Mind, 2007: 28); & ecotherapy programmes are advocated more & more as, at the very least, 'adjunctive treatment for clients of secondary & tertiary mental health care services' (Wilson et al., 2010: 10).



'initial indications & a growing body of evidence present an astonishingly hopeful picture of the efficacy of ecotherapeutic practices'
(Chalquist, 2009: 42)

Explanations

Studies place contact with nature as central to our ability to maintain & restore positive psychological mood states. How & why nature might maintain & restore our emotional equilibrium is a growing area of research. Here we will briefly look at three theories that locate nature's healing effects within a scientific evidence base. Building on earlier studies indicating stress reduction associated with nature contact, (e.g. Ulrich, 1984) these theories have been referred to extensively in order to support the rationale for *why* contact with nature is linked to mental health & why we may be driven in evolutionary terms to seek contact with the natural world.

The Biophilia Hypothesis

The starting point for articulating this relationship has been the assertion of the Biophilia Hypothesis (Wilson, 1984). The Biophilia hypothesis is the claim that there is an instinctive bond between human beings & other forms of life. Wilson believed that we were genetically programmed through evolutionary development to seek kinship with the more-than-human world. The biophilia hypothesis consequently suggests human identity & personal fulfilment somehow *depend on* our relationship to nature. The human need for nature is linked not just to the material exploitation of the environment but also to the influence the natural world has on our emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, & even spiritual development (Kellert, 1993).

Biophilia
'the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life'
Edward O. Wilson

Attention Restoration Theory (ART)

Focusing on the process of attention, Kaplan & Kaplan (e.g. Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) have researched the restorative effects of the natural environment resulting in 'attention restoration theory'. They undertook research which explored the psychological effects of being in both wilderness & nearby nature such as parks etc. They explored 'directed' attention, which involves sustained concentration in a task whilst holding other distracting tasks at bay (for example whilst I am trying to write this at my computer I am wrestling with the distraction of whether I should make myself a coffee & should I walk my dog). They proposed that these distractions have to be blocked out & this causes tiredness, & a depletion in higher cognitive functioning.

Being in natural environments involves a different sort of cognitive functioning, & looking at nature involves indirect attention or a 'soft' fascination. Fascination is maintained in an aesthetic & sensory contact with the natural world, away from the routines of our day to day life. The 'extent' to which natural environments provide diversity & scope to remain engaged with is the basis for the psychological effect of fascination, in relation to animals, birds, trees, plants & views. All of this leads to a feeling of wellbeing & a felt restoration of attention & capacity. Overall the theory quite clearly spells out how contact with both wilderness & nearby natural environments allows us to feel restored & able to return to more complex urban environments with a renewed sense of well being.

Attachment & holding environments

The benefits of developing an environment in which people feel 'held' is supported by theoretical ideas from psychotherapy, particularly from a psychodynamic perspective. This approach has long foregrounded the 'holding environment' as the space within which essential attachments to significant others are formed in childhood (Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth, 1978; Main, 2000). Healthy attachment is considered central to later emotional health & well-being, & to the very formation of a 'self'. It is also considered a vital component of a therapeutic environment where emotions can be expressed & understood (Bion, 1970). The holding environment & containment of the client's emotional states are here considered vital in promoting a comfortable & safe space. Ecopsychological theory argues that attachments to nonhuman nature are a neglected vital part of emotional development & health (Searles, 1960). Recent ecotherapeutic applications of attachment theory propose that facilitating good emotional attachments to both human & nonhuman worlds can promote good mental health (Jordan, 2009; Spitzform, 2001, Ward & Styles, 2007).

Summary

There is a growing evidence base that points towards the role of nature & its preventative & curative effects. What these different theories point to is the importance of nature in provoking an aesthetic & affective response which is positive & beneficial in a number of ways to human health, in reducing stress, restoring attention, & promoting wellbeing. What is less acknowledged or explored is how positive & formative contact with nature is driven by the interplay of social, cultural, psychological & biological processes.

