



**POST TRAUMATIC
STRESS
DISORDER
SUPPORT**

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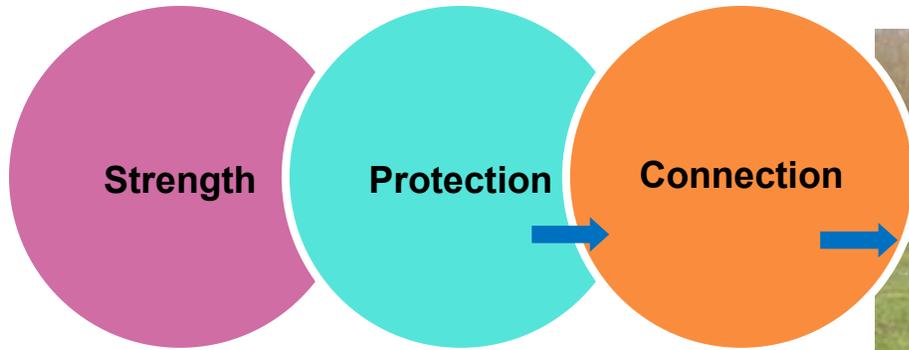
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BACKGROUND

This report provides impact, outputs as well as context to the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder support group funded by the My Life Full Life programme on the Isle of Wight. Funding of £5,000 was received in December 2015 for a one year period.

The report provides data and information from the time of commencement of the project in January 2016 up until the end of September 2016. The project is ongoing until the end of December 2016.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the project was to provide support to people living on the Isle of Wight who identified themselves as having Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, including Complex Trauma.

The objective was to increase their ability to enhance their sense of self protection and strength in dealing with the distressing symptoms that accompany this condition whilst reducing their anxiety.

If you want to know the answers to anything then turn to nature (Albert Einstein). Nature Therapy CIC used a nature based programme to enhance quality of life and wellbeing for those with PTSD on the Isle of Wight.

The intention was to make contact with a minimum of 150 individuals over a one year period to offer them a range of support. The level of support given would be based on an individual's own identified need. This is in keeping with the etiology of PTSD where research identifies that many individuals with this condition find it hard to function in a group setting.

Hypervigilance and acute sensitivity are two of the symptoms of PTSD making it hard for individuals to function around strangers. So, it was important for one to one support to be offered prior to any movement into a group setting. Even one to one support can be overwhelming for some, especially when in an office based face to face situation. Therefore a range of support approaches took this into account.

Providing a range of support options was considered ideal in reaching those that might otherwise only engage from a distance or not at all. The intention was to help people move forward to be able to come to a small group setting outdoors in a natural environment. Moving into a group setting at their own pace was considered important as trusting others is often a major issue for those with PTSD, especially if trauma has been inflicted via another person or persons.

Research has shown that many individuals turn to nature as a way of coping with the symptoms of PTSD because of the 'rewiring' of sensory input in their brain. This means certain experiences can be overwhelming such as crowded noisy areas that appear to have no escape routes. Nature offers a free and easily accessible resource that can offset fragile sensory perception.

The range of support the project offered from the outset included:

1. Facebook contact only via a PTSD support group page
2. Facebook contact via a Secret PTSD group
3. One to one support via email/skype with a trained volunteer
4. Face to face support with a trained volunteer
5. Support meetings for coffee and chat – outdoors over camp fire where possible
6. A series of group based Nature Quests
7. Provision of a nature based creative writing journal – Journal to the Wild

The project was initially supported by three trained volunteers who themselves were experts by experience – in other words those with experience of PTSD. The volunteers had taken part in a previous programme Nature Therapy CIC had run on PTSD for ex armed forces as part of a Ministry of Defense contract under the Isle of Wight Covenant.

These volunteers were all DBS enhanced checked and had undergone further training such as our Sports Leaders UK nationally accredited Expedition Leaders course.

As the PTSD work expanded, so more volunteers were recruited. At the time of this report Nature Therapy CIC has six skilled volunteers with experience of PTSD and mental health recovery.

The volunteers all receive skilled supervision and ongoing guidance to enable them to undertake this role. In 2016 we added a level 3 nationally accredited course in Nature Therapy and Applied Therapeutic Skills for our volunteers to take part in.

