

The Jigsaw Pieces

We have collected a large amount of anecdotal evidence from knitters and stitchers across the world. Each story gives us a clue. Some are dramatic, most are very moving.

We now have a number of pieces of a large jigsaw that we need to fit together, to enable us to get to the heart of what is really happening when you knit or stitch.

This document lays out those jigsaw pieces we have and draws together some of the links we've made. Have a browse through and let us know what you think by emailing Betsan@stitchlinks.com.

NB: When we refer to "stitchers", in this context we mean both knitters and stitchers.

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The physical effects

The anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that knitting and stitching are helping people with physical problems such as –

- **Pain** – including severe pain, hand pain, neck pain and that arising from fibromyalgia.
- **Depression** – including severe depression, suicidal thoughts, post natal.
- **Mental illness** – including complete breakdown, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder.
- **Stress, anxiety, panic attacks, phobia and anger** – including managing asthma.
- **Post Traumatic Stress**
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder**
- **Parkinsonian tremor** – particularly of the hand.
- **Long-term illness**
- **Quitting addictive behaviour** – they occupy the mind and hands. Effective for smoking, over/ binge eating, alcohol abuse, self harm, drugs including Class A.
- **Great hand exercise** – people will do it willingly for hours on end.
- **Chemotherapy** – takes the mind off unpleasant side effects.
- **Short term memory problems**
- **Multiple Sclerosis** – including helping with hand eye coordination, hand function, memory and concentration.
- **ME** – including helping to clear ‘brain fog’.
- **Fibromyalgia** – including hand and arm pain and stiffness. Plus clearing of thoughts and ‘brain fog’.
- **Insomnia and sleep disorders** – one narcoleptic reported knitting helps her stay awake.
- **Stroke** – improvement in function, coordination and short term memory
- **Nausea** – in pregnancy and chemotherapy.
- **Dementia**
- **Psychological trauma** following childhood abuse.
- **Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome**
- **Crohn’s disease**
- **Pregnancy / pre eclampsia** – enables sufferers to be productive in enforced rest periods.
- **Carpal tunnel**
- **Hand eye coordination**
- **Migraine** – as long as this is not severe.
- **Grief and bereavement**
- **Irritable bowel**
- **Muscular dystrophy**
- **Tinnitus**
- **High blood pressure**
- **Hyperactive and disruptive behaviour** in children and teenagers including ADHD.
- **Dyslexia and dyspraxia** – improves coordination, but also helps to organise thought processes

Behavioural and social effects

From our anecdotal evidence we've identified **four issues as being key** to how successful people are in managing life's normal downs as well as illness and trauma. These are –

- **Loneliness/social isolation**
- **Self esteem**
- **Stress/anxiety/worry**
- **An unoccupied mind free to ruminate**

The anecdotal evidence strongly suggest knitting and stitching deal with these issues.

- **Provide vital social contact** – deal with the isolation that many experience, for example as a result of illness, inner city life or moving to a new area. It's a great way to make friends.
- **Can be done in groups** – either real or virtual. These enhance the benefits and gives a sense of belonging.
- **Raise self esteem** – by creating an end product.
- **Raise self worth** – those with long-term illness feel they can contribute to society once more by stitching for charity, making gifts etc. One knitter said she felt 'valid' not 'in-valid' once more. Another said she could be a 'real mum'. They find they can actually do something and do it well.
- **Give identity back** – the stitcher regains a sense of identity.
- **Enable achievement** – the sense of achievement is huge when a project is finished.
- **Raise confidence** – improve confidence and makes it easier to talk to strangers who stitch.
- **Increase independence** – give the housebound and the learning disabled a sense of independence. Sometimes stitching is the only independent activity a person can do.
- **Calm** – people report a feeling of great calm. This can be dramatic and instantaneous.
- **Change attitudes** – people become more positive, start looking forwards; they experience excitement and anticipation. Knitting and stitching teach forgotten emotions. Self esteem is raised and people want to make contact with like minded people. They start to live a fuller life despite any condition they may have. The most frequently used sentence in emails and letters is "Now I look forward to tomorrow."
- **Change mood** – knitters and stitchers report a significant improvement in mood when knitting and stitching.
- **Change behaviour** – people make contact with the outside world and start planning, setting goals, looking forward. It teaches forgotten skills. Knitters and stitchers find they can plan and control something in their lives – it may be the only thing they can plan the outcome of.
- **Facilitate learning** – people report being able to take in and retain spoken information easily whilst knitting and cross stitching.
- **Facilitate listening and responding** – people report that they listen and respond less critically – conversations are more intimate and open. Communication is improved.
- **Help in bereavement and divorce** – help people deal with these. A funeral director told us she thought women instinctively needed to be creative in times of grief.
- **Helps with the problems of others** – people say knitting and stitching help them deal with traumas and problems happening to loved ones and within the family.