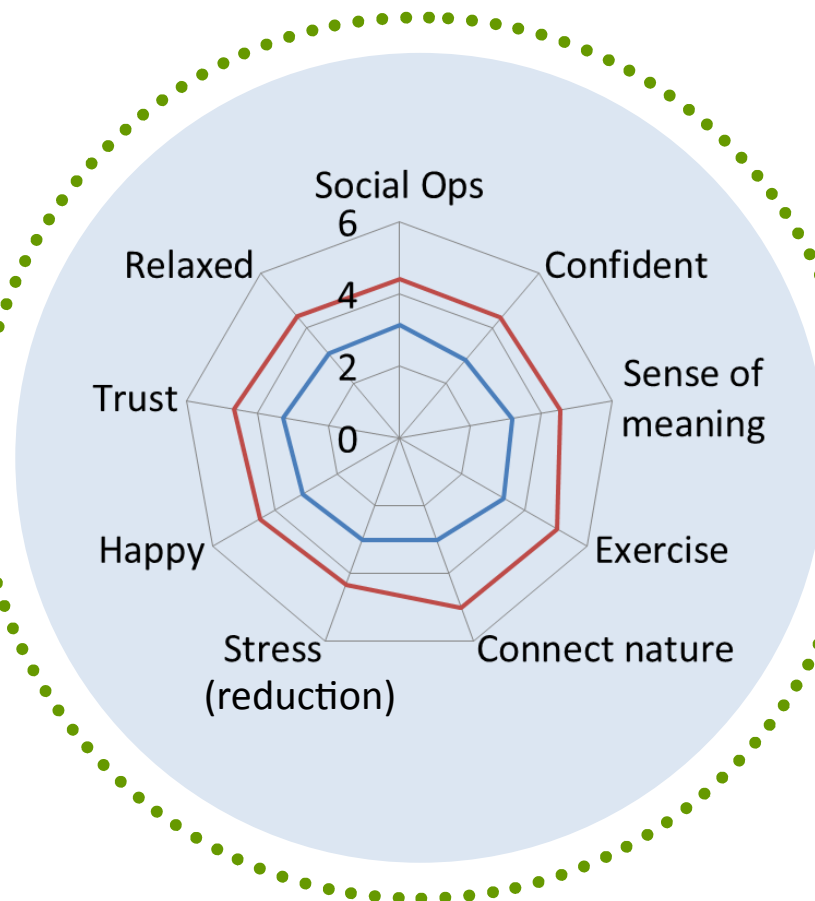


Our research

Existing measurements

Grow had already undertaken a number of evaluations in previous seasons in order to collate data on the outcomes & success of the project. Before & after coming on **Grow** each participant was asked to rank how they felt along a number of dimensions of wellbeing considered important by participants in the first **Grow** group (e.g. sense of belonging, trust, hope, relaxation). Participants were asked to rank each of these dimensions with a score between 1 (not good) & 6 (really great).

Before being part of the **Grow** programme the average self-allocated score across ten wellbeing items was **3.1**. After the programme it was **4.6**. This is an increase of **48%** from beginning to end of the programme.



Their overall score was calculated by adding each & then averaging (calculating the mean) through dividing by 10.* There was an average increase of at least 1.3 on every dimension.




— Before
— After

Where next?

We all felt that the positive benefits of **Grow** had been established. After initial discussion it was agreed that the priority for a small-scale project of limited duration was to explore participants' own perceptions of the positive effects of being involved in **Grow** in more depth. The decision was made to adopt an explorative & qualitative approach to evaluation.

*Thanks to Ian Scott for this data.

The evaluation process

Together we identified a series of questions which we felt would build upon this existing information. Ethical approval was attained from the University of Brighton to pose these questions to current & previous participants of **Grow**. The questions formed the basis for a series of interviews, open-ended questionnaires & focus groups with a small group of participants (a total of 36 participant responses). It was already established that these participants considered the benefits of **Grow** to be significant. Following Wilson et al.'s guidance (2010, p. 7-8), the questions were 'designed to be open, neutral, non-directive & free of jargon'. They were geared towards exploring participants' own perceptions of the benefits of involvement in **Grow**. Some interviews were recorded & transcribed, though when people did not feel comfortable being recorded the answers were written down. Some of the questions are included here. 