Two volunteers completed the course this year, whilst a further three volunteers completed their nationally accredited Expedition Leaders award. This is a course focused on safety and risk management in the outdoor environment.

The overall project was overseen by Dr Kim Brown who has over 40 years' experience in the field of mental health and social care. It is ably supported by Paddy Noctor who has extensive experience in the field of addictions.

IMPACT

FACEBOOK PAGE CONTACTS

At the time of this report the island PTSD group has 229 followers of the facebook page (PTSD). The page has been used to advertise meetings, Nature Quests, highlight recent research and post supportive messages.

Posts from members include poetry, promoting self-help, information on what else is available for those with PTSD and the latest research findings. It has also included posts on alternative approaches to PTSD management and treatment.

The web page is monitored.

FACEBOOK SECRET GROUP

The secret FB group is a way for members to share information they do not want shared with the public. This has mainly been grounded in members helping and encouraging others by sharing similar experiences and ways they have dealt with a particular issue.

There are 26 members of the Secret Group and members are only included once they have met with the core support group and have shown they can be trusted. Trust is a big issue for those with PTSD.

There was some discussion on opening up the secret group to wider membership but it was felt there were safety issues in this in terms of monitoring and responding to any concerns or safeguarding issues. To date this has not been a cause for concern but there is the potential therefore a staff member of Nature Therapy CIC moderates the secret group.

SELF HELP NATURE JOURNALS

A nature therapy journal was published called Journal to the Wild developed by Dr Kim Brown of Nature Therapy CIC. This journal was made available free of charge on request.

Whilst it was originally designed as a downloadable resource, on completion there were concerns that we would be unable to monitor the number of downloads from our current website without going to the expense of upgrading. We put a system in place so a request could be placed and the journal posted or delivered to the person in question. In this way we could be assured we had quantifiable evidence of the number of journals accessed for reporting purposes. A pdf emailed version was considered but again there were concerns about onward forwarding and lack of monitoring.

At the time of this report a total of 43 self-help journals have been distributed. A full evaluation of the impact of the use of this journal has not been undertaken but feedback received suggests use of the journal is primarily positive.

ONE TO ONE SUPPORT VIA EMAIL, FACEBOOK PERSONAL MESSAGING, TEXT OR PHONE

There was no formal referral process for the support group and individuals tended to make initial contact either by email, text or phone. Those making contact had generally heard about the support group via word of mouth, or were making initial enquiries for a friend or family member after seeing the support group on social media.

A total of 87 contacts have been made up until the time of this report with an average of three contacts per person.

FACE TO FACE SUPPORT

The aim of the face to face support was to encourage people into the group by them being able to identify with one person directly who would help them attend. However, this was not always possible and some individual support was required even though it was stated at the outset they would not attend a group.

A total of 28 people were supported on an individual basis through at least one meeting who did not then go on to attend any of the Nature Quests. Of those 13 took away a self-help journal and 3 individuals received further one to one work with the horses.

There was one case of historical sexual abuse disclosed during face to face meetings which, with consent, was duly reported according to Nature Therapy CIC Safeguarding Policy.

SUPPORT GROUP MEETINGS

A total of four support group meetings were arranged at different venues around the island at the outset of the project so people could drop in to have a coffee and a chat about the project. A total of just 6 people attended in total despite wide promotion on social media. Those 6 people were already known to Nature Therapy CIC.

It was concluded that drop ins are not an effective support method for those with PTSD, although this may have been because it was the start of a new project and word of mouth was not yet in place. However, because of lack of apparent interest, this support method was not further pursued.

Feedback from those that did go on to attend Nature Quests or make face to face contact suggested that our decision to concentrate efforts on other support methods was sound. As one participant put it 'the last thing I need is to sit around with a bunch of strangers talking about what happened to me'.

It must be stressed that at no time was a participant asked to share their trauma story as part of the project, although some did when they felt safe enough. There is strong evidence to suggest that sharing of trauma stories over and over can be particularly damaging for an individual as they are forced to relive the experience each time in the sharing.

NATURE QUESTS

Nature Therapy CIC delivered 32 Nature Quests up until the time of this report with an average of 8 people attending each Quest.

Quests are so called because they are voyages of self-discovery using the wilder parts of the natural environment as tools.

