

Planting seeds of hope

A horticultural project is providing a vital lifeline for veterans who have served on the front line in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Mental health nurse Nick Parry reports

'Gardening Leave is my lifeline'. These were the words a former marine commando used to sum up what the pioneering horticultural project means to him. As I looked into his eyes, I knew he wasn't kidding. Situated in Auchincruive, Ayr, Gardening Leave plays a vital role in the lives of many ex-servicemen in that part of west Scotland.

As I became more involved with Gardening Leave, I have seen that same look in the eyes of other users and have come to appreciate the fact that, with veterans, some things are best left unsaid. The beauty of the garden at Auchincruive becomes a focal point for all those numb and suppressed emotions that individuals struggle with as they try to maintain a sense of reality.

For those of you lucky enough to own a garden, you don't have to be reminded of its therapeutic value. The act of growing and nurturing plants helps to displace the negative, intrusive thoughts of an overactive mind. For the former servicemen and women that frequent Gardening Leave, the plot of land is more than a lifestyle decision. Gardening gives a perspective and meaning to life that medication and psychotherapeutic interventions cannot. Many of them arrive with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

They embrace this form of therapy because it is practical, and unites them as they embark on a horticultural journey of growing flowers and vegetables, the building of plant and bird boxes, maintaining the national poppy collection, and learning to fly fish on the bordering River Ayr.

As the clinical elite strive to be the first to solve the problem of what to do with all of these 'out of control' veterans, less high-profile occupational projects as Gardening Leave can go unnoticed. The project's founder, Anna Baker Cresswell, has had numerous conversations with academics and researchers in her attempts to promote her project over the years. She refuses to be deterred by their glazed expressions and polite excuses, so prevalent when the world of psychiatry is asked to look at the effectiveness of occupational input. There is, as yet, limited research to prove the effectiveness of horticultural therapy. Without the scientific evidence to show that veterans benefit from such interventions, the doors are ajar, but take immense strength to push open.



The 'quiet revolution' continues, however. As a military community psychiatric nurse, I have completed two tours of duty and have recently returned from the bloody fields of Afghanistan. I have walked alongside soldiers, both on the frontline and in the civilian world. I don't claim to understand fully what it is to be a combat soldier, but I have seen the fear of young soldiers who are asked to step outside the wire, and tread where the improvised explosive devices are virtually impossible to detect.

Those in the junior ranks have the unenviable job of trying to detect these devices with high-powered metal detectors. They might miss a device, only for their buddy step on it unwittingly. The sense of guilt is immense, and I, in my capacity as a counsellor, have to help people cope with the extreme emotions that wreak havoc when a routine patrol goes horribly wrong.

Perhaps the talks I have had with these traumatised soldiers assisted in their recovery, but what really works is peer support and a sense of being part of something. The NHS has opened its arms in a bitter sweet attempt to encompass the needs of veterans. This is good in that it helps absorb the needling guilt of a society that feels disempowered to help its 'brave boys and girls'. The difficulties arise however, when veterans are forced to join in therapy sessions that nurture bad memories and make them feel uncomfortable. There is a simmering discontent among those who have learned to adapt to the nightmares of combat. Gardening Leave does not challenge these memories but will ease the effects.

Gardening Leave is spreading the good work and may be coming to a town near you. The project has secured a walled patch of ground at the Royal Hospital Chelsea in London and is also taking over the gardening centre at Erskine Hospital in Bishopton, Renfrewshire. What started as a rural project in Ayr is now coming to the inner city; gardening with a political edge, reminding the masses that in today's cynical society, there is still sacrifice.

For more information, visit www.gardeningleave.org

Nick Parry

Community psychiatric nurse in a crisis resolution team in central London and head of the assessment team for Gardening Leave.