

Social Farming withPeople with Mental Health Challenges



Definition & Understanding of Mental Ill-Health

- Mental ill-health occurs when a person experiences significant changes in emotion, thinking or behaviour or a combination of these. It causes distress to the individual and more often than not, problems functioning in social, work or family activities.
- It does not discriminate, and it can affect anyone regardless of age, stage of life, gender, nationality, income, social status or religion.
- Most people with mental health challenges adapt and function reasonably well in everyday life. But others may require some intervention and support, one of which might be social farming.

Some common mental health challenges/disorders

- Mood disorders including depressive disorders and bipolar disorder
- Anxiety or fear-related disorders (including generalised anxiety disorder, phobias, panic disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder)
- Schizophrenia and other psychoses
- Personality disorders
- 'Burn-out' or severe stress-related complaints



But everyone is an individual first and foremost and comes with their own unique set of qualities, challenges and struggles. Other factors such as people's individual personalities, age, gender, level of interest in farming and nature, quality of professional support systems, cultural attitudes towards mental illness, etc. also have an impact. They can influence people's activity levels, relationships with others, level of interest & engagement and attendance levels. They may also help determine the kind of activities and approaches which will work best and the benefits and outcomes experienced.

Benefits and outcomes that social farming can deliver (and which you can support people in achieving)

- Improved mental health and wellbeing from spending real time outside and in nature.
- Feelings of peace and calm and reduced stress and anxiety levels.
- Opportunities to contribute to something valuable, to learn and to grow.
- New connections and friendships are formed, leading to reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- Builds a sense of hopefulness which is key to recovery.
- People get to have positive experiences, to be someplace where things go right for them.
- Existing (sometimes untapped) skills and strengths are uncovered and highlighted
- Improved physical health and vitality, improved sleep patterns and habits

Which Activities?

KEY POINT: There is no ONE set of activities or approaches which are of particular value and relevance. It is more so about supporting individuals on your farm to discover what they are good at and interested in, what will enhance their life. The early days should be very flexible and involve a process of discovery for you and the participant(s).

Operating with structure and rhythm

Time spent on the farm should have a kind of reliable rhythm according to the seasons, the time of day, the tasks needing to be done and the responsibilities which individuals are given. This provides a **secure framework** from which people can be supported to grow in wellbeing and confidence. It also demonstrates in a very natural way - without 'lectures' - the benefits of having good routines and habits both on and off the farm.

Mix of tasks

It's good to have a mix of **routine tasks** which are repeated every week and where people can see themselves getting better and more confident but also **new projects** which people can become invested in and where they can stretch themselves. The latter might be based on people's **pre-existing interests or skills**, giving them an opportunity to shine and for things to go right for them. For example, if they are interested in or skilled at working with wood, you could concentrate on build a new chicken coop or raised bed.

Getting close to nature

Provide the space and the time for everyday opportunities to connect to plants and the soil, to the animals on the farm, to features like woodland or rivers, to the sounds, smells and 'feel' of nature.

*"When people are too much in their heads, I say: go and weed with your hands instead of with the hoe, because then you are closer to the soil."**

*"So you actually resonate with what is real life. Especially the daily routine with the animals, letting the ducks and geese out early and putting them back to bed in the evening. And that gives structure and a framework that is not rigid, but is alive and where you have encounters."**

Meaningful tasks and activities

The focus should be on tasks which are **'real'** and not contrived, which need to be done. This gives a genuine feeling of accomplishment, where people are contributing to something bigger than themselves.

Tasks which encourage teamwork and connection to others

Working together on **shared tasks** encourages conversation and cooperation around the task, and is a great way to encourage people who have social anxiety or who are lacking in social skills or confidence to 'open up' and connect with others. Participants should be encouraged to work in pairs or in groups around particular tasks, such as weeding a patch of ground or using a piece of equipment together.



** All quotations are from interviews with experienced social farmers carried out as part of the SoFarTEAM Project.*

Which Approach?

Be present, grounded and intuitive

Perhaps even more so than with any other group, farmers need themselves to be in a good space mentally and to be able to park their own concerns and worries. They also need to be quietly sensitive and alert to people's moods or sources of stress and anxiety and to respond accordingly.

