

Adam McGowan
High Intensity Cognitive Behavioural Therapist
City Health Care Partnership (CHCP)

GROWING TOGETHER:



How Our
Allotment
Group
Nurtures
Minds and
Friendships



As a part of World Mental Health Day this year, our Allotment Group members put together a photo for City Health Care Partnership to use to promote positive mental health in the community, which we affectionately names 'big pumpkin picture'. Having run group interventions for anxiety and depression based at our allotment for almost 20 years, I can't help but draw similarities between how tend to the plot and we care for ourselves.

Although World Mental Health Day lasts just 24 hours, the truth is that our mental health is impacted moment-by-moment every single day. If we garden one day a year, then the garden isn't going to be a very healthy one. Whereas, if we tend to it and recognise when it is in need of attention, then we can cultivate something that is healthy and brightens the world up.

Sometimes our mental health needs little care – like a cactus it can survive periods of drought and neglect, with a self-preserving resilience that others cannot easily harm. At other times it can be much more precarious and requires lots of care and effort help it flourish, taking a long time before we can see any growth or improvement. If you have ever neglected a plant and thrown buckets of water at it to rush it back to life, you will know nothing grows that way. Just like our brains, plants need time and care and the right conditions to be healthy. We cannot rush good mental health; we must cultivate it.

What are the right conditions for good mental health? Well three universal qualities, across all cultures, tend to be cultivating a sense of Pleasure, Mastery and Connection. Pleasure brings joy and peace into our spirit, letting go of the goal-oriented mode of mind through things like watching a good film, meditation, or rekindling an old hobby – allowing ourselves some space for being mode. Mastery involves getting a sense of achievement from what we do, however difficult, in a way that is in line with what we care about, whether that's learning a new language, exercising, or painting (e.g. wall, shed, Mona Lisa etc.). Whilst connection to people, animals or nature nourishes us on a level that holds so many meanings and helps us realise that, however lonely we may feel, we are not alone.

Through our Allotment Group we aim to bring these caring conditions to those who feel low in mood, anxious in threat-mode, or isolated, so that they can experience the nourishment of pleasure, mastery and connection. M, whose idea it was for our 'big pumpkin picture' sums up what the group has brought to his life perfectly: -

“The allotment itself is a beautiful place and gives participants the opportunity to not only engage with nature and the natural environment but also engage socially with others in the group. These engagements are encouraged but not enforced, conversations occur naturally and the space encourages this, through simple tasks, sharing snacks and soft drinks and sharing experiences. The coordination and mentoring is supportive and friendly. As a participant/volunteer the space and the people have offered me a beautiful opportunity to belong to something that nourishes me!”

