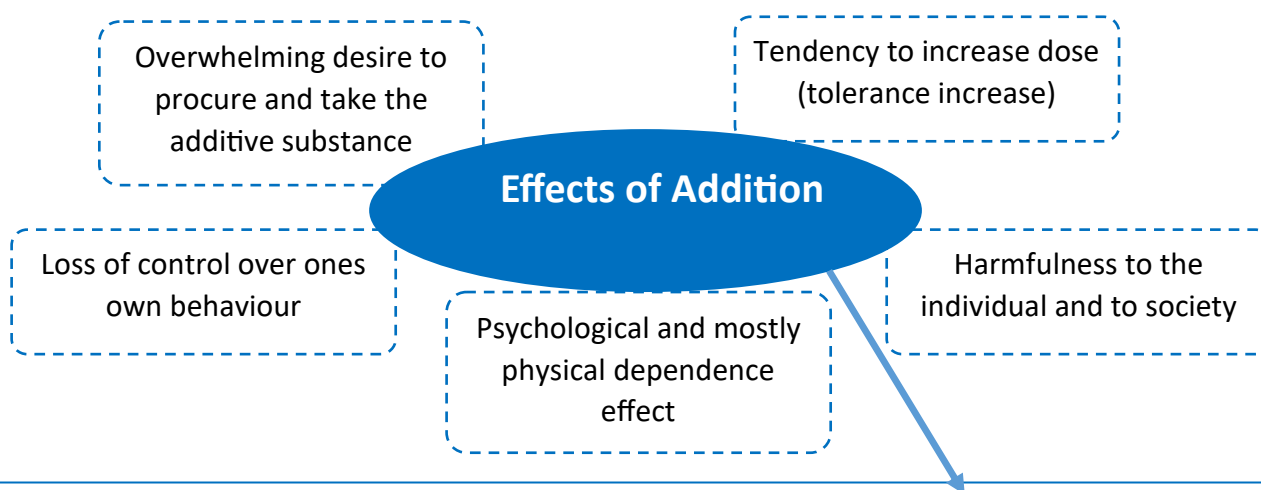


# Social Farming with ...People in Recovery from Addiction



## Background information & understanding

The medical consensus is that **addiction is a disease of the body and brain** and *not* a mental disorder or lifestyle choice. The causes but also the effects of addiction are multiple and complex. Physical (biological, genetic), psychological and social factors all play an important role in the development and maintenance of an addiction. All substance-related addictive disorders cause a **psychological and a physical addiction**, which mutually intensify each other in their interaction. The effects on the person are also multiple, making the recovery journey a complex and challenging one.



Some **further useful information on addiction and its effects** can be found online:

<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/addiction-substance-use-disorders/what-is-a-substance-use-disorder> (from the website of the American Psychiatric Association)

<https://www.drugs.ie/> (drugs and alcohol information and support) **THIS COULD BE MADE COUNTRY SPECIFIC.**

## Particular benefits & outcomes

.....which you can support people in achieving.

- A sense of belonging and ease from being in a safe, non-judgemental family environment.
- Improved mental health and well-being from being in the fresh air, in nature, working with and caring for plants and animals.
- A chance to feel part of a community and a stable social structure
- A break from negative influences, triggers and stressors...
- ...and the opportunity to get into *good* routines and habits in terms of self-care, eating & sleeping.
- The chance to be somewhere where things go right rather than wrong.
- The opportunity to gain occupational and social skills which can be used to access employment, training, volunteer opportunities, etc.
- Increased feelings of self-worth and self-esteem from having made a meaningful contribution.

# Which Activities?

## Focus on clear tasks and 'getting the job done'

Giving people the opportunity to do relatively straight-forward tasks with a beginning, middle and end is key to building confidence and self-belief. It is **empowering** for people to be able to see early on the kind of work they are capable of doing without drugs or alcohol.

## 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. These kind of experiences demonstrate how the **senses can be engaged in 'normal' life** and without the need for additional stimulants.

## Vigorous tasks with a strong element of manual labour

Tasks that enable people to '**work up a sweat**', to get out of their heads by putting their heads down to complete something are all very beneficial. Tasks like weeding, feeding animals and cleaning their sheds, straw and hay harvest, picking vegetables are all valuable.

*"The moment you work with animals, for example, you also get responsibility for them. When you feed calves or muck out pigs. And that by taking responsibility for the animals, you also learn to take responsibility again for one's own life. (...) Regular routine, healthy and honest work, also getting up early, regular daily routine."\**

*"It's good for an addict to have grounding work. So that he really has the dirt under his fingernails, that he is doing an occupation, a physical work in the fresh air is very good for the soul and the recovery of an addict. In comparison, immediately starting a screen job or standing in a cellar and assemble things, that (...) is not so good for a person's soul."\**

## Operating with structure and building responsibility

The 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 manage better and feel better. It also demonstrates in a very natural way - without 'lectures' - the **benefits of having good routines and habits** both on and off the farm.

