



Factsheet 44

Updated on 14 May 2021

Mental Health Awareness: Supporting Patients to Protect their Mental Health

This factsheet has been designed for use by healthcare professionals only.

This week (10th - 16th May) is Mental Health Awareness Week. One in four adults in the UK will experience mental health issues at some point in their lives¹ and individuals with respiratory conditions may be at greater risk of anxiety and depression. This can be due to a number of factors, such as:

- finding it harder to do the same activities they did before they became ill
- worrying about not being able to breathe, particularly when exercising or socialising
- feeling frustrated about reliance on regular medical treatment and / or support from others
- worrying about the future with their lung condition²

The feelings associated with poor mental health can affect people's abilities to self-manage their respiratory symptoms, which in turn can lead to flare ups that further debilitate the individual's daily life. Supporting patients to look after their mental wellbeing is therefore key to ensuring that respiratory symptoms are well-controlled.

The focus of this year's Mental Health Awareness campaign is Nature. This factsheet will explore the role of nature in improving mental wellbeing and the strategies that we, and our patients, can use to maximise our mental health.

Why Nature?

During lockdown, nature has taken on a more significant role in our lives: with limited leisure options, going for walks and enjoying the outdoors became not just a hobby but a coping strategy. It is important that as restrictions lift, and we return to our 'normal' lives, that we do not lose sight of the benefits nature can offer. As a species, humans have been entrenched in the natural world from our very inception – whatever our beliefs about the origins of the world, it seems reasonable to accept that nature came first, and human life subsequently thrived in these organic surroundings. It has only been for relatively recent generations that urbanisation has become 'the norm' and so we can begin to understand why spending time in the natural world can be so restorative: we are, literally, going back to our roots.



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The [Mental Health Foundation](#) suggests we try, and encourage patients to try, to do the following:

- **Experience nature:** take time to recognise and grow your connection with nature during the week. Take a moment to notice and celebrate nature in your daily life. You might be surprised by what you notice!
- **Share nature:** Take a photo, video or sound recording and share the connections you have made during the week, to inspire others. During Mental Health Awareness Week, join the online discussion on how you are connecting with nature by using the hashtags #ConnectWithNature #MentalHealthAwarenessWeek
- **Talk about nature:** use our tips, school packs, research and policy guides to discuss in your family, school, workplace and community how you can help encourage people to find new ways to connect with nature in your local environment.³

To maximise the mental health benefits of time spent enjoying nature, it can be worth discussing **mindfulness** techniques with patients. Experiencing the natural world in a mindful way can help individuals who are suffering poor physical health to focus their attention away from their respiratory symptoms and appreciate the small joys in their surroundings.

Patients with physical limitations

It can be difficult for patients with severe respiratory symptoms to spend time in the outside world. As healthcare professionals we need to ensure that the mental wellbeing benefits of nature are not experienced at the detriment of an individual's physical health; it is therefore important to support people to plan leisure activities that are safe and appropriate to their needs.

The Mental Health Foundation suggest exploring the following ideas with individuals who may be affected by limited mobility or are shielding:

- **Find nature wherever you are.** Even in urban communities, there are likely to be gardens, a local park, or even a nearby beach to sit and enjoy being outdoors.
- **Bring nature to you.** For individuals who may be housebound or isolating, encourage them to bring plants or natural objects into their homes. Even watching documentaries or films can be a way of experiencing and reflecting on nature.

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- **Exercise in nature.** For those who are able to, encourage walking or cycling rather than going to the gym or driving to work. Even trying a new route for a regular journey can be an opportunity to enjoy new sights and sounds.
- **Combine nature with creativity.** Drawing or painting, taking photographs, writing poetry, enjoying outdoor dance or yoga classes – these are all ways to incorporate elements of nature into hobbies and leisure activities.
- **Protect nature.** Taking time to recycle and reuse materials, or car sharing when possible to reduce air pollution, can create positive feelings of 'giving back'.

Mental Health and Covid-19

The pandemic has had a significant impact on mental health and some individuals will require a greater level of support than is discussed here. [Factsheet 2](#) and [Factsheet 21](#) offer further advice on supporting patients with respiratory conditions to protect their mental health.

You may also find it useful to signpost individuals to the following websites and resources:

- [Samaritans](#)
- [Rethink Mental Illness](#)
- [Mind](#)
- [NHS Choices](#)
- [The Mix \(Support for Under 25s\)](#)
- [Young Minds' parent helpline](#)

Finally, this week's Podcast 13 looks at some of the symptoms of anxiety and depression, and explores how individuals can use the NHS Five Steps to Mental Wellbeing to reduce their risk of experiencing poor mental health.

References:

¹NHS, 2021, <https://www.england.nhs.uk/mental-health/>

²Adapted from Breathe, 2020, <https://breathe.ersjournals.com/content/16/2/162ELF>

³Mental Health Foundation, 2021, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/campaigns/mental-health-awareness-week/why-nature>