Journeys into the more wilder and unknown parts of the island which resulted in high adrenaline were surprisingly the most popular than those more sedate or indoor Quests. This may be because participants are often functioning under higher than usual levels of cortisol release and so need something that will trump that. High adrenaline activities have been found to attract individuals with PTSD in studies - especially in ex armed forces personnel.

Bad weather did not always deter – for example on the Cave of Secret Carvings Quest all those booked turned up on the day despite lashing rain and high winds. Sadly a risk assessment meant we had to cancel the Quest and retire for coffee and cake instead but this showed the level of commitment to something outside of the ordinary.

Examples of Quests delivered during period Jan 2016 to end of Sept 2016 include:

- Cave of Secret Carvings Quest
- Mud Slide of Faith Quest
- Dancing with Horses Quest
- Walking the Labyrinth Quest
- Forest Bathing Quest
- Neolithic Quest
- Lighthouse Quest
- Medieval Quest
- Dinosaur Quest
- Falcon Quest
- Birds of Prey Quest
- Dragonfly Quest
- Mindfulness Quest
- Earthing Quest
- Firestone Quest
- Hot soup Quest
- Journaling Quest
- Wolf Quest
- Wilderness Quest
- Vision Quest
-

Please note that some Quests ran more than once and each Quest ran for one day. Quests are not just nice days out in nature although that in itself has proved to be beneficial by many studies. Quests are individual voyages of self-discovery designed to surface self-insights into an individual's own way of being so included a therapeutic style activity in the day's adventure.



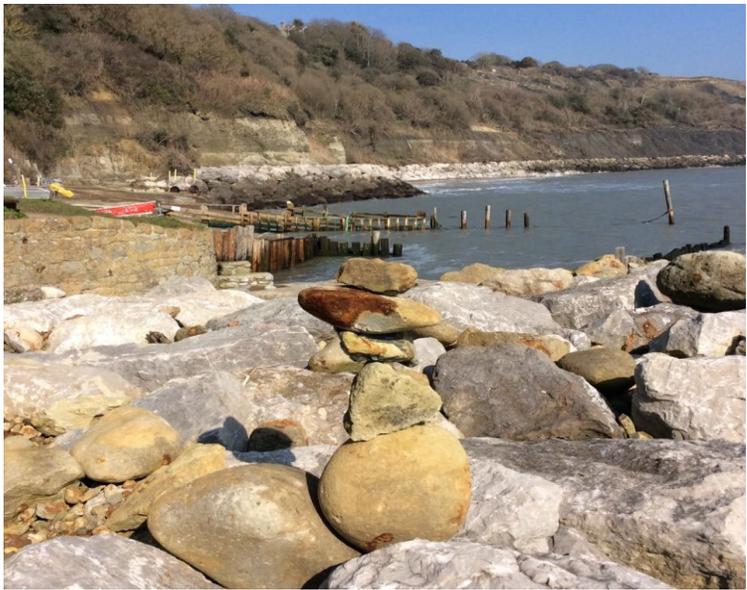
COMMUNITY AWARENESS RAISING

Members of the support group aimed at raising awareness of the condition. A Christmas tree was exhibited at the ever popular Brighstone Christmas Tree festival with information about PTSD including details of the support available on the island. This event attracts numerous people each year and many positive comments were received about the exhibit including feedback that it is not generally understood that PTSD can occur outside of combat situations.

This event followed on from the popular Plant a Tree in Support of PTSD set up by the support group in which people were invited to plant a tree with a message of support buried with the roots. Some people used the tree planting as a letting go ceremony for those they loved and had lost. This was particularly poignant for those family members who had lost someone to suicide or who had experienced the death of a child.

Members of the support group also asked the community to take part in a stone balancing activity on beaches around the island to raise awareness of PTSD.

Links were made with other projects and campaigns such as the Semi Colon project.



QUANTATIVE DATA

A sample group of 15 participants who had attended at least three Nature Quests were asked to complete a survey format using a validated mental health recovery tool before their first Quest and again after. It must be noted that more than 15 completed the pre survey as it was uncertain at that point in time who would complete a minimum of three Quests.

