

The relationship between hand knitting and therapy

The NHS in England planned to spend £12.2 billion on mental health in 2018/19. This figure equates to roughly £1 in every £10 spent by the Department of Health and Social Care.¹ Further, data from NHS Digital shows that 70.9 million prescriptions for antidepressants were given out in 2018; a figure that has been steadily increasing year-on-year.²

Many experts emphasise the need for self-management when it comes to more common mental health illnesses such as mild depression and anxiety. Time, money, and effort are poured into encouraging patients to look after their own health and wellbeing as lifestyle changes can only be made by the individual themselves and cannot be imposed. Ultimately, it's up to each patient whether they carry out recommendations, and a range of recommendations helps to increase the likelihood of a person committing to rehabilitation.

This is where portable, creative, and inexpensive crafts such as knitting come in handy. There has been a wealth of academic research into both the physical and emotional/ mental health benefits of knitting. The first evidence of a knitted item dates back to ancient Egypt, at the end of the first millennium AD. Knitting refers to the method by which yarn is manipulated to create a textile or fabric and can be done by hand or by machine.³ Throughout this text though, we will refer predominantly to knitting by hand, however, there is also evidence of the same benefits for other handicrafts such as crochet and needlepoint.

Knitting itself has a physical impact on one's brain, working to help fix anxiety. This is because knitting helps activate the prefrontal cortex which controls executive functions such as controlling reflexive, short-sighted behaviours to allow an individual to take part in behaviours such as decision-making, problem-solving and self-control. The performance of a concurrent visuospatial task has also been found to reduce the emotional intensity of distressing images, aiding recovery from illnesses such as anorexia nervosa.⁴

It also helps to invoke a sense of mindfulness – a present-moment awareness of one's experience, as it arises, without judgement. While an individual is knitting, they may be paying attention to the pattern alone, allowing the brain to concentrate on the present. When this happens, an individual's corpus callosum gets thicker, allowing them to go back and forth between the right and left hemispheres of their brain more readily, acting as an alternative to existing medicinal options.⁵

When it comes to aiding general wellbeing, a lot of academic work to date focuses on how leisure activities help mental health. A study by P. Lampinen et al., for example, found that higher leisure activity, including handicrafts such as knitting, is a factor in being able to predict

¹ NHS England. (2020). *NHS Mental Health Dashboard*. Available:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/nhs-mental-health-dashboard/>. Last accessed 14th July 2020.

² Lacobucci, G. (2019). NHS Prescribed record number of antidepressants last year. *British Medical Journal*. 364 (1), 508.

³ Harris, J. (2004). Knitting. In: Harris, J *5000 Years of Textiles*. London: British Museum Press. 46-48.

⁴ Clave-Brule, M et. Al (2009). Managing Anxiety in Eating Disorders with Knitting. *Eat Weight Disord*. 14 (1), e1-e5.

⁵ Howell, V. (2019). *The Knit Vibe: A Knitter's Guide to Creativity, Community, and Well-being*. New York: Abrams. 85.

mental well-being in later life, with evidence to show increased leisure activity as positively impacting mental well-being.⁶

To remedy the lack of work produced solely on a specific occupation such as knitting, Dr Jill Riley et al. conducted a study to explore this phenomenon in depth. Researchers surveyed 3,545 knitters worldwide and found that knitters commonly reported knitting for relaxation, stress relief and creativity. The results showed ‘a significant relationship between knitting frequency and feeling calm and happy.’ Further, more frequent knitters also reported higher cognitive functioning and knitting in a group impacted significantly on perceived happiness, improved social contact, and communication with others. Ultimately, the study concludes, ‘knitting has significant psychological and social benefits which can contribute to wellbeing and quality of life. As a skill and creative occupation, it has therapeutic potential.’⁷

Knitting also induces other beneficial psychological effects. Professor Hosegood conducted a sociocultural study into knitting and found the countless repetitions involved in knitting means you can socialise with others or daydream freely – luxuries usually connected to having free time. Thus, the nostalgic feeling that often surfaces when knitting is discussed is related to the excess of time and space that allowed for the production of the objects that essentially could be produced more efficiently by machines. Consequently, ‘knitting affords a link between the past (perceived as calm, anachronistic, simple, and worry-free) and the present postmodern condition (a constant move forward and the lack of luxurious leisure time) that can be seen as a positive and empowering phenomenon.’⁸

Knitting ought to be prescribed to individuals as it helps to alleviate feelings of stress and stimulates a ‘relaxation response’. Respondents to Riley’s survey in the *British Journal of Occupational Therapy* commonly reported that induced feelings of calm and relaxation were related to the rhythmical nature of the knitting process. One respondent, for example, described the “the rhythm of the repetitive motion in simple projects” as “hypnotic and calming” when she was feeling stressed.⁹

This is because knitting requires bilateral, repetitive, rhythmic, automatic and coordinated hand movements that have associated therapeutic qualities. Studies have found that the rhythmic and sensory nature of knitting promotes the release of calming serotonin, helping to lift mood and to dull pain. Knitting in particular, as opposed to a one-handed craft such as crochet, uses two-handed movement across the midline of the body, a particular reference point for the brain. As such, it uses more brain capacity, focusing the mind on a physical task rather than psychological or emotional concerns.¹⁰

⁶ Lampien, P et al. (2006). Activity as a Predictor of Mental Well-being Among Older Adults. *Aging Mental Health*. 10 (5), 454-66.

⁷ Riley, J et al. (2013). The Benefits of Knitting for Personal and Social Wellbeing in Adulthood: Findings from an International Survey. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*. 76 (2), 50-57.

