

Benefits in brief

Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that knitting and stitching have the following effects ...

- **Meditation** – knitters who also meditate say the states of mind are similar. The rhythmic repetitive movements induce a form of meditation enabling knitters and stitchers to experience the benefits of Mindfulness. The automatic nature of the tasks also enables knitters and stitchers to 'zone out' or 'tune out' so they can escape into the sanctuary of a quiet mind, which gives the mind a break. It opens up the benefits of meditation to those who may otherwise find it difficult.
- **Relaxation** – difficult to learn for those who need it the most. Providing a project is within your capabilities, relaxation occurs as a natural side effect of knitting and stitching. People report a feeling of instantaneous calm. Highly effective for stress/anxiety/phobia management. Guilt at enforced rest periods is eased – people report not 'feeling lazy' or being seen as 'sitting doing nothing'. It takes the frustration out of pacing when they can do something in the rest periods.
- **Thought processes** – thoughts are slowed down, brought under control enabling them to be processed. Some report being able to think through issues that they would normally find too traumatic. ME and MS sufferers report thoughts 'clearing', 'brain fog' improving. Post traumatic stress sufferers report improvement.
- **Distraction** – even those on morphine based medication claim to be able to 'block out' pain. This gives a person the feeling of control, which can significantly change their outlook on life. Planning projects occupies the mind in between.
- **Addiction** – occupying the hands and mind, the addictiveness of knitting and stitching can successfully replace destructive addictions. Used to quit smoking, binge eating, alcohol, drug addiction, to lose weight and prevent self harm. It also encourages people to look forward to their next project - important for those with suicidal thoughts.
- **Attitudes** – negative thought cycles and demotivation pose a huge barrier in treating those with long-term medical conditions. Knitting and stitching encourage more positive, outward thinking, motivated thought processes. People begin looking forward to tomorrow. Self esteem, confidence, feelings of self worth are raised and a sense of identity is regained. This appears to be 'opening the door' to trying other things.
- **Mood** – a project with psychologists from Cardiff University at the Stitch and Craft Show, March 2006 showed that knitters and stitchers reported a significant improvement in mood during and after knitting or stitching. People report feeling happy when they knit or stitch and when they think about it. On days when they are unable to knit or stitch, planning projects and going through the motions in their minds makes them feel happy too.
- **Behaviour** – forgotten skills such as forward planning and goal setting are reawakened. Structure and purpose are regained and a person's world opens up. The calming effect has been used successfully to improve disruptive behaviour, anxiety, panic and agoraphobia.
- **Positive emotions** – such as excitement, anticipation, pride, pleasure and sense of achievement are reawakened and enjoyed. This appears to be breaking negative cycles.
- **Ruminating cycles** – in those suffering from depression and chronic pain may be broken, this includes disruptive thought cycles before sleep. A pilot project is currently being run by Cardiff University.
- **Memory** – those who knit and stitch to spoken tapes report being able to retain the information.
- **Concentration** – people report improved concentration. Teachers who use knitting and stitching in classrooms report concentration and willingness to cooperate and learn improves significantly.
- **Dyslexia and dyspraxia** – reports of knitting helping to find structure, organisation and improving coordination. Thought processes become more organised, too.
- **Communication** – people listen and communicate differently when knitting in a group. Conversations become intimate quickly even with strangers. Normal barriers, prejudices and criticism are lowered. This has implications for future therapy particularly with disruptive teenagers and those who find it difficult to talk. It also gives someone suffering from long-term illness and pain something else to talk about.

- **Hand exercise** – a lady with cerebral palsy had a 50% increase in hand function through cross stitching enabling her to hold a mug of tea and type. Many report being able to maintain hand function and mobility as well as improving feelings of stiffness in conditions such as rheumatoid and osteo arthritis, fibromyalgia, ME and MS.
- **Sense of community and belonging** – this is improved. Feeling included in knitting and stitching groups whether in face-to-face groups or via the internet maintains and improves social confidence. Internet groups and forums work well because they put the individual totally in control at the click of a mouse. Personal appearance, skin colour, disability, weight issues are put to the background, and are unseen unless the individual chooses to talk about them.
- **Universal tools** – they cut across class, culture, intelligence, education and language. No artistic skills or messy preparation is needed. They're also easy to learn from pictures and affordable, so good for occupying those with learning disabilities. Many report their first project as a turning point in their lives because suddenly they find something they can do and do well and be praised for it.
- **Creativity** – described by some as being necessary for a balanced life. Knitting and stitching projects enable people who don't consider themselves 'artistic' to be creative.
- **Sensory input** – people report colour as 'kick starting' the brain. Colour often evokes memories. Different textures are important too, with many reporting that simply looking at their yarn and stroking it can make them feel either happy, calm or excited by a future project.
- **Highly portable** – can be done in bed, hospital, at night when sleep is difficult, on long journeys in the workplace or in school. Great for carers who need to pick up and drop projects on demand and sit up at night. The portability of knitting and stitching means the benefits above can be enjoyed any place, any time.

- **Distraction** – MRI scans show that distraction is one of the most powerful analgesics we know of and that brain centres responsible for releasing the body's natural opioids are stimulated during distraction.
- **Meditation** – knitting evokes the relaxation response and all its benefits – Dr Herbert Benson of the Mind Body Institute. Daily Mindfulness can change the brain and immune system function in positive ways in just eight weeks - Neuroscientist, Professor Richard Davidson, University of Wisconsin.
- **Chemical release** – research on animals has shown that repetitive movement enhances the release of serotonin - Dr Barry Jacobs, Princetown University.
- **Storing and encoding images** – performing a repetitive visuo-spatial task during a traumatic event significantly reduces the number of flashbacks - Dr Emily Holmes, University College London 2002.
- **Neural pathways** – are neural pathways opened up by the repetitive movement and what are the implications? MS, ME and stroke sufferers report an improvement in cognition and memory. Recent work in neurogenesis suggests that learning in motor areas could have a knock on effect in areas of cognition and memory.
- **Eye movements** – sideways eye movements lower arousal levels and are calming. Used successfully in EMDR therapy for post traumatic stress and schizophrenia. Sideways eye movements also improve memory, it's thought by improving communication between the cerebral hemispheres - Dr Andrew Parker, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2007.
- **The Mind's Eye** – is this being reawakened in those with depression by visualising the finished project? Can you plan forward without a mind's eye and is it essential to enable people to move forward?
- **Memory** – multi sensorial events are retained in the memory more readily. EMDR is thought to mimic REM sleep and research has shown that REM sleep helps to transfer information into the long-term memory. Playing a musical instrument improves verbal memory – could knitting have the same effect – reading a pattern then coordinating both hands to 'play' the instructions? A study of Buddhist monks found that skills developed during meditation sharpened the brain's ability to focus on one thing and remember it. Could the bilateral activity of knitting be improving communication between the left and right side of the brain to improve memory?