Participants were asked to record the most relevant statement on a mental health six point Likert research format for 11 questions. They were also asked to score on a 10 point format for three questions based on what the programme was trying to achieve which was to increase sense of mental strength and protection as well as reducing anxiety

Their recordings were based on a 14 scale inventory that looked at the following elements of mental health:

1. Whatever happens I know I am OK
2. I feel at ease with who I am
3. I believe there are things I can do to make me feel mentally stronger
4. I am self-reliant
5. I have a sense of wellbeing and know how to maintain it
6. I can live independently
7. I am a contributing member of a community
8. I have close relationships
9. I don't have a problem with addictive behaviour
10. I am meeting my responsibilities
11. I can protect myself
12. On a scale of 1 – 10 how mentally strong have you felt in the last week (with 1 being the least strong and 10 the most)?
13. On a scale of 1 – 10 how protected have you felt in the last week (with 1 being the least protected and 10 the most)?
14. On a scale of 1 – 10 how anxious have you felt in the last week (with 1 being the most anxious and 10 the least)?

Participants were also asked to record any other comments which are reported on in the qualitative section of this document.

Responses from each participant have been aggregated. This takes the form of a radar chart for each person recording their pre and post participation for the 12 statements and a block chart for three statements regarding levels of strength, protection and anxiety pre and post Quests.

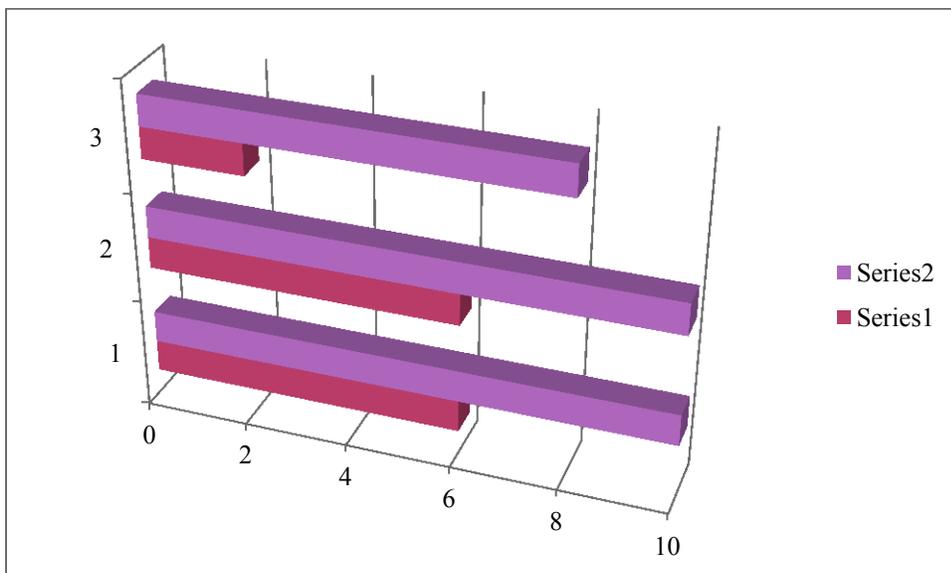
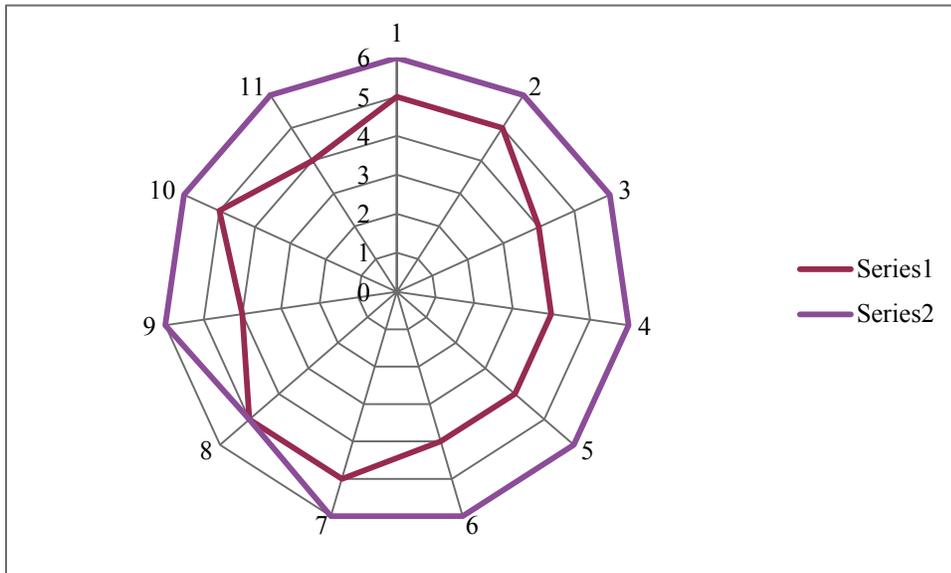
FINDINGS

What follows are three examples of participants radar charts taken at random where Series One is the pre participation completion and Series Two is post completion.

