



# Healing woodlands: a personal perspective

*Catriona Ross leads us through some of the pioneering programmes in and around Inverness which bring cost effective treatment to people experiencing mental ill health.*

**A** dreich midwinter dawn. The gloom matches my mood. Since coming out of hospital recently I've been on a downer, and it'd be the easiest thing in the world to dive back under the duvet and hide. A couple of hours later, I'm positively cheery. I'm in the woods in one of my favourite places, Abriachan, in the hills above Loch Ness. Around 20 mental health service users have gathered for a festive social, the sun has made an appearance above the skyline and the air is filled with chat and laughter as we decorate wee Christmas trees, swap banter and drink tea.

I am lucky enough to live among woodlands and to have reaped their benefits throughout my life. Now middle-aged and struggling with bipolar disorder, I need the woods more than ever. And organised outdoor activities have proved an invaluable step on my road to recovery. One in four people will experience a mental health problem at some point

in their lives. It is well known that green space and nature boost anyone's morale. But both in hospitals and the community, mental health patients often find themselves lacking the confidence, will and opportunity to get outdoors.

It was my community psychiatric nurse who suggested a couple of years ago that I join 'Branching Out', a group for local service users at Abriachan Forest Trust. I was sceptical. I knew about woods and was out in them with the dog every day. Groups were for people who needed more support than me. But I joined the group and we had a great time. The craic started in the car on the way up and just got better as the days wore on and people relaxed with each other. On arriving at Abriachan, we were greeted in the forest classroom with a cuppa in front of a cosy stove. Some introductions, morning chat, a plan of action, and off we'd go for the day's adventures. Lighting and tending fires, building shelters, campfire cooking,

bushcraft, walks, woodwork, creative writing - activities were sociable and fun, and trust and confidence grew.

## **Working together**

In summer 2015, Mid Ross Community Mental Health Team teamed up with woodland leaders at Abriachan to form a follow-up group called 'Moving On', giving people opportunities to work in the woods. Projects included creating a garden and building a 'peace trail'. Boosting confidence, learning new skills, forging friendships, and getting fitter were among the benefits highlighted by participants. Grace Moir, 35, said she had initially found Abriachan nerve-racking as she was apprehensive about meeting new people. However, the friendly environment ensured she soon began to relax and enjoy the company. "Everyone was really easy to get on with, and once you started chatting it was fine," she said. "I feel much better in myself and coming here has helped a lot with my problems. I like to be outside, it helps the head. You're

Left to right: Wooden prayer flags; Roni Smith at Abriachan; Flo MacIennan on Nature Walks for Well-being.



not just focusing on your problems, you feel like you're doing something beneficial and have a sense of purpose."

Kevin Henderson agreed. Since coming to Abriachan he has made new friends, and gained the confidence to get back on the road after several years not driving. "The group helps with social skills - it really helps you get out of the isolation you can feel when you're not well." Kevin, 51, found his fitness improved, and he developed skills such as woodworking and cooking. He stressed the importance of such projects continuing. "It gives you something to aim for and is a great, healthy environment for people to meet up in."

Group leader Roni Smith of Abriachan Forest Trust added: "It's all about getting people outside, getting some physical exercise, learning about themselves and learning from each other. It's also about what participants bring to the group. Everybody's got their own skills and experiences, what we do is create a safe place for people to share. It's really rewarding seeing people getting more confident, working together and chatting away about a multitude of things."

'Branching Out' was developed by Forestry Commission Scotland in partnership with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde in 2007. It has grown from strength to strength and now runs in nine of Scotland's 14 health boards. The expansion was enabled through the development of the Branching Out leader training course. Programme manager Nathalie Moriarty said: "Branching Out is a cost effective treatment option for people experiencing mental ill health. We want this treatment option to

become a realistic choice of treatment for all those who could benefit from it."

In Inverness another pioneering programme is proving hugely popular with patients of New Craigs Hospital, as well as users of Highland substance misuse units and community patients. 'Nature Walks for Wellbeing' has been spearheaded by the Scottish Waterways Trust in partnership with Dunain Community Woodland and other local outdoor practitioners. "The idea is to connect with nature and restore body and mind and use local greenspaces to provide opportunities for healing," explained Caledonian Canal heritage officer Stephen Wiseman. "Nature connection and nature based therapy has never been more important." Nature Walks for Wellbeing are weekly 90-minute outdoor sessions where participants can feel immediate and lasting health benefits. Art, storytelling, poetry, nature tracking, and wildlife watching may form part of the session, and mindfulness activities are a regular focus. Every session ends with a social gathering round tea and cake.

### Transformation

During spells in hospital, I have been among participants who have escaped the telly and tedium of the ward, and taken to surrounding woods, hills and towpaths. Fresh air, walking, sledging, drumming and singing - the activities broke through the medicated fog to bring brightness to difficult days. Occupational therapy assistant practitioner Sue Fraser, who takes patients from New Craigs out on the walks, says the benefits to everyone involved are immense. "The walks are very grounding and get people away from the hospital environment, which is not always the most therapeutic. It's incredibly satisfying - you can see it's making a real difference to people and when we come out there's not the same staff-patient division. Walks provide an opportunity to stop, reflect, observe and learn about the wonderful environment that surrounds us. They have attracted some personalities that I never imagined would be drawn to this activity and I never fail to be impressed at the enthusiasm and interest shown by some members of the group. Our clients are recovering from conditions such as depression, addiction and schizophrenia. Many of the regular

attendees are young males, which is great, as most of our hospital-based occupational therapy social activities appeal to women more than men."

Gathering bark and kindling for a campfire in Dunain Community Woodland, hospital patient Iain Sangster said: "Getting out is uplifting and therapeutic - just being out in the open feels good and it's peaceful too. It's sociable too and gets you speaking to people, even when you're down." Another in-patient, Flo MacLennan added, "It's the environment, the peace, learning about how to survive in the woods - it's all great for well-being. I feel very at home in the woods but you can see how this benefits people who are not so used to it - some folk are a bit scared at first but you soon see a real difference in them. You get the craic and make friends - when you're out people talk and listen to each other."

As a facilitator of Branching Out programmes and Nature Walks for Wellbeing, and a director of Dunain Community Woodland, Amy Clarkson has seen how the outdoors brings people alive. "When we're out you notice flowing conversations. Nature becomes the common denominator, which I guess is going to be more nurturing than having hospital as your common ground," she said. "People start to take on roles, gathering wood, becoming a firekeeper - knowledge comes from the group, which is a beautiful thing to see. When I've led Branching Out groups and Nature Walks for Wellbeing in Dunain Community Woodland you could see when we gathered in the car park that people were often not feeling the best, and were suffering the effects of their illness and medication. As soon as we started to walk out into the woods, the transformation began and by the end of the session, it was like they'd come back to life. I'd see people's eyes shining again."

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*Catriona Ross is a journalist and joint custodian of her family's farm in Ardnamurchan, where native woodland is beginning to flourish following centuries of overgrazing. She is currently focusing on managing her bipolar disorder and is particularly interested in mindfulness in nature as a path to recovery.*

Above: Grace Moir and Kevin Henderson at Abriachan.