We collected together everything that was said (10000+ words) & generated this wordcloud. The size of the word reflects how often it was used by participants. It provides an initial impression of dominant themes in what people said.

Can you put into words what it is about being in nature that is helpful to you?

Can you talk about how the **Grow** project compares to your experiences of indoor mental health services?

Can you say how it was for you to have a choice of things to do each day?

Could you say how being in a *group* at **Grow** was for you?

How would you describe being in nature, with a project like **Grow**, to someone who has never experienced it?

Our Findings

For the purposes of this report we have organized our findings into a number of themes. We think these themes best represent what participants had to say in their own words about the positive benefits of being involved in **Grow**.

#1 Positivity

Experiences of **Grow** were overwhelmingly couched in positive terms. This was not a surprise, nonetheless it was useful to see the positive dimensions of **Grow** confirmed. Most of the subsequent themes address how positive experiences are elaborated upon by participants.

'Life is at a gentler pace than in the town'

'It helps my mind become more peaceful & calm'

'The peaceful environment helps your mind become peaceful in contrast to the hectic city' environment which seems to make your mind more hectic'

"Being away from the city, in the fresh air, I just feel free-er"

The context & space of the experience of **Grow** as a natural setting felt very important to participants. Not surprisingly participants often cited feeling connected to nature as an important part of **Grow**. Experiencing nature as peaceful, safe & something positive if not always easy to articulate was identified in a number of statements.

#2 Nature connectedness

*'I just love being around the animals,
hearing the birds singing & breathing in the fresh air'*

'It's just a few hours when you can forget about other things & concentrate on others around you'

'Being away from the city it's quiet & you get the feeling of being back to nature'

These two themes & related statements would seem to support existing findings about the capacity of natural settings to reduce stress & restore attention & cognitive capacity. Some people may find natural environments stress inducing ('biophobic'), at least initially. However this was not the case for any of the participants of **Grow** who had chosen the project because of its situation outdoors. There was overwhelming evidence here that nature & the setting of **Grow** were a very important part of helping participants reduce their stress levels, feel better & over a period of time feel significant improvement in their mental health.

The **Grow** project has always stressed the value of participant involvement. This has translated into genuine engagement, with past & present participants involved in structuring, organizing the current nature & future directions of **Grow**. A central element of **Grow** is also to allow for choice when involved. Current participants have the freedom to engage, or not, with the activities on offer on any given day. They have the option of being in the space separately (with support) or together with or without structured activity. Both aspects of autonomy were highly valued by participants.

#3 Autonomy

'I thought it was brilliant that there was no pressure to do anything – by not having the pressure to do things, it sort of encouraged me to do them more'

'The choice whether to do an activity or not meant that negative feelings don't escalate. For example there was one exercise which we did one morning... I didn't feel like doing... at all because I didn't feel great & having the choice not to do it made me feel not quite so bad & so feelings that could have escalated & got worse quickly just went away'

'It's motivated me to do more – it's opened up more possibilities of other things that I could do'

'I enjoyed being able to wander off... & take pictures but know that I had people to come back to & have the safety of the group'



The range of activities, but equally importantly the choice to be involved or not without judgment was described as having a positive effect on people's sense of themselves & their ability to complete an activity. The National Trust warden Graham Welfare played a vital role here in supporting people & giving them a sense of confidence that they were able to complete an activity & also, for example when clearing trees, explain the

rationale for doing this in terms of conservation & environmental management. Quite often when people have been out of work for a number of years due to mental health problems their sense of self efficacy & confidence is lessened. Being in an atmosphere which encouraged people to participate in activities, in whatever way they felt they could, had a mutually beneficial effect on people's mental health & their sense of confidence. For some participants this was directly connected to feeling able to begin considering returning to training & potentially some form of work.