Also included is the bar chart for the same participants where 1 is the level of inner strength they felt, 2 is how protected they felt and 3 is their self-assessed level of anxiety.

In the bar chart Series One is pre participation and Series Two is post.

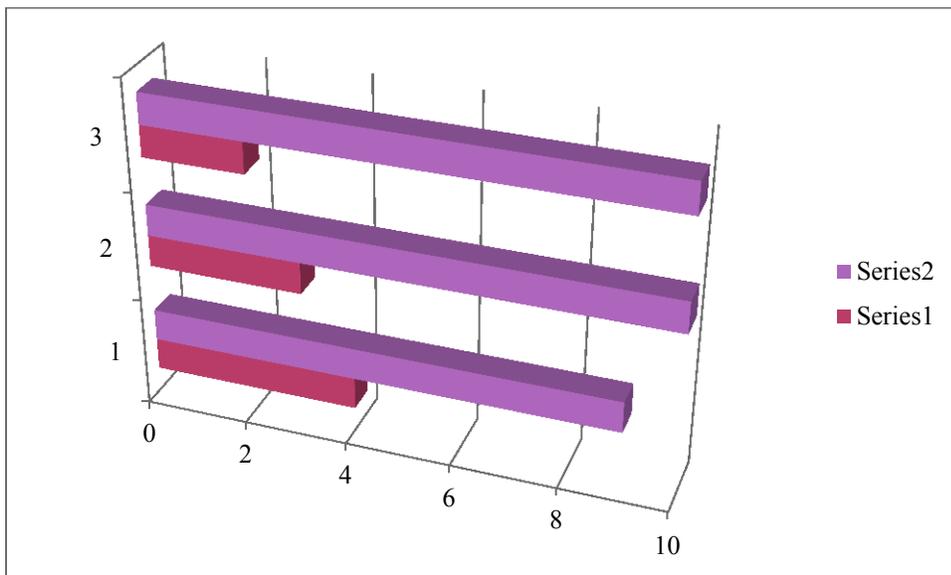
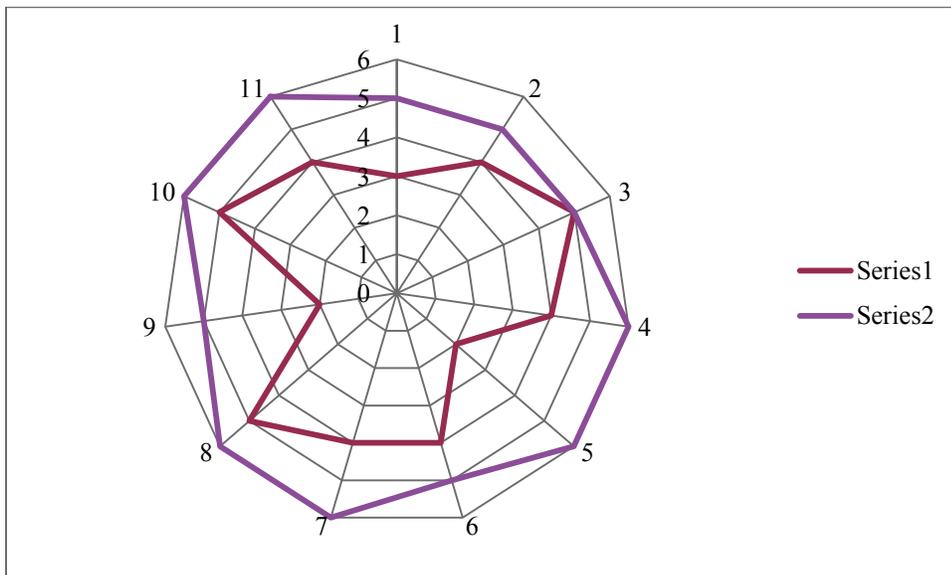
Example One



In this case you can see that there was a significant shift towards enhanced mental health recovery as measured by these validated recovery statements in all but the statement around personal relationships. This particular individual was experiencing a stressful and distressing breakdown of a long term relationship despite which he continued to attend Nature Quests as he found them beneficial to his overall wellbeing and felt they meant he did not stay at home dwelling on the break up.

