

Walking for wellbeing: taking steps to maintain people's mental health



Sylvia Thompson

A new group aims to create natural encounters to help people 'get out of their head and into their body'

Three days walking the Kerry Way this summer restored my faith in the power of walking in nature to clear the mind. Not that I ever stopped believing in the benefits of outdoor physical activity in beautiful rural landscapes. But sometimes you really do need to immerse yourself in the elements to realise fully how much you need to unwind from the speed of our information-driven 21st-century lifestyle.

So, it was with some delight that I attended the first meeting of the Dún Laoghaire Rathdown (DLR) Nature for Health group a month later. The meeting was held in a fifth-floor room at the DLR LexIcon with magnificent views over Scotsman's Bay.

It was a perfect setting for a group that hopes to develop regular outdoor activities for people who need to maintain and/or improve their mental and physical wellbeing.

Shirley Gleeson, the founder of the group, is a social worker who has also trained in ecotherapy and forest therapy. This type of training focuses on things such as sensory connection activities (for example, listening to birdsong, feeling and smelling plants) and meditative walking.

Interventions

"The catchphrase is 'get out of your head and into your body', says Gleeson. The idea is that time in nature is beneficial for people who want to maintain their mental wellbeing and for people who are currently suffering mental health difficulties and need therapeutic interventions.

Diarmuid McAree, another founder member, is a forest consultant and director of the broadleaf tree charity, Crann. He is specifically keen to promote the recreational value of forests.

"I am involved with a United Nations group on forestry that has identified forest ecotherapy as an antidote to modern-day stresses," says McAree.

"Stress is a major factor in cardiovascular disease, depression and even obesity. I



bring people on forest walks and get them to appreciate the sights, sounds and smells in the forest. It's about going back to the basics of nature, and the beauty and mystique of the forest," says McAree.

Words like ecotherapy, green gyms, green passports (where children record outdoor activities) and green prescriptions are part of the lexicon of this breed of health and wellbeing advocates.

Gleeson is very keen to bring together health services and environmental groups so that walking and other nature-based activities can become easier options as green prescriptions. In her work with children and adults who have mental health problems or physical/intellectual disabilities, she has already witnessed how time in nature brings benefits.

"I'm very excited by the idea that a GP could prescribe time in nature as a treatment for mild depression or stress," she says.

"I'd like to see the greening of the public health system where people can come out of the medical environment into the outdoors for therapy as an adjunct to their treatment," says Gleeson.

■ **Founding members of Dún Laoghaire Rathdown (DLR) Nature for Health group, Diarmuid McAree, forest consultant, Shirley Gleeson, social worker, and Donal O'Keeffe, research psychologist.**

PHOTOGRAPH
CYRIL BYRNE

She explains how, in the UK, the Mind charity has already developed numerous ecotherapy projects (see ecotherapy on mind.org.uk).

Green prescribing

However, the seeds for green prescribing also exist in Ireland. The growth of community gardens and allotments is one example of our desire to spend time outdoors.

The organisation Social Farming Across Borders (socialfarmingacrossborders.org) organises work on farms for people with mental health problems and intellectual disabilities.

Charities such as Festina Lente in Bray, Co Wicklow, run therapeutic programmes caring for and interacting with horses. The St John of God hospital in Stillorgan, Co Dublin, set up a green gym five years ago. And the HSE has run a Green Prescription pilot programme in the west of Ireland with gardening and walking as social prescribing options.

Donal O'Keeffe, a research psychologist and another founder member of the DLR Nature for Health group, says research into the benefits of nature for health and

wellbeing has mushroomed in the past 10 to 15 years.

"There are studies now that show how walks in nature can reduce ruminations [repetitive negative thinking patterns] that are associated with the development of anxiety and depression. Contact with nature confronts that form of thinking and acts as a form of resilience," says O'Keeffe.

Gleeson says the group is keen to use nearby forests, parks and natural spaces to make it easy for people to make contact with nature.

"Initially, I was very interested in wilderness therapy [where people spent time hiking, shelter-building and foraging for food in remote settings], but then I realised what's most important is how people can access nature on their own doorstep," she explains.

Rediscovering the therapeutic landscapes in our midst is the key. And these include coastal paths, forest trails, boardwalks through bogs, parks and riverside walkways and community gardens closest to your home.

See naturehealthandwellbeing.ie

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