#4 Belonging

Participants often expressed what felt good about **Grow** in terms of attachments - a sense of belonging, acceptance, safety, that applied to the group. They commonly cited supportive relationships with others as one of the most important parts of **Grow**. Significant others here included other participants, volunteers & the service-providers (Jo & Julie). The sense of belonging described was often intertwined with the feeling of acceptance, openness, & expressed in relation to other themes such as nature connectedness & autonomy.

'I used to be a sociable person but when I had my breakdown 2 or 3 years ago people stopped getting in contact with me. I was getting more & more isolated & coming to Grow has made me realise that I can form relationships with people again'

'It really helped – it's given me more confidence in situations which would normally petrify me – e.g. standing around in a circle doing check-in & speaking in front of other people'

'It was nice to go through the experience with other people – it's nice to know you're not alone'

'Support from my peers has been really beneficial'

'Grow has helped me enjoy meeting new people & made me realise that I'm not so alone – that there are others who have been through similar things'

'Grow is helping me to remember that it's ok to be open & honest'

A day with Grow is structured around a 'check in' session when people arrive & a 'check out' session at the end of the day. These structures were described as important in allowing participants to feel 'held' in some way across the day. It was in this sense that a sense of belonging occurred over the course of the day at Saddlescombe farm. Participants might struggle just to get to the bus to take them to **Grow**, but even if not in a good space, anticipated that they would get support & comfort in their surroundings & each other. The benefits of developing an environment in which people feel 'held' is supported by theoretical ideas from psychotherapy, particularly from a psychodynamic perspective. This approach has long foregrounded the holding environment as the space within which emotions can be expressed & understood (Bion, 1970). The holding environment & containment of the client's emotional states are here considered vital in promoting a comfortable & safe space. The atmosphere of support & choice was commented on as being central & was highlighted by some of the respondents in terms of how they might describe the project to others who were interested in coming along. It seems reasonable to suggest that positive benefits of nature described in relation to other themes contributed to the sense of being 'held' in an environment.

When asked about previous experiences of mental health service provision, participants commonly elaborated on the previous themes by talking about the kind of experience of self Grow as an environment encouraged, often in contrast to the normal environments, often indoors, that were supposedly therapeutic. We consider this to be a reflection on the everyday norms, expectations, routines & practices that maintain & confirm who we are, our social identity. Grow was experienced as an escape from these problem rich environments into a less judgmental alternative.

#5 Social Identity

'Indoors is really claustrophobic & clinical'

'There are no tables which always seem like such a barrier'

'I don't feel like I'm here because I've got mental health issues & so it changes the way I see myself'

'With indoor mental health services you are constantly reminded of mental health issues, diagnoses, labels – this isn't the case outdoors. This was a bit strange for me at first – I wanted to talk about my 'label' but now I don't'

'It's more about focussing on nature rather than mental health – you only start thinking about mental health issues & your problems when you get near to home again'

'It's much more formal indoors'

'It's softer [here]'

'It's nice to not be thinking about, talking about, what's wrong with you'

More is at play here than the restoration of attention & related cognitive faculties; more too perhaps than the positive benefits of being 'held', & of belonging. These comments also hint at the importance of the relationship between natural settings, psychology & social & cultural contexts that shape identity. More specifically, our participants describe the way users of indoor NHS services are situated within certain frameworks & narratives of understanding, & how, by regularly attending supportive groups & activities outdoors, alternative frames & narratives can be initiated. Positive changes in a person's sense of social & personal identity appear to be intertwined with improvements in their mental health.

B's Story: 'The magic of Grow'

B is a 38 year old woman. At the time of joining **Grow** she had had a long history of bipolar disorder, which would result in her suffering incapacitating depressions where she wouldn't be able to get out of bed, eat or even go to the toilet for days on end. She also experienced high anxiety in social situations. She is a Buddhist and worked as a carer after attending university. For the last fourteen years she has had a number of unpaid voluntary jobs. She had had a particularly bad episode of depression just prior to starting the project:

"I think it is worth saying that I quite often don't leave this flat for weeks on end sometimes or months. And I don't answer the phone and I don't answer texts and I don't answer emails and everyone gets very scared. Over Christmas I spent five days not answering the phone and not eating anything."