You will note that despite the stress he was experiencing with regards this breakdown - his self-reported anxiety levels dropped significantly from the level he expressed at the start.

Example Two

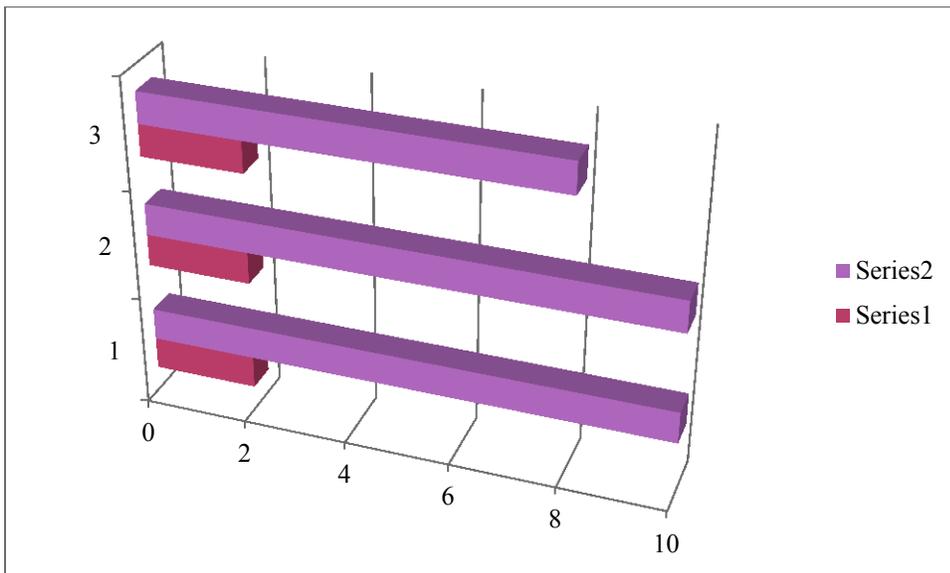
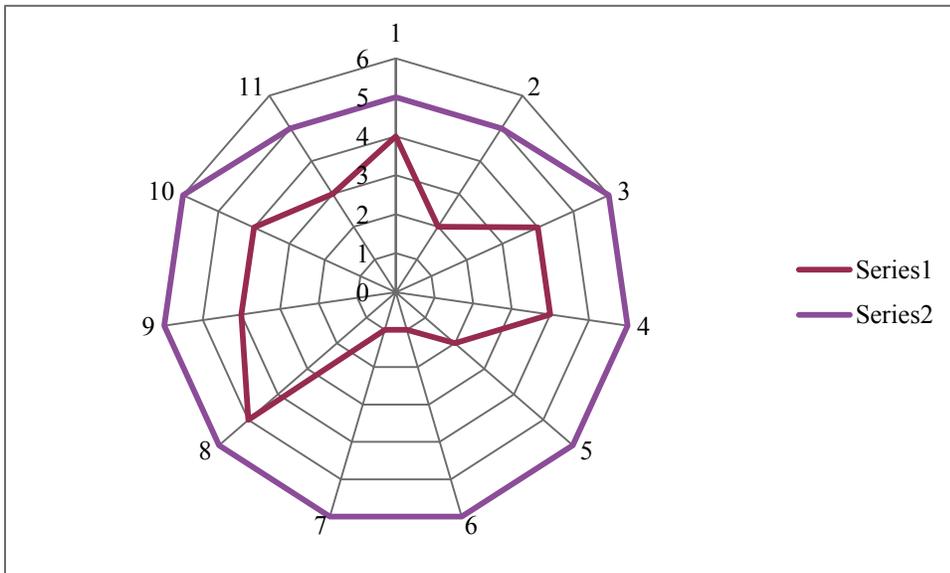


This individual showed improvement in all items relating to mental health recovery other than statement three relating to addiction. The gentleman was in recovery from addiction which often goes hand in hand with

PTSD therefore the statement regarding addiction was an ongoing factor for him that was unlikely to change into the future.

