



Hands-on healing

[**WELLBEING**] What do a fishing line, a ball of wool and a chicken have in common? They're all linked to activities proven to be beneficial to mental health. Three women discuss their chosen activity...

CHICKEN-REARING

JO BARLOW ON THE UNTOLD JOYS OF CARING FOR HER FEATHERED FRIENDS.

When I rehomed my first ex-battery hens, I thought I was the one doing the rescuing. In fact, it was them who rescued me. Emotionally frail after my son's lengthy illness, I took the much-anticipated step of rehoming my first three hens – Audrey, Agatha and Aurora. These scrawny scraps, whose featherless bodies belied their big hearts and even bigger characters, were my saviours, physically and emotionally.

Looking back, I can't remember when it was exactly that they stopped being 'just chickens' and became 'my girls'. I think it was the moment, two weeks after rehoming, that I opened the back door and they came running across the garden to me – their joy at seeing me was unconditional. It's hard to be sad in the reflection of such love.

And it would seem I'm not alone. Many hen-keepers have similar stories of recovery and hope. Julie Smith, from Kent, says, 'Without my girls, I wouldn't be here. They saved my life. I had depression and couldn't do anything. My husband decided I needed to get out of the house, so he bought six point-of-lay girls for me. Since then, I haven't looked back.'

You only have to look at the amazing success of HenPower, a charity initiative that enables the elderly and those with dementia to look after chickens as a therapy, to see the positive effect hens can have on mental and physical health, including combating loneliness. The benefits of

animal-assisted therapy are well-known, but it is participating in the long-term care of the hens that has been shown to have such a positive impact on the 'hensioners'.

In fact, hen-keeping incorporates many of the recommended ways to improve mental wellbeing. They give you a reason to get up and be outside. Caring for them each day ensures you're benefiting from fresh air and exercise, and interacting with nature and wildlife. There is little better in life than sitting in the garden with my girls clucking around my feet. Hens are excellent listeners; they don't interrupt, they never judge and they will always love you.

Keeping hens helps with isolation – whether interacting with fellow hen-keepers or joining some of the friendly and supportive online hen-keeping communities. They bring people together with a shared passion. As a mother whose children have flown the nest, having something precious to nurture has filled the void my human babies have left.

But hens help on more than just an emotional level. Egg yolks from your free-ranging hens are a good source of omega-3, one of the essential mood-boosting fats.

My girls have taken over my life: I write about them, run courses about them and help find homes for them. My garden is full of hens and I've made lifelong (human) friends with a shared love of these special girls.

For anybody thinking of getting hens, I cannot tell you how truly magical they are. Hens will return your love tenfold and bring sunshine to your soul.

Jo is the author of 'A Beginner's Guide to Caring for Ex-batts' (CreateSpace, £9.99). She also runs henhugger.co.uk, which offers advice to hen-keepers >>>

PHOTOGRAPH: SHANNONMCINTYRE/GALLERY STOCK

>>> **KNITTING**

PSYCHOTHERAPIST ANTONIA MACARO ENJOYS THE THERAPEUTIC BENEFITS OF SQUISHY BALLS OF SOFT YARN, AS SHE KNITS HER WAY TO A BETTER PLACE, ONE STITCH AT A TIME.

Knitting and I go back a long way. My aunt was a knitting wizard; the one everybody turned to for advice. But, like many of my generation, as a teenager I rebelled and threw away the needles. Then some time ago, during a relationship break-up, I discovered that knitting was quite a therapeutic thing to do, requiring just enough concentration even when you're in the grip of negative emotions that stop you doing much else.

There has been evidence around for quite some time to show that's all true. As personal wellbeing coach, founder of healthcare research craft hub Stitchlinks and author of *Knit For Health And Wellness* (FlatBear, £5.99) Betsan Corkhill points out, knitting 'can divert the brain's attention away from issues such as chronic pain, worries, stresses and depression'. Even more reason to cultivate my knitting.