⁸ Myzelev, A. (2009). Whip Your Hobby into Shape: Knitting, Feminism, and the Construction of Gender. *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*. 7 (2), 148-63.

⁹ Riley, J et al. (2013). The Benefits of Knitting for Personal and Social Wellbeing in Adulthood: Findings from an International Survey. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*. 76 (2), 53.

¹⁰ Main, G. (2012). *Therapeutic Knitting Study Day Manuscript: Knitting to Facilitate Change*. Available: http://stitchlinks.com/PDFs/MANUSCRIPT_THERAPEUTIC_KNITTING_FINAL.pdf. Last accessed 14th July 2020.

Furthermore, research from Harvard Medical School's Mind and Body Institute, for example, found that knitting reduced participants heart rates on average eleven beats per minute, lowered blood pressure, reduced harmful blood levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and lessened muscle tension. This same 'relaxation response' can also 'be elicited by a number of meditative techniques, such as diaphragmatic breathing, yoga, [and] progressive muscle relaxation'.¹¹ It goes without saying, knitting is not given enough credit for this benefit in popular culture.

Knitting is further beneficial as it boosts self-confidence and instils a sense of capability in an individual. Unlike meditation or diaphragmatic breathing, knitting produces a tangible and often useful product. Knitting a jumper, for example, has a specific output which is visible to all and enables a sense of satisfaction upon completion. This product-oriented process, Dr Blanche highlights, boosts the reward centres of the brain and reinforces the aforementioned sense of capability/ self-esteem.¹² Unlike the depression, anxiety, or stress one may be feeling, it is something the participant can actively create and change – it is at odds with the lack of control they feel they have over other emotions.¹³ Further, through the process of learning how to knit, one practices patience and perseverance as well as that goals can be reached despite potential setbacks along the way; skills that can be utilised in the self-management of their wellbeing.¹⁴

Knitting also reduces loneliness and isolation by providing an avenue for social engagement and provides a sense of community, friendship, support, belonging, confidence and identity. In the UK today, Age UK has found that 2.65 million older people feel they have no one to turn to for help and support, and half a million older people go at least 5 or 6 days a week without seeing or speaking to anyone at all.¹⁵ Lonely people are more likely to suffer from dementia, heart disease, and importantly, in this case, depression.¹⁶ Professor Keith Willett additionally stresses that the associated low moods and mild depression are 'significant contributors to patients not taking an interest in their care because they feel no one else is interested in them.'¹⁷

Knitting can help ease loneliness as there is a large community of knitters worldwide, both virtually through forums and social media, and in person. In the UK, we have a history of

¹¹ Benson, H (1975). *The Relaxation Response*. Boston: Avon Books.

¹² Blanche, E. (2007). The Expression of Creativity through Occupation. *Journal of Occupational Science*. 14 (1), 21-29.

¹³ Corkhill, B (2014). *Knit for Health & Wellness*. London: Flatbear Publishing.

¹⁴ Bandura, A. (1994). Self-Efficacy. In: Ramachandran, V *Encyclopaedia of Human Behaviour* . New York: Academic Press.

¹⁵ Age UK (2019). *No One Should Have No One*. Available:

<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/buckinghamshire/activities-and-events/no-one-should-have-no-one/#:~:text=Schools->

,No%20one%20should%20have%20no%20one,you%20are%20facing%20them%20alone.. Last accessed 14th July 2020.

¹⁶ Cacioppo, J et al. (2006). Loneliness as a Specific Risk Factor for Depressive Symptoms: Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Analyses. *Psychology and Aging*. 21 (1), 140-51.

¹⁷ Professor Keith Willett, Director for Acute Care, with NHS England. In: Gentleman, A (2016). *Loneliness forces older people into hospitals and strains services, say senior doctors*. Available:

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/feb/01/loneliness-forces-older-people-into-hospitals-and-strains-services-say-senior-doctors>

knitting circles, and there are groups all over the country centred around crafting together.¹⁸ The online world means we are more connected than ever and able to find out about groups around us where participants can share tips and techniques and gain new skills. This is important to help meet emotional needs such as a sense of community, status, and achievement.

Along a similar vein, knitting can also improve wellbeing by providing a sense of meaning and purpose. One way to meet your need for 'meaning and purpose' is through volunteering - knitting presents many options in this respect. Knitting garments for free distribution is a common theme in modern history – for example, Knit for Peace in the UK, an initiative of the Charities Advisory Trust, has more than 15,000 knitters and started as an income generation project for Hutu and Tutsi widows, victims of the Rwandan genocide and civil war. Contributing to such a cause allows participants to feel as if they are still useful and included in society, improving the sense of self-worth and purpose.¹⁹ In fact, research by the Harvard School of Public Health suggests that people who volunteer spend 35% less time in a hospital too, improving their health overall.²⁰

Given all these benefits – including a physical impact on one's brain that helps to overcome mental health issues, an improved sense of wellbeing and creativity, and the increased social life and therapeutic advantages of the craft (to name a few) – it seems wise that knitting is recommended for those struggling with mental health issues in place of more expensive and invasive alternatives.

¹⁸ Rutt, R (2003). *The History of Hand Knitting*. London: Interweave Press.

¹⁹ Suffolk Mind. (2020). *Meeting Emotional Needs*. Available: <https://www.hgi.org.uk/resources/delve-our-extensive-library/resources-and-techniques/meeting-emotional-needs-while-socially-isolated>. Last accessed 14th July 2020.

²⁰ Kim, E. & Konrath, H. (2016). Volunteering is prospectively associated with health care use among older adults. *Social Science and Medicine*. 149 (1), 122-9.