In keeping with all other 15 respondents, he showed a considerable reduction in his anxiety levels as well as improvements in his feeling of inner strength and ability to self-protect.

Example 3



This lady demonstrated significant improvements in all aspects of her mental health recovery as well as significant reduction in anxiety levels and increase in self-belief that she is able to find inner strength and self-protection.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

All participants that took part in the sample survey (n=15) showed a significant reduction in anxiety levels. Although there are not enough numbers to undertake statistical analysis, the example charts shown are able to demonstrate this reduction along with the improvements in the self-belief that they do indeed have inner strength and are able to protect themselves. Considering the survey sample included individuals that had been subject to childhood abuse, including sexual abuse and exploitation, leading to feeling they had their power removed, this is a considerable paradigm shift on their part as long term users of mental health service.

All 15 of the radar charts demonstrate an overall enhancement in mental health recovery as measured by these validated statements.

Whilst this survey has many faults and leaves more questions than answers, it is a considerable insight into how nature therapy can make a difference for those with PTSD to help them to own their own power.



QUALITATIVE DATA

All participants reported enjoyment, fun and laughter during their engagement on the Nature Quests and feeling less anxious after each one. A state of being that persisted for some weeks after and was enhanced the more Quests they took part in.

Those that did not continue with the Quests with Nature Therapy due to time commitment, family matters or work reported back that they continued taking time out in nature either by themselves or with their families to continue to enhance their mental wellbeing. Those with families reported undertaking some of the activities they learned on the project with their children.

One example of this was Walking the Labyrinth Quest where participants go through a Letting Go ceremony. We were sent pictures of self-constructed labyrinths that were created on beaches, gardens, waste land and in woodlands with fallen branches. These were used by the participants to help family and friends go through the same process.

Involving family members outside of the group was very much encouraged, more so as it was reported by those taking part that they felt their child/ren had suffered because of the participant's own mental distress. They felt they were not always fully present or had experienced family breakdown because of their way of being and this was one way of helping the younger members of the family let go of their own mental distress. Many reported not being able to access formal support for their child and felt this was one way of a child finding their own power.

CASE STUDY

Case studies are widely recognised in social science research especially when in depth understanding of human behaviours is sought after. The following replicates a case study from the PTSD support group with some details changed to protect anonymity.

Amy's son had died in tragic circumstances which she witnessed. She had sought expert help at the time and received bereavement counselling but later started to exhibit symptoms of PTSD. She was referred for EMDR but found the sessions upsetting. Amy started coming to the Nature Quests as she thought it might help alleviate some of the ongoing symptoms. She wanted to be around people in nature who would understand if she sometimes acted 'odd' and who would not question her about her trauma.

The most significant shift for Amy was in Walking the Labyrinth Quest with the horses. When she reached the centre and put her burden down as part of the Letting Go she experienced a cathartic episode of sobbing. One of the gentle horses we work with came straight over to her and placed his head over hers in an equine protective gesture. He stayed alongside her for some time whilst she

cried. She reached up and hugged him round his neck and buried her face into him. Horses give off a scent from their neck which helps calm other horses when they are distressed and she reported inhaling deeply to take in this scent even though she didn't know this at the time.

Eventually she was able to stand and carry on with her Labyrinth walk – with the horse walking alongside her all the way. She reported feeling safe and protected on her journey but most of all calm and connected for some weeks after. Months later she recalls that experience as providing a significant paradigm shift.

By being in nature I felt able to disconnect from Jonathon dying is such a horrible way and let go of some of my pain with the things we did.

Walking the Labyrinth in particular was a powerful experience for me and a major breakthrough in my recovery. I felt less stress and more at peace and realised I had carried this tragic burden to the point of exhaustion and needed to gently lay it down with love and thanks for his life and then carry on with my life.

The little horse helped me so much by just being there alongside me and I realised I was not alone as I have friends and family that will hold me and walk alongside me in the same way he did.

Feeling his concern, warmth and softness was a bit like a visit from the angels to tell me I was going to be ok and that I could lay down what I have been carrying for so long.