Treat people as people

It is key that people are treated as people and not as 'cases'. This includes seeing social farming as a **two-way process** where everyone has something to offer to the farm. Indeed in many cases, particular strengths, such as being gentle and empathetic towards animals or being very diligent, are associated with a particular condition. It also extends to **respecting people** enough raise an issue with their behaviour or conduct on the farm if necessary, whether related to their mental health condition or otherwise. **Avoiding distinctions** in terms of clothing or appearance is also important - everyone should 'come as they are' and it shouldn't be possible to immediately see the differences between farmers, workers and participants.

*"One of the things that social farming can offer is that they don't know the person at the beginning – unlike the service who only know them in one way. Farmers can really have a sense that they can flourish and have potential. If we can keep that in mind, that belief in itself can bring people on." **

Role-Modelling

Time spent on the farm should demonstrate **healthy habits** in terms of routines, eating, movement, posture, sleep etc. It can provide everyday examples and modelling of self-care without overt lecturing or preaching (e.g. having a shower after a day's work, eating a good breakfast to set you up for the day).

Relax and have fun

What may be missing most in many people's lives is simple **fun and enjoyment**, a break from anxieties or excessive rumination. Keeping things light and warm-hearted and doing at least some activities where an element of fun might occur - things like playing with the dog or having a water-fight on a hot day - is important. But it shouldn't be 'forced': **use your judgement** as to what individual participants will be open to and comfortable with. Other opportunities to **gather and to share life's rhythms** with each other - at mealtimes, celebrating someone's birthday or a feast days - should also be part of life on the farm.

*"[important that] they feel that they are not alone in their problems or in their lives and that they are surrounded by the environment of our gardens and the presence of other clients and employees." **

Create a sense of belonging

It is very important that the participants in social farming feel that they are part of the farm life, that they **matter**, that they are not alone, and that they are missed when they are not around.



Possible challenges...and how to manage them

<p>Lack of motivation, enthusiasm or engagement. <i>This is particularly relevant to depressive disorders and can also manifest itself in low energy levels - occasionally due to medication - in complaints about physical symptoms and in poor attendance.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Don't panic about it or take it personally. ⇒ You may need to lower expectations of what will be achieved on any given day. Emphasise the positive, what <i>has</i> been achieved. ⇒ Prepare to adapt and adjust continually to people's moods and energy levels. ⇒ Accept that people can behave in a certain way because they have had to and have developed patterns. But also have faith that people can be gently challenged to change these patterns.
<p>Anxiety and social anxiety <i>People may experience anxiety about this new environment, about situations which may arise, about their own capacity to handle things. These anxieties can be very individual (e.g. fear of eating in front of other people, anxiety about driving to the farm)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Take time to ease people into the social farming experience itself and then also into new elements as they arise (e.g. using new equipment or visiting the neighbours). ⇒ Ensure easy access to the elements which people find comfortable and calming (e.g. rubbing the dog, walking the fields). ⇒ Allow people time and space to themselves if that is what they need. ⇒ In cases of phobias, you should identify triggers on the farm and either remove them, minimise exposure to them or in some cases work with the participant to overcome them, depending which is the best option for the individual.
<p>Over-exuberance or over-activity <i>This can be a challenge in working with people with bi-polar disorder or with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Channelled effectively, bouts of creativity and high energy can lead to high productivity and feelings of accomplishment. ⇒ But a balance must be achieved which ensures the comfort and safety of everyone else on the farm. Someone might need to and work on a different part of the farm or on separate tasks to others to enable them to 'burn off ' energy.
<p>Aggressive or very challenging behaviour <i>In a small number of cases, people may show aggression towards the farmer, staff or other participants.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Remain alert to people's changing moods and respond quickly and calmly to (ideally) prevent escalation. ⇒ Do not take it personally or get angry or challenge the person in return. This behaviour is rarely personal but is a function of the person's mental health disorder. ⇒ In cases of significant aggression, ensuring the safety of everyone on the farm - including ensuring that there is no access to tools or areas of the farm which could cause harm to self or others - is the first priority.