

Permaculture and Mental Health in the City

The 10th of October is World Mental Health Day, and an opportunity for people and projects around the world to talk about mental health. The national charity Mind reports that one in four people in the UK experience a mental health problem each year¹. Mental health doesn't discriminate. It affects people regardless of gender, age, ethnicity and class and there are probably as many variations of poor mental health as there are people experiencing it.

So, what role does permaculture have in addressing mental health issues?

As permaculturalists, environmentalists and organic growers, it is easy to relate to the increasing number of articles like Charles Einstein's 'Mutiny of the Soul'², that argue poor mental health is an expected side-effect of capitalism. They point out that anxiety, depression and feelings of inadequacy might be the most sane response to living in a system that promotes competition over cooperation, profit over people and individualism over community. Can we challenge this system, offer alternatives and in doing so address emotional wellbeing? Likewise, can we focus on mental health and in doing so create a better world?

A Leeds-based collaborative project, 'Outdoors, Active and Well', is looking for answers to that question. Generously funded by the Big Lottery for three years, three non-profits Hyde Park Source, The Conservation Volunteers at Hollybush, and Leeds Mind, are creating spaces across the cityscape where people can connect, take pride in improving their local environment, share and learn skills. Put simply – get outdoors, be active and feel well!

What do we do?

Each week 11 different groups meet on five different sites across Leeds. For about two hours, each group gets stuck in tending to either an established garden in need of regular maintenance, or giving their time, energy and creativity to an abandoned or underused piece of land, transforming it into a much-needed green space that is a refuge not only for people, but for the many non-human animals too! One of the groups focuses on wildlife walks, or nature appreciation sessions, taking the time to slow down and be mindful of the mini beasts and the beauty that surrounds us. It helps us to see that even in the concrete jungle, if we take the time to look, there are signs of resilience everywhere. Another group takes the time to practice peer support, combining it with the grounding effect that comes with spending time in a green space.

Outdoors, Active and Well is a multi-faceted project, one element with countless functions. The gardening groups are a safe, non-judgemental space, ideal for exercising, talking to others in a non-pressurised way and taking a break from the mind by getting into the body, whether by putting your hands in the soil, uncoiling bindweed from a currant or feeling the sun, rain or wind on your skin. It is an accessible first step for people who may be socially isolated, experiencing low self-esteem, mental health difficulties or wanting to get outside but lacking a space of their own in which to do so. There is an option for volunteers to then attend groups with a more exclusive focus on mental health offered by Leeds Mind.

The hard work of volunteers not only develops beautiful spaces in the inner city, that support biodiversity and improve the soil, they also provide fresh, local organic food – for free! Eating well and exercising are important factors in both physical and emotional wellbeing and something the

¹ <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/statistics-and-facts-about-mental-health/key-facts-and-trends/#.WdZNoVtSzcs>

² http://realitysandwich.com/1535/mutiny_soul/

gardens combine naturally. Seeing people return week after week, investing so much into the space goes to show how important it is to hold on to and create public spaces where people can come together and give and care for their community – in a sharp contrast to the meritocratic and every-man-for-himself mentality that we are often encouraged to adopt in the workplace today.

The design of Outdoors, Active and Well is simple and fosters community where people support one another organically, sharing information, advice, laughs over a cup of tea or while working out a task. It is free to join in and aimed especially at involving people who are on the edges. Just over one year in the project has seen over 100 people getting involved in their local community, turning unused spaces into hives of productivity, making webs of connections, and achieving personal goals such as increased confidence. These effects ripple out as we see more groups starting up and increasing demand for shaping the locality, both literally and in terms of the relationships between people.

What can you do?

Some of the sites where Outdoors, Active and Well gardens, were started up by the surrounding community. Others, like the Hollybush site, is more established. The former have been brought into community control by determined neighbours who simply wanted somewhere to grow some vegetables and meet with others.

Do you live near an unused space? Can you find out who owns it? Do you and your neighbours want to change it and have a bit of time to do so? What resources are at your disposal? There are many different shapes your project could take – you just need to start somewhere. Having more inclusive, green spaces flowering in our cities may be one of the most powerful tools in creating a healthier society and one tool that, at least is within our reach.

If you are in Leeds and want to get involved or find out more, get in touch! You can reach us at info@outdoorsactivewell.org or call us on 01132262623 and find out more on facebook, twitter or online at www.outdoorsactivewell.org