

‘My Nature’ – an effective tool for residential care

Venturing into the great outdoors is good for health and wellbeing, but access to green spaces can be difficult for older people with dementia in care homes. **Wendy Brewin, Noreen Orr and Ruth Garside** describe the “My Nature” activities toolkit designed to solve the problem

Wendy Brewin is creative spaces project manager at the Sensory Trust, Noreen Orr is research fellow at the NIHR Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (South West), University of Exeter, and Ruth Garside is senior lecturer at the University of Exeter Medical School

Experiencing nature is increasingly recognised as having a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of older people living in care homes (Whear *et al* 2014). Studies have shown that the benefits of engaging with nature for older people are linked to the pleasure and enjoyment derived from viewing nature, as well as “being and doing” in nature (Orr *et al* 2016). Care home residents, including those with dementia, have expressed their appreciation of *being* outdoors in the care home garden, away from the restrictions of being inside and finding opportunities for social interactions as well as places of calm and tranquillity (Raske 2010). The green environment of a care home – even a view of the garden – can give a sense of freedom and independence, acting as an antidote to the perceived loss of autonomy experienced by many residents.

While evidence indicates the benefits of using care home gardens, actual time spent in nature is low (see Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland 2013). Barriers to access include poor physical and mental health, lack of interest and initiative, loss of confidence, weather, limited staff resources, attitudes and risk aversion.

Staff efforts to minimise risk can mean that residents find doors to the garden are closed or

locked to prevent them going out by themselves (Whear *et al* 2014). Staff may feel that they lack “green fingers” and find it challenging and time-consuming to generate nature-based or garden activities for residents (Lovering *et al* 2002).

Developing “My Nature”

Sensory Trust and the University of Exeter collaborated on developing My Nature, an evidence-based training toolkit to help care staff identify ways in which nature can not only play a role in a resident’s care plan but also support them in their work. The toolkit was born from a desire to provide research evidence in a user-friendly format that encourages staff and management to read and act on it.

There are three main elements to My Nature, which is based on the premise that connections with nature are vital to health and wellbeing:

- *Evidence booklets:* book 1 contains research evidence to show how nature improves health and wellbeing and to support potential funding applications for improving outdoor spaces; book 2 contains the main points from research plus eight nature-based activities putting the evidence into practice.
- *Nature-based activities:* details on “how to do” the activities, which are designed for residents with a range of interest and ability and have names like Nature Palettes, Nature Mapping, Hey Pesto!, Tea Tasting, Painting by Nature, Birds’ Nests and Nature Spotting (spotter cards for birds, butterflies and bugs).
- *Wall chart:* easy access information on timings, benefits, sensory engagement and related interests/hobbies to help find appropriate activities for individuals.

There is guidance to help care staff get started and build their confidence in running activities and adapting each to the needs of individuals, based on their existing knowledge of people’s personalities, interests and needs. We piloted and then evaluated My Nature to see how far it could achieve the health and wellbeing gains that access to nature can provide.



Evidence from the My Nature activities materials

Piloting My Nature

Care homes

Two care homes in Cornwall participated in the pilot, although we have given them fictitious names for the purposes of reporting our findings. "Summerlands" is in an urban location with 43 residents and "Holly Hill" is in a rural location with 16 residents.

Both homes use their gardens and were keen to learn how to do more with nature-based activities, particularly by using nature indoors to support residents with reduced access to the gardens. My Nature was piloted for one month in the two homes.

Workshops

At the start of the pilot we held two workshops at each care home. Led by Sensory Trust, these demonstrated the nature-based activities and were accompanied by an explanation of how the activities reflected the evidence. At Summerlands, we worked with five residents, two members of staff and two health and social care students on placement, while at Holly Hill we worked with eight residents, four members of staff and two family members.

We varied the format of the workshops: in the first we introduced the evidence before doing the activities and, in the second, we did the activities and then highlighted key points from the research evidence. We found that putting the activities first worked best as the residents could relate better to the evidence having just experienced their own connections with nature. We also shared evidence reporting older people's experiences of connecting with nature in their own words as we felt this would help residents grasp the message.



Activities

Activities demonstrated in the workshops included:

- *Nature Palettes*: involves finding things in nature (flowers, leaves, twigs, etc) and sticking them to a palette. Sensory Trust has adapted this activity to engage people with various levels of ability, enabling them to find the natural objects that they connect to outdoors.
- *Painting by Nature*: uses nature to make paint brushes and other painting tools to create landscapes of abstract shapes, textures and colours. People can connect with nature, use it as a tool and explore how natural materials respond to their movements. ➤

Above left: map drawing from Nature Mapping. Above right: Nature Palettes are created from nature



Holly Hill resident enjoys a taste of Hey Pesto!