What could be causing these changes? – Our ideas so far

- **Rhythmic repetitive movements** – inducing meditation, calm, possibly enhancing serotonin release and opening new neural pathways.
- **Serotonin release** – experiments in animals show that repetitive movements enhance the release of serotonin.
- **Meditation** – daydreaming/zoning out – enables the stitcher to escape into the sanctuary of a quiet mind. Also **mindfulness** – Buddhists who knit describe entering a similar state of mind to Mindfulness. One knitter was connected to an EEG machine whilst knitting, meditating and practising Yoga - the Alpha (calming) waves were stronger whilst knitting.
- **Automatic nature of the tasks** – occupying some areas of the brain, freeing up others.
- **Breaking of ruminating cycles** – due to the automaticity pushing out automatic negative thought cycles.
- **Relaxation** – facilitation of relaxation even in those who find it difficult.
- **Distraction** – the brain's attention is diverted away from troubling thoughts and pain. It's a powerful analgesic and a technique difficult to teach.
- **Eye scanning** – is there a link with the benefits of Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing therapy? Eye scanning is known to have a calming effect, lower arousal levels and improve memory.
- **Opening of new neural pathways** – Stroke, ME and MS patients report improved cognitive function.
- **Improvement of links between the right and left brain** – scans of musicians' brains show this is the case. Is knitting a similar activity and could knitting have the same effect?
- **Colour** – mentioned by many as 'kick starting' the brain on the road out of depression.
- **Texture** – mentioned by many. Making the tasks multi-sensorial, helping when depression 'desensitises' the body.
- **Social contact** – increases particularly if the stitcher joins a group. Opens up the world.
- **Giving back purpose, structure, control**
- **Raising confidence and self esteem** – motivates the stitcher to do other things.
- **Teaching valuable life skills** which can be transferred to other areas of life – planning, goal setting, perseverance, patience.
- **Teaching skills** such as meditation, relaxation and distraction – enabling the benefits to be available to a wider population.
- **Instinct** – do they fulfil a basic instinct? Is the desire to be creative instinctive in situations of distress (particularly for women)?
- **Hand movement** – hand function has played a big part in our evolution. The hand has a large area of representation in the brain. Does using your hands for a specific task every day, alter this somehow?
- **Occupying people** with something they enjoy.
- **Anticipation of reward** – is the brain's reward system involved somehow?
- **Visualisation** – do these crafts re-awaken this skill in depressed people? Stitchers are constantly referring to pictures of the finished article, visualising them and the reactions of others at the end product, so does this re-awaken The Mind's Eye?
- **Some other?**

Other benefits of knitting and stitching

Absorbing hobbies you enjoy will have beneficial effects.

However, the anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that knitting and cross stitching have additional benefits.

In the main they are also effective regardless of a person's physical, mental or artistic ability. Plus they have the huge advantage of being the ultimate portable tool for dealing with problems any time, anywhere. For this reason they're great tools for carers, teachers, for stress management and team building in industry and for everyone wishing to find balance in life as well as those managing long-term medical conditions.

- **They're a universal tool** – they cut across class, culture, language and intelligence. They occupy those of the highest abilities and those who are learning disabled.
- **They're easy to learn** – can be learnt from pictures or DVDs, so you don't need to understand language to make a start.
- **Highly portable** – not messy. Can be done without leaving your armchair, wheelchair or bed, but also at work and when out and about.
- **No stigma attached** – they can be done with the family and in social situations.
- **Affordable and accessible to everyone**
- **Good for the poorly motivated** – cross stitching in particular needs very little preparation. Pre printed canvasses are ideal for getting those with very poor motivation or limited ability started.
- **You don't need artistic skills**
- **Ability** – cross stitching in particular can be done by even the severely disabled using especially adapted frames. They're also great for occupying those with learning disabilities.
- **They produce an end product** – giving people an opportunity to make personal gifts and cards and something to show off.
- **Practical and useful** – making 'useful' products helps people deal with feelings of low self worth enabling them to contribute.
- **Creative** – doing something creative appears to make people feel good. They enable everyone to be creative, regardless of artistic ability. Does being creative produce more balanced people/brains?