

Walk Alton Open Evening Oct 16th 2019

What can walking contribute to your wellbeing?

There were four speakers/major contributors, Sally Thomas (*self-employed Counsellor, using walking as a therapeutic device*); Dr Hugh Bethell (*Alton Cardiac Rehab*). Helen Fisher (*Energise Me*) and Amy Holder (*Havant and East Hampshire Mind*). The discussion, following inputs from all four contributors, was chaired by Bob Booker (*Alton Society*)

Speaker inputs

Sally is a Counsellor in private practice and uses walking as a counselling tool: 'walk and talk.' Walking and the fact of being in an outdoor natural environment are resources for good mental health; Sally spoke of a big evidence base attesting to the simple benefits of being outside. She gave a number of key messages:

- listen deeply to your walking companion; let go of giving 'normal' responses and keep listening
- walking in the countryside provides a good environment for discussing difficult subjects; removes hierarchic issues, while lack of direct eye contact reduces the intensity of the communication
- if you are walking alone, try to focus upon your senses: sight, hearing, smell: this can be a mindfulness exercise to concentrate on the here and now
- shared experience has a powerful mental benefit

Hugh was an Alton GP for many years. He started the *Cardiac Rehab Centre* in 1976 and has always been passionate about the benefits of exercise. Walking is a very important part of any exercise programme. Regular walkers live longer and have a longer period of healthy life. The average unexercised person spends 20% of their elderly life in ill health. Hugh suggested that we should speak of 'health span', rather than life span.

Hugh referred to three recent medical papers on the benefits of walking. Two of these identified a much lower risk of heart disease for dog owners, as they have to walk their pets regularly. The third study considered speed of walking and found that a slow walking pace accelerates aging. Hugh's message was: Walk fast!

Helen is Strategic Lead for *Energise Me*, a charity with the aim to 'beat inactivity'; she defined inactivity as less than 45 minutes per week of activity. Helen reiterated the message that physical inactivity is a major cause of disease and health problems, estimated to cost the UK economy £7.4 billion per annum. She also stated that physical activity leads to lower risk of anxiety or depressive illness.

Helen claimed that 25% of Alton residents are inactive. 'Selling' the benefits of physical activity is not straightforward and can be challenging. The social aspect of

walking groups is an important factor in encouraging participants to remain. Helen mentioned a recent campaign to promote Walking for Health to women, which revealed that some had health concerns or personal anxieties about 'fitting in'.

Helen considered that GPs and Pharmacists should have a crucial role in initiating conversations with patients about greater physical activity.

Amy is Wellbeing Lead, East Hants, for *Havant and East Hampshire Mind*. She also supported the idea of encouraging people to get outside and gave the example of a peer support group using area alongside Petersfield Pond to socialise, be active and gain mental health benefits. Amy strongly suggested that a weekly routine in terms of participation in walking groups is very important. She also stressed the additional benefits of other activities which might be linked to walking, such as photography, drawing and creative work, all of which have potential to raise self-esteem through a sense of achievement.

General discussion

There were a number of questions or statements for comment raised by the audience. Here is a brief summary of some of the points raised and comments from the speakers:

Does a helpful 'outside' experience always have to be in a natural environment or can you do it anywhere?

A daily activity routine in your local community is very helpful....but people are reluctant to travel for more than 15 minutes (Helen)

Go in your garden! You don't have to go to a beauty spot to get benefits! Even a walk around the block in the dark can be beneficial (Sally)

Remember the five minute rule: try an activity in that time and see how it goes; step up the time if you like the activity (Amy)

Anywhere you go can be stimulating if you keep your eyes open...try looking up; look above eye level

Does a walk have to be at a brisk pace?

Yes! Expend some energy; increased physical fitness will follow and there will be benefits in later life (Hugh)

Helen mentioned the Active 10 app from Public Health England

Sarah from Wey Valley Radio mentioned a regular visit to a boot sale by a group of women who enjoy getting together and talking to each other; the activity doesn't necessarily have to be a walk; there are benefits from socialising with friends and talking sometimes about personal problems

This is all about human connections; a good set of friends can derive mental benefits from just enjoying time together (Sally)

In sociable walks a mix of people is a great benefit; they all bring their own interests and perspectives, including genres of books, sport, music... (Amy)

How do you get people, especially young people, into walking?

Some schools are using a 'daily mile' activity and have found that participation in this leads to better behaviour and better concentration in class (Helen)

The idea of 'themes' might attract younger people....geocaching and hunting Pokemon? (Helen)

The new Activities Directory being compiled for the GU34 area should ideally be handed out by GPs rather than statins! (Hugh)

There was some discussion of the success of the *Park Run* phenomenon. Our nearest ones to Alton are in Alice Holt and Bordon. Helen suggested that a walking variant might now be needed.

How can we coax adolescents away from computers and phones into activity?

A really difficult challenge, as teenagers relate best to those of their own age group (Sally)

Turn it into something fun or incorporate a small reward (Amy)

Too many teenagers have a jaundiced view of school sport and find the team environment challenging. We need to stop celebrating the sporting successes of a small group who represent the school and focus instead upon engaging a wider group in much more diverse, fun activities (Helen)

What about stressed middle aged working people who don't get exercise?

There is a move in some organisations to support mental health and Mental Health First Aid training is now available (Sally)

There was some discussion about one company where the HR department could identify employees at risk and arrange for them to be supported by trained colleagues. Mindfulness and meditation exercises had been offered.

There is a small positive move in terms of organisations recognising the need for physical exercise. Sitting down at a desk for 6-7 hrs per day really needs a

tremendous amount of exercise to counteract the effects. Design of the built environment should encourage physical activity (Hugh)

In organisations, suggesting that teams take lunch together can be a positive move; encourages social interaction (Amy)

There was some discussion about 'old style' sports and social facilities in organisations, now usually gone, and companies putting in gyms that were not used by anyone

In Manchester there was an 'Active Soles' initiative. People were encouraged to wear comfortable footwear to work and this increased physical activity (Helen)

Why don't we try setting up a Midday Mile initiative in Alton? (Helen)