Elements arranged for the tea tasting activity



References

- Bartlett R (2007) 'You can get in alright but you can't get out': Social exclusion and men with dementia in nursing homes: insights from a single case study. *Quality in Ageing – Policy, practice and research* 8(2) 16-26.
- Lovering M, Cott C, Wells D, Taylor J, Wells L (2002) A study of a secure garden in the care of people with Alzheimer's disease. *Canadian Journal of Aging* 21(3) 717-427.
- Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland (2013) *Dignity and respect: dementia continuing care visits*. Edinburgh: Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland.
- Orr N, Wagstaffe A, Briscoe S, Garside R (2016) How do older people describe their sensory experiences of the natural world? A systematic review of the qualitative evidence. *BMC Geriatrics* 16 116.
- Raske M (2010) Nursing home quality of life: study of an enabling garden. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* 53 (4) 336–51.
- Whear R, Coon JT, Bethel A, Abbott R *et al* (2014) What is the impact of using outdoor spaces such as gardens on the physical and mental wellbeing of those with dementia? A systematic review of quantitative and qualitative evidence. *JAMDA* 15 (10) 697–705.

• *Tea Tasting Party and Hey Pesto!*: created so that care homes are encouraged to plant herbs and bring residents into contact with edible plants. Tea Tasting Party involves making different teas from mint, sage and thyme, and Hey Pesto! enables residents to taste home-made basil, mint and cheese and chive-flavoured pestos.

In our evaluation we conducted four two-hour observation sessions, collecting data on how My Nature activities were used with residents at Summerlands and Holly Hill. In particular, we looked at the Painting by Nature, Tea Tasting, Nature Mapping and Nature Palettes activities. Additionally, we carried out seven interviews, involving the owner of one of the care homes and two managers at the other, as well as the activities coordinators, a gardener and care staff.

Our key findings have been grouped into themes and focus on what worked for residents and what worked for staff. We also unearthed several challenges from our data, relating to gender, care home culture and residents living with dementia.

What worked for residents?

Getting out into the garden

My Nature activities, particularly Nature Mapping and Nature Palettes, succeeded in enticing residents to go out into the gardens. During one session, we accompanied a resident on a combined Nature Palettes/Nature Mapping activity in the garden and she talked about how she had had a lovely garden which she and her husband had worked on together. She reminisced about taking flowers from the convent to the church as a young girl, while seeing ivy brought back memories of her garden. At the end she said she was "really pleased" with her nature palette and remarked "I'm glad that I came outside."

Stimulating interaction

All the activities generated conversation between residents and between residents, staff and family members. For example, in the Tea Tasting activity bunches of herbs, collected from the garden, were passed around to each resident to touch and smell and comment on their likes and dislikes.

Summerlands' activities coordinator generated conversation with residents, discussing food matches with specific herbs and the meaning of herbs. As the activity progressed one resident reminisced about the "performance" or "ritual" of making a cup of tea when she was young and said that "it was a long time before she was allowed to make tea" (by her mother).

Residents also talked about the rationing of tea during the second world war. In the words of the Holly Hill gardener:

It gives them something... they can link back to, but can also be talked about by carers, and it gets the conversation going, and it's that interaction. So, it's all about interaction, which is the important bit.

Enjoyment and pleasure

Residents showed pleasure and enjoyment participating in the activities, both while doing them and in what was created. A display produced from the Nature Palettes activity at Summerlands lent substance to a point made by the manager:

I think they had something at the end of it... and I always think...that's important that there's an end result.

But the pleasure in doing the activities was not marred by pressure to create a "masterpiece" as noted by the Summerlands' deputy manager, who said of the Painting by Nature activity: "Anybody can paint with any type of material...And there's a lady... she's got a wall display of painting...She said 'I probably wouldn't be as good as I was back then' and then I explained this way of painting and she said she would give it a go."

For some residents, particularly those with dementia, the pleasure was "in the moment," as this quote from the Holly Hill owner implies:

In that moment that they were making it [a nature palette], they really, really, really liked it. The same with the pesto. No one will remember that now. But in that moment when they made it and everyone was tasting, they were engaged in that activity.

What worked for staff?

Adaptability

The activities proved to be adaptable in the different contexts of the two care homes. Each could be adapted to suit a resident's capabilities, particularly important for people with dementia as explained by Holly Hill's activities coordinator in terms of "seeing what they're capable of and then trying to find things that can fit into what they can accomplish."

One staff member believed that it was important to differentiate between the stages of dementia and adapt the activities to match the resident's attention span. In later stage dementia there was a premium on brevity "because they lose interest

quite quickly, just a little five, ten minute one-to-one" as the staff member at Holly Hill put it.

