

BBC Inside Out – TV Programme about Sydenham Garden (2006)

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Suggs (Programme Presenter): A doctor in this Sydenham health centre realised he had lots of people suffering from depression and other serious mental illnesses. And as they went away with their medication had no real quality of life between their trips back for more pills.

But he found out that just down the road this nature reserve had some spare land, so why not turn it into this?

Here, right in the heart of South London's inner city mayhem, now lies a verdant oasis of calm and sanity, gardened with expert help by people with mental health problems.

Suggs: If you don't mind me asking you, Charles, what brought you here in the first place?

Charles (Co-worker): Well, the doctor recommended it to me.

Suggs: And what had been your problems?

Charles: Hearing voices. Just mainly hearing voices. They call it schizophrenia, but I don't think it's that. It's just the hearing voices.

Aine (Co-worker): Well, I have suffered from bipolar disorder since I was 23. It used to be called manic depression. You get very depressed, where you can't do anything, you're not able to do the simple tasks like do your housework or go shopping or look after the children.

Stephen M (Co-worker): I was like a zombie. I couldn't care about life, I couldn't care about anybody. I couldn't measure people, I was scared. I would walk away, I wouldn't want to know about it. I'm doing gardening now, 5 days a week.

Suggs: So how long have you been involved in this project, Nick?

Nick Fry (Former Garden Manager at Sydenham Garden): I've been here for about a year and a half now. Before this, I worked at a community garden. Coincidentally, I was working with people with mental health problems, so that's sort of how I transgressed into this as well.

Suggs: So you've, very much first hand, seen the benefits of a project like this for people with mental health issues

Nick Fry: Absolutely, I think whether you've got a mental health issue or not, you can't beat the fact that you're working outdoors in the fresh air, you're getting to meet new people, you're doing physical exercise and there's nothing better than that for your health.

With a lot of people, they are very nervous when they first come here because it's a completely new venue for them.

For a lot of people, just venturing outside their house is a difficult thing in itself. But once they get here, they actually find there are lots of friendly faces. There are other people with similar difficulties to themselves, and very soon they actually do start to relax.

Stephen P (Co-worker): I had some problems at work. I let work get on top of me and ended up having to go and ask for some help from my doctor. I had very low self-esteem, very negative about things. Didn't have much of an optimistic outlook on life. As a result of that, eventually I lost my job and I was at a bit of a loose end.

Suggs: So have you found this a specific help to address some of those problems?

Stephen P: Yes, it has. It's always quite good to do physical work if you've had depression. It's quite helpful. I'm no expert, but it changes the chemical levels. It's known to have an effect on your health. Plus being outside. I'm a lot better now, thanks.

Suggs: This leafy sanctuary has brought a real sense of purpose back into the lives of many of its gardeners, but none of it would be possible without one man's vision, Dr Jim Sikorski.

Dr Jim Sikorski (Chair & Founder): What I was finding and what other people in the practice were finding was that there wasn't any activity for people with mental health problems to do between seeing their doctors, seeing their nurses.

So there were big gaps in their lives, they were quite isolated, socially isolated, lacking in friends, lacking in community and feeling often that there was little purpose in their lives.

I think gardening has a particular role to play in helping people recover, recover their lives, people working quietly and gently in the outdoors with earth, and achieving results when they do that is actually quite a healing thing.

What happens over a period of several months, maybe a year or so, is that people do pick up confidence. They're able to face you, look at you straight and have a conversation. They're able to sort of offer themselves as useful members of a group when they could have never imagined doing that before.

So it's self-esteem, it's self-confidence, it's the ability to make relationships and we've seen all those in the 18 months that we've been going.

Suggs: One young man's new found confidence is a real tribute to this garden. His mental illness was a hardly surprising manifestation of a horrific series of events.

Grant (Co-worker): I went out about four times in 5 years and got mugged every time. I had a gun put to my head and knife put to my throat.

Suggs: You're obviously living in a pretty rough area

Grant: It's not far from here, but it's not that good around there. Lots of shootings and things. I was just sitting inside the house the whole time. I didn't go out for 3 years. I felt like committing suicide. I just didn't want to be around at all.

Suggs: But you're obviously very assured here. This is somewhere where you feel comfortable?

Grant: Yes, because you come down here, it gets you out and you feel like you're achieving something. You see the work coming along. I feel like I'm building myself up. I feel a lot more confident in myself. I feel like I can talk to people a lot more. Just integrating with people and that. It feels a lot better, yeah.

Suggs: And what does the future hold for Grant?

Grant: Wow, that's a question. Not sure yet, not sure. I'm hopefully going to start a plumbing course soon. I've got to go for an interview Friday coming, so hopefully everything will go well. I'll have a job and sort myself out a bit more.

Stephen P (Co-worker): I'm starting work next month as a police community support officer. I think the experiences I've had of having a problem and having it dealt with, coming here will help equip me for that job.

Charles (Co-worker): I'm learning landscape gardening and now I've got things to do.

Suggs: And does this help the voices go away?

Charles: To go away, yeah

Suggs: Nice one

Suggs: This garden, carefully tended by its gardeners, feels like a gorgeous piece of sanity in a sometimes-insane world. And long may it continue, say I!