I felt I grew stronger with each Quest. For the more adventurous Quests I had to learn to trust others in the group would help me if I needed it and they also made me fully present in the moment.

I loved creating the soundscapes as they helped me tune out of myself and into the stunning nature that was all around me.

Thank you for the beautiful journal, I found this helpful as I could not attend all the Quests and it helped me take some of the chaos out of head and post it safely into the book.

Thank you also to Mark (one of the volunteers) who talked me through my anxiety when I felt I could not go into the Cave of Secret Carvings I couldn't be more delighted that I actually did it. It showed me I can do things if I put my mind to it.

It seems that through the Nature Quests Amy came to realise she could claim her own power and take charge of her recovery.

INSIGHTS

One of the key factors for the support work that surfaced through discussion with participants was that many individuals taking part in the Nature Quests were seeking a life philosophy. Whereas mental health services are focused on the mind, it appears that Nature Quests also fulfilled a spiritual search for understanding what had happened to them in life. The support group does not promote any specific religion or belief, but it was very apparent that element of a wholistic approach to PTSD was a vital missing factor. It seems severe or ongoing trauma can make an individual really question the meaning of life and their role on this planet. Feelings of being unworthy and a burden were at times inherent in this therefore this may be worth further exploration in relation to suicide and para suicide.

Drop in support in this project was not an effective method of providing support as measured by the attendance figures. Whilst this may have been because it was early days when this type of support was offered, further feedback from participants supports the decision not to undertake drop ins. Time and resources spent setting this up were not cost effective.

After a traumatic event people often report using substances to relieve anxiety, irritability or depression. Alcohol compensates for deficiencies in endorphin activity following traumatic event (Volpicelli et al). There was an approximation of 50% co-morbidity of substance use and PTSD as measured by self-reporting. In all likelihood the incidence was probably higher. Participants felt that stating they had PTSD rather than a substance problem was more socially acceptable. They felt they were looked down on when labelled as an addict and not offered support for what to many was an extremely distressing way of being. They felt the label of PTSD seemed more acceptable and was more reflective of their life experiences.

Substance addiction with PTSD is linked with a higher incidence of relapse (Norman et al 2007) yet it appears there is currently no treatment pathway we are aware of on the island at the time of writing this report in relation to PTSD and addiction.

SUMMARY

A Swedish study by Professor Bohman (2015) confirmed that when all that is on offer from mental health services is CBT – mental health suffers. The author provided incontrovertible evidence from a national audit that nearly a quarter of people offered CBT had dropped out of treatment before completion.

Therefore treatment choices need to be offered on the basis of the client's needs and preferences. Bohman (2015) concluded that CBT has no effect whatsoever on the outcome of people disabled by anxiety and depression, in fact there is evidence from this national audit that it can in fact be harmful.

Considering the amount of money that has been invested in training and delivering CBT interventions over the years this is indeed a worrying conclusion.

Nature Therapy support for PTSD costs just a small fraction of the overall budget for providing mental health services and could eventually demonstrate strong therapeutic outcomes if funded over a longer period of time.

There is a strong global evidence base to promote the use of outdoor activities and nature based projects in supporting those that experience mental distress such as PTSD, severe stress, anxiety and depression.



'Twas the night before Christmas
And all through the house
Was a deafening silence
Not even the squeak from that mouse.

Under the covers
Tucked up in bed
The demons, they came for her
But they were all in her head.

Their baby boys first Christmas
This was supposed to be
But God needed him
And replaced him with P.T.S.D.

The nightmares and flashbacks
Her senses are heightened
The anxiety and panic
She can't live a life so frightened.

She's back there again
The smell of her skin
She sees the blood and her baby
This can't be happening.

It replays in her head
And fills her with fear
She can smell that darn hospital
This is P.T.S.D. my dear.

She knows what to do
To ground herself quick
Biting into a lemon
Is sometimes the trick.

Her heartbeat starts to slow
As her breathing does too
She sits and reflects
On the time she didn't know what to do.

She's come so far
And been through so much
But she's taking control as her fiancé
Is used as her crutch.

So it's Christmas time
And she's back in the game
Without these three beauties'
Her life wouldn't be the same.

The morning will bring so much joy
As she watches her kids
Excitedly unwrapping their favourite toy.

Her life isn't the same
But acceptance is the key
With patience and love
Gentleness and positivity.