B came to Grow for the first time in 2011 just after this episode. Although very, very scared on her first visit to the farm out at Saddlescombe she had a strong sense that it was the 'right' place to help her with her recovery. She says:

"But the biggest impression that I have is that I knew it was going to be OK. And I knew I was in the right place. And it was lovely. I remember being unable to speak to anyone, and being really scared of most people... And I remember being particularly touched by the fact that there was a checking-in circle and a checking-out circle"

Participants are encouraged to come however they are feeling and an important part of how the process of the day is held is a check-in and check-out circle, where people are gently encouraged to share how they are doing at the beginning and end of the day. B again:

"There are several really deep messages which Grow has reminded me of and made clear to me again and again, in different states and levels of illness and wellness. One of the key messages was – 'come as you are', 'please come as you are however you are', 'please come', 'we would love to have you however you are' "

The importance of the natural world and the space where Grow occurred is a recurring theme in people's experiences and it is no less so in B's account

"I remember gorgeous walks and getting a little bit more of my sense of direction back around the countryside and the farm. And I remember the chickens (chuckles)! I remember just this relief to be out of the city. The peacefulness and the quietness and the spaciousness and the birds and the sky. The quality of the air was so gorgeous"

B also reiterated a strong sense that being in nature is a very 'levelling' experience which allows people to be seen and see themselves as existing beyond their mental health label or diagnosis:

"People come together from all their different backgrounds, with different labels and diagnoses and stuff going on in their lives, and with different levels of wellness and illness. And then slowly over the Season, they get softer – more open and relaxed – more authentic, less reserved and frightened"

B talked more about her illness and how being 'sensitive' to your immediate environment has an effect on both her and others' mental health. She makes an important point about how the outdoor situation of Grow aids in her recovery and how even indoor environments which are supportive can still have a detrimental effect on mental health due to this environmental sensitivity.

"I have done some poetry classes etc. which have been great but, as a highly sensitive person, I am very aware of fluorescent lights vibrating unpleasantly. Or a clock loudly ticking away. I think that many people will not actually pick up on the way that the hum of the generator or the buzz of tube lights affects your energy, in terms of your exhaustion and concentration levels"

Being outdoors is an important part of B feeling at ease, as well as the nurturing, supportive environment of Grow. B's experience of Grow was also instrumental in helping her return to training and make steps back into the world of work. B explains how the experience of being outdoors was central in this process:

"I did a horticultural course which was brilliant. And I realised that any attempt to get back into earning money and paying taxes (which has long been my ambition) would involve being outdoors. I had done some lovely gardening at Saddlescombe Farm... and I know that for me being outside is the key thing I should have in my future. And yes, that was directly influenced by being in Grow and noticing that being outside was the best thing that I could possibly be doing with my time"

B also returned to the project as a volunteer and is actively involved in the on-going work of supporting others through Grow seasons, drawing upon her own experiences of being a participant at Grow.



Photo: Andrew Miller

Discussion—why does Grow work?

Themes & existing research

The first & second themes in our findings suggest that the positive benefits of the natural setting were articulated by participants themselves as an important element of Grow, described in terms that offer support for existing theories such as attention restoration & attachment theories. The benefits of being in nature were described alongside the experience of belonging, our fourth theme, as part of nature, but also as part of a supportive group. The acceptance & reassurance provided by the human & non-human settings often overlapped in participant's accounts, reflecting, we assert, the fact that they overlapped & mutually reinforced a sense of belonging in practice.



Our third theme emphasized the role of autonomy & choice, & the value participants placed on this element of Grow. While at first glance this may seem to be at odds with the sense of belonging & interdependence championed in the previous theme, it may actually emerge in tandem. To speculate briefly, if an environment can be fostered where access to the setting is made relatively easy & routinised; where a sense of safety, love & belonging through effective interpersonal structures & practice is established; then it is likely that an effective holding environment is created. This, in turn, is the basis for exploration of the wider environment—natural, personal, social & the countless points at which they merge. This exploration is, in effect, a form of self-expansion, a basis for experiencing differently who we are in relation to our own understandings, other people & the natural setting. The potential for exploration & expansion is important in the context of mental health if we accept that entrenched, negative & narrow self-understandings are central to the experience of mental ill-health, reinforced in the norms, narratives & practices of everyday life in relation to others, & social & cultural life more generally.