## Work with animals

Participants will often say that animals do not disappoint them, that they are 'honest'. They also do not judge. Allowing space and time for **real interactions** can be very beneficial. Having **the responsibility to care for animals** consistently and reliably can also greatly improve motivation and self-esteem.



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

# Which Approach?



## Give time for people to get the feel of the place

The farm may be a very different and **unfamiliar environment** in all sorts of ways, including in how people treat one another. Participants may also be unused to the particular rhythms of this kind of setting and may, for example, have a disturbed sleep-wake rhythm and seem quite out of balance. Introduce people to the key elements of the farm, explain the rules and how things are done but **give time and space for the farm to work on people** and for them to find their own way. It is always necessary to take **very small steps** to avoid the risk of relapse.

## No judgement

People with addiction issues face a lot of discrimination and misunderstanding within wider society: the farm should be a space and place where **people are treated as people and given a chance whatever their background or history**. This is not the same as having people doing exactly as they like: indeed you should respect people enough to **raise issues with behaviour if they arise and are significant**.

## Create a sense of belonging

This is a group that may feel particularly disconnected from wider society and often from their own families and friends. They often feel that people don't trust them and are judging them. **Making people feel 'seen', that they have value and are part of something**, that they are missed when they are not around: all of this is very important .

*"For this group, a huge factor is being trusted within a family or home environment. One of the participants said to me after the first day 'isn't it great to be trusted by the 'normals'? He saw himself as not normal because of his addictions, heroin was his drug of choice and he was from the inner city and had no experience of animals bar maybe the horses in the estates. And the farmer just treated him like another person. He was used to be judged because of his addictions and his visible tatoos. And here was someone who didn't judge him and who accepted him."\**

*"When you are working with someone you have a better chat with them than you would otherwise. It might come up a totally unexpected time, it's organic. "*

*But you're not stopping the work to have that conversation so it's easy to switch the conversation away if it's not something you want to discuss. You might say; 'hand us over that tool there' to break up the conversation."*

## Warmth and openness

The bonds of friendship and support which can be built over time are very valuable. In fact you may find that people are much more likely to **open up** in the setting of the farm, where people are simply working together side by side and there is no pressure to do so. A balance always has to be struck between maintaining a kind of professional distance, not getting overly absorbed or involved in the details of people's lives and troubles and on the other hand, being open to making a **genuine connection** which can make a meaningful difference in a person's life. There are no easy answers to how exactly to do this, but it is important to at least be aware of the need for it.

# Challenges in working with this group.....

In working with this group, you may encounter the following **characteristics** which can be often be found amongst **people with addiction issues**:

- High sensitivity
- Insecurity and tendency to be easily offended
- Distrust of others
- Excessive attachment to caregivers and partners
- Desire for self-abandonment
- Uncertainty regarding the meaning of life and their own goals within it
- Unstructured approach to time and poor organisational skills

For people who are actually in **recovery from addiction**, there are some additional distinctive **behaviors and feelings** which you should be aware of:

- Feelings of being between worlds: there may be feelings of loss and disconnection from multiple 'old lives', including the social world which they inhabited before going into recovery
- Feelings of guilt for previous behaviours and the impact of the addiction on family and friends but also wider society
- Ongoing drug withdrawal systems
- Effects of medication which may restrict behaviour and performance on the farm: this may be particularly the case where efforts are still being made to get the correct dose
- Fear of relapse



## Managing these challenges

- Be **understanding of and patient with** the kind of negative behaviours which might be exhibited and with the very real challenges people have had to face.
- You are not a therapist or there to solve all of someone's problems. Your main role is in providing the space, activities and sense of social connection and meaning which will **support a person in their recovery** and in their attempts to build a better life.
- **Avoid triggers and cues** which might jeopardise people's recovery. These include simple things like making sure you don't do tasks with animals which involve needles, or making sure that no alcohol is visible in the farmhouse.
- Be alert to signs of **relapse**. Relapse is usually a process, the *end* point of which is actually using again. (i.e. physical relapse) Before that, signs of emotional and mental relapse including romanticising the past life as an addict, engaging in self-destructive behaviours, withdrawing from pillars of recovery process (including not coming to the farm or being disinterested when there), expressing doubt about the recovery process.
- In these cases, call upon **additional and more specialised services** who can support you and the person more effectively. It is good practice to develop these relationships in any case.
- Know that you can do the best you can but **it will not always 'work'** or work like you hope it will.