Holly Hill's activities co-ordinator explained how she adapted the bird and butterfly spotter cards by laminating the pictures and putting them in the garden so that they acted as talking points for residents and care staff. The gardener noted that making some of the activities work for residents with dementia meant "you've nearly got to strip them [the activities] down to the real basic level."

That the activities could be done outdoors or indoors offered flexibility in that residents who were mobile and willing to go outside could help to bring nature indoors for residents with less mobility. All the activities could be brought inside during bad weather.

Planned and person-centred

Activities could be planned in advance, which was particularly appreciated by the Summerlands activities coordinator who said that while being outside in nature had much to commend it, it was impractical in inclement weather. In that case, the coordinator said, "you need an activity that you can plan to do."

Staff had to be flexible when planning the activities and particularly when doing them with residents with dementia. As the gardener at Holly Hill put it:

And the fact that you've unpredictability, you don't know who's up in their room, who's having a walkabout day.... You know what you want to do, you think you know how you're going to do it...you have a pretty good idea of where you're ending up, but the fact that the whole process could be very unpredictable.... It's not a straight...fluid exercise from start to finish.

My Nature was used with the residents in a person-centred way. Summerlands' activities coordinator discussed how she had a personal profile for each resident outlining their likes and dislikes, history, occupations and interests which helped her plan which activities would work for whom.

A person-centred approach also involved assessing how residents were on the day, as described by the Holly Hill activities coordinator: *Well, the best way is just to come in, have a cup, make a cup of tea, and just engage in the atmosphere to see. Maybe someone's having a really bad day.*

Challenges encountered

Gender

In neither care home did the activities appear to appeal to male residents. Two took part in Nature Mapping and another in Painting by Nature and Hey Pesto! At Summerlands, the activities coordinator noted that the men were interested in practical aspects of gardening like digging up bulbs: "That's a normal gardening activity, rather than something different to do in the garden." That this male preference could be a way of "maintaining masculinity" in a "woman's world" (Bartlett 2007) was suggested by Holly Hill's owner, who believed that activities with a purpose such as "sweeping up leaves and feeling that

they're doing something helpful" were important for giving residents a feeling of self-worth.

Care home culture

The challenge for care home staff using My Nature was that their time was devoted to dealing with the physical needs of residents. At Summerlands, the manager noted the "lack of time that the care staff have because...their work is very task-orientated, so they never stop." No sooner had one task been completed than it was time for another: "I think I've only known a few times where we've been really quiet, that they've been able to take people out," the manager said. In this situation, management regarded an activities coordinator as key to implementing the activities.

Yet it was clear from the activities coordinator that she relied on care staff support for preparing residents to join an activity. It took considerable time to bring residents together for an activity, with most needing help because of their impaired mobility. If the activity was due to start at 2.30, the coordinator explained:

There is a logistical aspect...I think "Right, at ten to two, I need to start with that person, this person and this person, which means at one o'clock I have to tell the carers that this person will need personal assistance, personal care...." There isn't much spontaneity from the resident's point of view, to going outside for a planned activity.

Residents with dementia

Care home staff discussed the challenge of doing My Nature activities with residents, often with fairly advanced dementia. For example, both activity coordinators described difficulties with residents' understanding; as the Holly Hill coordinator said:

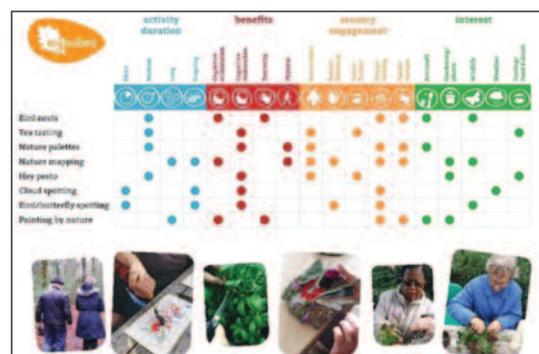
It's a bit difficult to say, 'This is what we're going to do', because not everyone's understood what you've said. And then, 'This is how we're going to do it.' They might not have the capability to do it. And then their question is, even the people that can, 'But why?'

What's next?

My Nature will be incorporated into the Sensory Trust's nature-based training programme for residential care practitioners, helping them to grasp the important role nature can play in supporting quality of life among residents. Care staff and management will be encouraged to see the value of nature and how it can add value to their own roles as care providers. ■

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the residents and care homes who participated in the pilot study. Our thanks to colleagues who worked with us in developing My Nature: Stuart Spurring, Victoria Hutchinson, Ellie Robinson Carter at Sensory Trust, and Kath Maguire, Rebecca Whear and Jo Thompson Coon at the University of Exeter. My Nature: A Training Toolkit was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Award Fund and supported by the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) CLAHRC South West Peninsula and the European Centre for the Environment and Human Health, University of Exeter Medical School.



My Nature wall chart