This leads us to our final theme, social identity. Many participants expressed the value of **Grow** in terms of it providing an escape from the social & cultural markers of mental ill health, often, ironically, compacted in normal (& indoor) therapeutic settings. Here we broaden our understanding of the benefits of providing nature connectedness, beyond individual psychological functioning, & the supportive dynamics of the immediate group, to the 'softening' of social & cultural reference points that might normally

position a person's health as problematic more 'sharply'. This conclusion combines emerging findings in ecotherapy that support from others both contributes to & is an outcome of the process of reconnecting with nature (e.g. Burls, 2007). It also connects to developments in social theory, human geography & elsewhere that elevate the role of other people, society & culture in experiences of nature (e.g. Adams, 2012; Kasper, 2009; Worthy, 2008).



Grow & Recovery

The Mental Health Foundation (MHF) (2013) outline the key aspects of the recovery process in relation to mental health which challenge some of the traditionally held notions of health being the absence of illness, this is particularly so in relation to mental ill health. According to MHF, the recovery process:



- believes recovery from severe mental illness is possible
- is a journey rather than a destination
- does not necessarily mean getting back to where you were before
- happens in 'fits & starts' &, like life, has many ups & downs
- calls for optimism & commitment from all concerned
- provides a holistic view of mental illness that focuses on the person, not just their symptoms
- is profoundly influenced by people's expectations & attitudes
- requires a well organised system of support from family, friends or professionals
- requires services to embrace new & innovative ways of working.



Each of these elements are key aspects of the **Grow** project & its approach to mental health & recovery, & have been highlighted by participants in this & previous research. Whilst many services may subscribe to some of these requirements, what is especially striking is the extent to which **Grow** addresses all or most of them. The focus is the person & their wellbeing, not their symptoms. The structure of the day & the 'season' acknowledges, with optimism & commitment, the recovery is an open-ended journey & that well-being can be precarious (accessibility, autonomy, including opting-out of activities, checking-in & checking-out). Of particular note is the fact that in embracing new & innovative ways of working, **Grow's** directors explicitly incorporate an emphasis on participants' expectations & attitudes (autonomy & choice, participant involvement in the programme); encourage & facilitate a system of support involving family, friends & professionals (encourage family & friend attendance, drop-in sessions once season is completed, volunteering opportunities, connections with other organisations & institutions). These last three aspects of recovery also reflect the emphasis we have placed here on social identity. We think the **Grow** approach can be situated within this model of recovery & as an exemplar of ecotherapy (Sempick et al 2010) is an important aspect of this recovery-oriented approach to mental health & support services.

Recommendations

Our recommendations follow directly from our findings, emphasising positivity, nature connectedness, autonomy, belonging & social identity as vital interrelated aspects of ecotherapy. They reiterate & reinforce the recommendations of previous large-scale studies of ecotherapy (Bragg, Wood & Barton, 2013; Mind, 2007), whilst also reflecting the novelty of our findings.

1 Recognition. This report contributes to the growing evidence base highlighting the effectiveness of ecotherapeutic interventions. Therefore we add to the increasing calls for ecotherapy to be recognised as a clinically valid treatment for people with diverse lived experiences of mental distress, including more severe forms of suffering. Expanding the legitimacy of ecotherapy involves a number of issues: the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) taking a positive stand in recognizing the value of ecotherapy; encouraging mental health commissioners to consider ecotherapy programmes as viable; facilitating the availability of ecotherapy as a legitimate option for GPs; more integration of ecotherapy into community services; & increasing the visibility of these forms of treatment for patients. These are interrelated issues, for example recognition by NICE brings attention to, & Validates ecotherapy as an option for GPs. More specifically our findings translate into the following recommendations for ecotherapeutic practice.

