



**AN EVALUATION OF THE GARDENING LEAVE PROJECT
FOR EX-MILITARY PERSONNEL
WITH PTSD AND OTHER COMBAT RELATED MENTAL
HEALTH PROBLEMS**

**By Jacqueline Atkinson, Professor of Mental Health Policy at
Glasgow University
June 2009**

Commissioned by Gardening Leave

Funded by The Pears Foundation



RESEARCH FINDINGS

An evaluation of the Gardening Leave project for ex-military personnel with PTSD and other combat related mental health problems.

Background

Combat related mental health issues have become high profile in the UK (<http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7916221.stm>). There has been growing concern that a growing number of military personnel are suffering from post traumatic stress (PTSD) and other combat related disorders which have not been effectively treated by mainstream mental health service providers. In response to these concerns the UK government announced measures to give veterans 'priority treatment' and 'beef up' mental health provision (The Herald, 27.06.08).

The main problems associated with veterans' mental health are substance abuse (alcohol/drugs/tobacco), psychiatric disorders (clinical depression, bi-polar illness, psychotic conditions, obsessional compulsive disorder) and behavioural problems associated with PTSD (which can include irritability, outbursts of anger, sleep disturbances, poor concentration, extreme vigilance and exaggerated startle responses). (<http://www.combatstress.org.uk/careand> treatment).

The Gardening Leave project

Gardening Leave was set up in 2007 as a horticultural therapy pilot project to enhance the therapeutic experience of ex-military personnel with combat related mental health problems.

The pilot is hosted by Combat Stress, the UK's ex-services mental welfare society at their Scottish treatment centre (Hollybush House) in Ayrshire. Centres run by Combat Stress offer short stay remedial treatments 'including psychiatric support and occupational therapy to help veterans rebuild their lives and provide a break for the families of traumatised veterans' (www.combatstress.org/welfare and treatment). Veterans can attend Hollybush House for up to six weeks a year (generally for one to two weeks at a time).

The Gardening Leave pilot is an 'add-on' intervention to standard clinical and non-clinical therapies offered at Hollybush House. The Gardening Leave site is currently based at the Scottish Agricultural College, Auchincruive, Ayr. The project site itself comprises the garden, a small, single storey 'cottage', and a derelict stovehouse (glasshouse). With a high back wall the front of the garden is open, with extensive views over the gardens of the College site, including the river Ayr, which runs through the College grounds. There is a paved 'patio' area with garden tables and benches, and a barbeque (www.gardeningleave.org). The activities offered include maintaining the National Poppy Collection, planting and growing flowers and vegetables, making plant and bird boxes, the restoration of an old stove house (which when completed will be used for a variety of purposes) and more recently the

introduction of fishing classes started up and being run by veterans.

Veterans resident at Hollybush House can attend Gardening Leave on a whole or half-day basis depending on what other therapies they are engaging in and as agreed in their treatment plans. They can attend as often as they choose while resident at Hollybush House.

Veterans can also attend Gardening Leave while not in residence for treatment at Hollybush House. In general these are people who live within a commutable distance from the garden site. It should be noted that the Combat Stress centre in Ayrshire covers treatment for veterans from throughout Scotland, the North of England and Northern Ireland.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to evaluate the impact of the Gardening Leave pilot project as a therapeutic intervention for ex-military personnel with combat related mental health problems from the point of view of the veterans who use the service and clinical staff who work with them at the Combat Stress treatment centre. The main questions addressed were:

1. What impact did veterans think this type of horticultural therapy project has had on them? Why and in what ways?
2. What impact did clinical staff think horticultural therapy has had? Why and in what ways?

Methods

A qualitative approach was used comprising face-to-face interviews with veterans and clinical staff. A total of 44 veterans were interviewed over a six month period from August 2008 to February 2009.

Ethical approval

Initial ethical approval was given by the University of Glasgow Ethics Committee for Non-clinical Research on Human Subjects, Medical Faculty sub-committee. This was then confirmed by the Combat Stress research ethics committee.

MAIN FINDINGS

1. ISSUES FOR COMBAT STRESS STAFF

- Combat Stress staff were wholeheartedly positive about Gardening Leave as an addition to other non-clinical therapeutic interventions provided at Hollybush House.
- They received good feedback from the veterans who attended Gardening Leave
- Clinical care workers routinely offered Gardening Leave to veterans as a potential part of a care plan on admission.
- The project was seen as being particularly helpful for veterans with PTSD.

- Being in a secure environment, being outdoors with other veterans and learning new skills were seen as being beneficial.
- Gardening Leave was seen as being able to help by offering a focus and structure to the day (often missing for many veterans in their normal lives), helping with concentration levels, relieving high stress levels, positively affecting mood, and giving veterans back a sense of pride and achievement.

2. ISSUES FOR VETERANS

Attendance at Gardening Leave

- Veterans who were resident at Hollybush House could attend Gardening Leave during their 1-2 week stay at the treatment centre. In addition a smaller but growing population of veterans who were not currently resident at Hollybush attended on a more regular basis, mainly because they live within a commutable distance.
- The project works with these different visiting structures well. It can effectively work with the needs of those returning a small number of times in any given year or well as veterans who may attend on a daily or weekly basis.

