

Therapeutic knitting and stitching

Therapeutic knitting and stitching can benefit everyone because they deal with the mind and body as a whole. In addition they can improve some of the social issues that arise from lack of community or that accompany long-term medical conditions.

Meditation, relaxation and distraction occur as you knit and stitch. Along with pacing, these are techniques taught on Pain Management courses, but can be difficult to learn. Knitting and stitching enables them to be taught more easily and transferred to other areas of life. It also makes the benefits available to a larger population. They are also important skills for finding balance in life enabling everyone to lower stress levels.

Issues of social isolation/loneliness, self esteem, stress/anxiety and an unoccupied mind left to ruminate can happen to anyone and are key to how well you manage life's normal ups and downs. They also complicate and exacerbate many medical conditions, including pain. We have a wealth of anecdotal evidence suggesting that knitting and stitching deal with these issues and can be used to complement and enhance all treatments.

The end product raises self esteem, but importantly does so with no mess, little preparation with no requirement for artistic ability. They can be done from an armchair, wheelchair, hospital bed or work desk enabling people to regain structure, control, feelings of self worth in society and identity. Of course the portability of knitting and stitching means you can use them any place, any time, unlike other crafts. So they're perfect for managing stress, anxiety, panic, phobias, addictions or pain whilst out and about.

Those who suffer from the relentlessness of long-term pain tell us that distraction helps greatly. Having the power to 'switch off' or 'block out' pain when they choose to do so, even if it's only for short periods, gives them back control over a situation that may otherwise feel overwhelming. This has a significant effect on their outlook. This distraction continues when not knitting or stitching – project planning and anticipation of reward gives the mind something more important and exciting to think about. It takes your mind off troubling thoughts, too.

Knitting and stitching have unique benefits that go much deeper than simply occupying people with an activity they enjoy. The rhythmical repetitive movements involved are interesting because they induce a form of meditation and may also enhance the release of serotonin. The rhythm of the movement is calming and slows down thought processes, making knitting and stitching ideal stress/anxiety management tools. The instantaneous calm experienced can be successfully used to manage disruptive behaviour, too.

There may also be a link with Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing therapy used by some psychologists to treat post traumatic stress and schizophrenia. It's a controversial therapy, but sideways eye movements have been shown to lower arousal levels and also to improve memory.

The automatic nature of the tasks enables people to 'zone out' and escape into the sanctuary of a quiet mind, giving the mind a break from worrying thoughts and all problems. This automaticity could also be pushing out ruminating cycles and a pilot study is currently underway by psychologists at Cardiff University.

The addictiveness of knitting and stitching enables them to successfully replace more destructive addictions, but also encourages people to start looking forward to tomorrow. Negative thoughts are replaced by positive ones, projects are planned, there is anticipation and excitement – emotions that often get lost in the mire of stress, chronic pain or depression. Contact with the outside world is encouraged, so other possibilities open up, making them ideal 'keys' for motivating people. Importantly they take the focus away from inward thoughts and feelings of failure and worthlessness. Finding something you can plan and control the outcome of, and something you can do and do well improves feelings of wellbeing, gives a sense of identity and can significantly change your outlook on life.

All the above issues make knitting and stitching ideal tools for managing a number of medical conditions. For the fit and healthy, they're also ideal tools for complementing and enhancing life. Of course knitting and stitching in groups combines the above benefits with those of social contact. Having something in common makes it a lot easier for those who have low social confidence to take that first step to attend a group. It gives them something to talk about and the opportunity for fun and enjoyment.

Knitting and stitching can be used in the health arena, workplace, in education and socially making them powerful tools for improving wellbeing and quality of life for everyone.