2 Access. Hand-in-hand with recommending an increase in the availability of ecotherapy is an emphasis on the importance of extending, maintaining & protecting the availability of quality green spaces for individual & community health & wellbeing. Access to green space appears to be yet another marker of health inequality (Mitchell & Popham 2008), so this should not be considered any less important as a policy implication precisely at a time when poverty & economic & social inequality are forefronted as a key contributor to social problem & a threat to physical & psychological wellbeing. Ecotherapy cannot solve problems that are structural, social & economic in origin, but access to green space is an important ingredient in a relative model of health, described below.

3 Identity. One of the important strands of the concept of ecotherapy outlined in the report is the redefinition of health & well-being which is not solely based on the absence of disease or illness. We add to the growing recognition of a relative model of health (Downie et al, 2000). This model takes into account the importance of the multidimensional & subjective processes inherent in understanding individual well-being & ill-health (Sempik et al. 2010: 102). In line with our findings, ecotherapy programmes should attend to the extent to which they provide structured access to natural environments as alternative interpersonal, social & cultural spaces to those routinely experienced by people with diverse lived experiences of mental distress. Natural settings, with the appropriate care & support, provide opportunities to develop autonomy & social identities relatively free from the way people experiencing distress are routinely situated within frameworks & narratives of understanding they experience as damaging. These include dominant framings of health & illness & related stigmas but broader aspects of social & cultural identity too, such as materialism & consumerism.



4 Structure & choice. A balance between structure & autonomy is a vital component of effective ecotherapy as experienced with **Grow**. Providing a structure for the duration of a programme, for example regular drop-off & pick-up points & transportation, check-ins & check-outs was essential in providing a safe & secure environment. The easier it is to initiate involvement each scheduled day, the more likely participants are to attend & subsequently benefit. However, Grow also managed to strike a balance between a structure & routine on the one hand, & choice & autonomy on the other. The latter was facilitated through various strategies revolving around participant involvement.: the freedom of current participants to contribute to decision making about the activities on offer in any one season; & the choice to engage (or not) in activities on any given day.

5 Belonging & support. Ecotherapy is especially effective if connectedness to nature is promoted alongside connectedness to others. This involves professional support, but also attention to interpersonal & group processes, fostering a sense of belonging & acceptance. Adequate professional support should be considered a priority in all ecotherapy programmes. This includes suitably qualified mental health support & volunteering, but also local & practical expertise relevant to the natural setting. The National Trust warden's contribution to the everyday experience of Grow was also substantial. Future ecotherapy projects would benefit from the regular knowledgeable input of this kind.

6 Continuity & connectedness. An important aspect of ecotherapy will be the extent to which it connects participants to other opportunities & communities that build on the positive experiences Grow & the associated skills developed. Grow offers previous participants the opportunity to attend weekly drop-in sessions once they have completed a season of Grow, providing important continuity. Previous participants also have the opportunity to become volunteers on future seasons (induction, additional training & supportive one-to-one & group meetings, are offered, along with briefings & de-briefings on every activity day). In the future Grow intends to offer volunteers the chance to move into paid employment with Grow via supported freelance work opportunities. Equally important is developing relationships with other community programmes, training & education providers & potential employers. An emphasis on connectedness & continuity is vital for maintaining the positive elements of belonging & enhanced social identity described above.

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Finally

A poem by a Grow participant

Grow

**For a few hours the bomb in my head stopped ticking
And the perpetually unfinished lists were still
I didn't have to run anymore, fear or hide myself**

**The anger the sirens the squawking were far away
And all I heard was birdsong
All I saw was beautiful**

**Nature minded its own business
I'm just another thing
Alongside
Quietly growing**

And all I did was breathe

**The calm strength of the earth below
Held my feet and made my stride braver
And the sky gently put its arms around my shoulders and said,**

**"None of this needs to be so complicated you know.
You will always be part of this landscape,
And no harm will come to you today"**

Sarah Grinstead





www.growingwellbeing.org.uk

'You see the empty
hand,
She gives and gives and
gives,
And you thought she'd
gone'

In loving memory of Kreaen.