Introduction to Gardening Leave

- Combat Stress staff at Hollybush House would inform veterans about Gardening leave. A notice for the project is exhibited in the dining room at Hollybush House where veterans can sign up to attend on a daily basis.
- Information about the project was also passed on by Gardening Leave staff and from one veteran to another. This mixture of voluntary, ad-hoc and word of mouth approaches seemed to work in creating interest in the project
- It was important that there was no element of being 'forced' to attend, rather it was the veteran making a clear choice.

Reasons for attendance

- Veterans attended Gardening Leave for a variety of different reasons. These ranged from getting out in the fresh air, a need for physical activity, having an already developed interest in gardening, an interest in other activities available at the site, looking for structure and focus, the need to get away from a clinical environment to help deal with issues raised by other therapies. For some veterans who had attended Hollybush for a number of years and completed various clinical programmes, Gardening Leave was offered as an appropriate non-clinical alternative.

Flexibility of participation

- Veterans at Gardening Leave can pick the activities they want to be involved with, can work at whatever pace suits them, and can work alone, with other veterans or with a staff member or volunteer depending on their preference. It is clear that individual and specific needs will be catered for. This has undoubtedly been an important element in the projects success with this group of people. What was important was that the project was a therapy not work.

Gardening Leave staff

- What was crucial to the project working well for many of the veterans was the

attitude of the staff and volunteers who work for the project. Being able to trust civilians who have the background and training to understand ‘their’ issues was crucial to veterans feeling comfortable and secure in this environment.

Environment

- Fundamental to veterans was the feeling of security the environment allowed them. The ‘walled’ nature of the garden offered a sense of safety and allowed veterans to be able to totally immerse themselves in whatever activity they were involved with without fear of being interrupted or caught ‘off-guard’ which for some was very distressing.
- Being collected and taken to the garden site in the mornings was an important incentive for many to get up each morning, be active, be creative, and have a structure for each day.
- Being removed from a clinical environment was also seen as an important way of dealing with particular issues brought up in therapy sessions.

Veterans only project

- The fact that Gardening Leave is for ex-military personnel exclusively was important for the majority of veterans. Working alongside people who have had the same experiences and were suffering the same illnesses was invaluable.
- The sense of a common bond amongst the veterans was palpable and this helped to break down barriers in terms of being able to communicate with others which for many was not an option open to them in the civilian world.
- An important point highlighted was that veterans would be more guarded in a mixed setting, less likely to be open about what they were feeling, more likely to hide the fact they were feeling ‘low’, all of which would be detrimental to any therapeutic progress they might be making.

3. THE IMPACT OF GARDENING LEAVE ON VETERANS

Veterans interviewed suggested that the impact of Gardening Leave on them could not be overestimated. The project was described as by some as a ‘life-saver’ in the very real sense of giving a structure and sense of achievement to those prone to serious bouts of depression or who were extremely socially isolated in the civilian world.

Many veterans related the impact of Gardening Leave on them to issues such as confidence, a sense of purpose, self-respect, and learning. Some impacts of Gardening Leave might be viewed in a holistic rather than clinical way.

- ***Sense of purpose:*** Many veterans reflected on how a sense of purpose had been missing in their lives, and Gardening Leave had helped to give this back. This purpose was manifest in several ways; including a sense of pride, feeling motivated and ‘giving something back’ by helping to develop the garden.
- ***Anticipation:*** Future visits to Gardening Leave were highly anticipated. For veterans who may be very isolated at home having something to look forward to was seen as being positive.
- ***Mood and stress:*** Attending Gardening Leave helped regain confidence which

veterans did not feel they had in the civilian world because of illness and/or social isolation. To go into an environment where you instantly feel relaxed, chilled-out, secure and safe, can work at your own pace, can stop thinking negatively, can concentrate, learn new skills, be part of growing something, and most importantly where problems are understood - all impacted positively on mood and stress levels.

- ***Physical activity:*** The physical nature of the work for some as well as being out in the fresh air for all or part of the day did have positive impacts in relation to sleep related problems or being able to relax, remain calm or not become agitated.
- ***Transferable skills:*** Veterans could translate experiences at Gardening Leave into their everyday life, such as a motivation to create or develop their own gardens with the new knowledge they had gained. This was important in building direction, motivation and purpose in individuals whose circumstances mean these have been lost.
- ***Knowledge transfer:*** For some veterans the ability to pass on knowledge to others was a positive aspect to their own experience of Gardening Leave. Being able to give something back and develop new ideas and activities for the site helped to rebuild confidence both those who imparting knowledge and to those learning new skills.
- ***Stigma and understanding:*** The safe environment of Gardening Leave and knowledge that everyone attending was 'in the same boat' contrasted to commonly stated feelings of being misunderstood in the civilian world.

4. MAIN MESSAGES

- Gardening Leave is seen as having positive therapeutic benefits by the veterans who attend, and this was echoed by clinical staff. The project is helping individuals to cope better with many elements of their illnesses, learn new skills, and feel safe in an inclusive and understanding environment.
- The project is effective because it caters for the different needs, abilities and interests of individuals and allows veterans the freedom to participate in whatever capacity suits them best.
- Although the points made here are to some extent specific to this pilot site, all would be useful in relation to future sites. Certain aspects of the site are crucial to its success - the walled nature of the garden and the need for a secure environment. Any future garden would have to take this into account
- The broad benefits of the Gardening Leave project described are directly in line with the aim of UK national strategies for the improvement of mental well-being which is to enhance the quality of life for individuals experiencing mental health problems.