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NORFOLK

Great outdoors is more than just a breath of fresh air

As a psychiatric mental health student Paul Lefever was uncomfortable with the traditional methods to support and treat clients, for example medication and a weekly one-hour support sessions.

Born on a farm in Wales, he had always had a love of the outdoors and as a student would go on walks with clients and found it really opened them up.

Fast forward to 2006 and he set up Discovery Quest, which is run by Norwich-based Julian Housing in partnership with the Norfolk Wildlife Trust, The John Muir Trust and Mountainwise.

It is an innovative and challenging walking and outdoor-based therapy project for Norfolk people whose lives have been significantly impacted by mental illness.

"Connecting with nature and physical activity are powerful and proven tools in the fight against mental health problems," says Paul.

The scheme is funded by Natural England's 'Access to Nature' grant from the Big Lottery and in 2008 won an award for Mental Health Practice Innovation.

Discovery Quest challenges its participants to explore, learn and develop knowledge of the countryside in Norfolk, starting out with gentle walks across Norfolk and building up to more strenuous trips.

The six-month programme includes walking weekends in Derbyshire, and involves walking 350 miles in five months.

In the sixth month walkers spend eight days walking the West Highland Way in Scotland and summiting Ben Nevis.

Paul says: "The concept of Discovery Quest is a new one within the mental health field. It started as a dream of mine, based on what I knew about the positive benefits of connecting with nature and physical exercise and wanting to offer an alternative to traditional psychiatric treatment.

"Although we learn more from every programme, I am delighted with how the initiative has developed and what we offer our service users. I'm also proud of how many of our participants have embraced what can be quite a challenging project.

"I am very passionate about this field of mental health and delighted to add our findings to the ever increasing base of research which demonstrates the value of this kind of treatment."

The new independent research and analysis, conducted by the University of Essex, supports the growing body of empirical evidence to show that exposure to nature brings substantial mental health benefits and will help Discovery Quest to unlock more funding.

The research was conducted during a Discovery Quest wilderness expedition in Knoydart, Scotland, in September 2009 and investigated the benefits of spending time in a wilderness environment, incorporating both quantitative data and qualitative narrative based on international standardised tools which measure participants' self-esteem and connectedness to nature.

Research into changes in smoking and drinking habits and healthy eating was also included.



INNOVATIVE: Sarah Hubbard, above; Richard Hutches, top right, and Jon Buckenham have all felt great benefit from Paul Lefever's Discover Quest programme of outdoor adventures for mental health clients.



It may seem like common sense to say that being in the great outdoors is good for your wellbeing. But it's a harder thing to prove that walking and enjoying the natural world can have a positive effect on people with mental health problems. But one pioneering Norfolk walking project is starting to do just that – with the help of new university research. **KIM BRISCOE** reports.

As a result of taking part in the wilderness experience with Discovery Quest, the majority of participants (69pc) saw an increase in connectedness to nature, with 58pc seeing an increase in their self-esteem as a result of taking part in the wilderness experience.

Of those that drink alcohol, 86pc drank less on the trip and of the smokers 41pc smoked less on the trip. A total of 63pc of those said they ate more healthily than they would at home.

After taking part in the wilderness expedition, members of the group were asked to rate various aspects of the experience such as the wildlife and being part of a group. The most highly rated aspects were the scenery and the fresh air, but all aspects were enjoyed 'very much' by 75pc of participants.

One of those participants was Sarah

Hubbard, 26, from Swaffham, who joined the scheme last May and hopes now to become a volunteer with Discovery Quest.

She said the walking and being out in the fresh air had helped her to cope with her mental health problems, and particularly with depression.

She said: "I think it gives you a different perspective and it gets people out in the fresh air when perhaps they don't have the motivation to get out themselves.

"It gives you that purpose and makes you realise that someone does care and you are worth it."

The University of Essex has a department specialising in research into the health benefits of exercise in the natural world and it was particularly keen to look at how this impacted on mental health.

Rachel Hine, the assistant director of the Interdisciplinary Centre for

Environment and Society (iCES) at the University of Essex, said she was keen to study Discovery Quest as it was a long-term project which involved longer spells of walking, with sometimes more than a week away.

She said: "There has always been a lot of anecdotal evidence about the health benefits of walking in a natural setting, but if you are going to convince health care professionals to invest time and finances in the programme you need more robust and scientific research.

"The increase in self-esteem and the increase in connectedness to nature is something that we can measure."

The university is planning to conduct more research on the project throughout 2010.

For more information about the initiative log on to www.discoveryquest.org