Then I came across Héléne Magnússon's knitting retreat in Iceland, which promised to teach the techniques involved in making an Icelandic Loppi sweater, famously knitted with circular needles (two needles joined by a cord). I felt the need to expand my knitting repertoire and I'd always wanted to go to Iceland, so I decided to book.

So it is that I find myself in Reykjavik with a bunch of women from around the world. We hit Iceland's Route 1 in the sunshine, heading north, snowy peaks in the distance. We stop to visit farms with impossibly cute lambs. You can tell this is not a retreat of the 'becoming one with your knitting needles' sort, in part from the fact that most visits include a shopping interlude. Somehow, I manage not to indulge in the tempting yarns.

We arrive at our destination – a farm with more cute lambs – and get down to business: we're going to knit a doll-sized Loppi sweater, which should equip us with the skills to knit a full-sized one. As we learn, both the 'traditional' Icelandic unspun Loppi yarn and the famous sweater were actually invented in the 20th century.

On the two intensive knitting days that follow, I alternate between the excitement of learning and the frustration of not always getting things straight away. The wind is howling outside. Normally I'd be straining

to get out and walk, but the Icelandic weather, which has reverted to form after the initial spring-like day, encourages concentration. Some of us knit around the dinner table in the evening – just like we do at the knitting group in the pub back home, only outside this window is the grandeur of Icelandic nature.

My first attempt at knitting the mini-Loppi ends less successfully than I'd hoped, with a strangely shaped garment that's more of a crop top with sleeves. I manage to redo it the next day, when I learn a bunch of new things and the fog begins to lift.

On the way back to Reykjavik, I catch a glimpse of swans flying. But I come away with a lot more than memories of the Icelandic landscape. The moments of frustration were more than compensated by the rich therapeutic benefits of knitting; feeling so absorbed in the present task that all other concerns fall away, the thrill of learning new skills, developing patience and perseverance, and the sheer magic of seeing my fingers turn fluffy balls of yarn into something I can wear or give as a gift. My next project? An Icelandic jumper, of course.

Learn about Betsan Corkhill's knitting therapy at stitchlinks.com. Find Héléne Magnússon's knitting tours at icelandicknitter.com

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FISHING

ERICA CAMUS CASTS OUT HER FISHING LINE AND MEDITATES ON WHAT COMES BACK – BOTH PHYSICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY.

The feathery flies used in fly-fishing, shimmering in the water to attract a bite, are somehow as magical as the meditative effects that fishing can have on the mind. Scientific research has, for many years now, bolstered the therapeutic benefits of green exercise and spending time at one with the great outdoors. At the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, Mike Wynne, a community psychiatric nurse, has been using fishing to help Brian, a friend and patient, not just find peace of mind, but also boost his self-esteem. 'You can see a difference in Brian immediately when fishing,' says Wynne, 'He stops talking about symptoms and mental health, and simply becomes a fisherman. There's also a sense of achievement when he catches something he can take home for dinner.'

I went along to spend a day fishing at the Rosslynlee Trout Fishery near Edinburgh, with Brian and Mike, and am astonished by the obvious benefits that fishing

boasts. Diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, I sometimes suffer from moments of anxiety, and I feel fishing benefits me in more ways than one.

As I look out over the rippling waters, over which a small wooden rowing boat bobs, I cast out my line into an idyllic landscape – ponies grazing the hills on the right, sheep dotted on the hillside to the left. From here, Mike teaches me to 'retrieve' the line – slowly pulling it back in, in the hope I may catch a rainbow or brown trout.

I don't catch anything at first, but focusing on my fly closing in on me along these waters as I retrieve evokes mindfulness. My mind becomes focused, and anxieties slip away. I then do the retrieving over and over, each time becoming a little more focused on my fly and casting some anxiety symptoms away and into the deep waters.

After a couple of hours, the three of us go to the lake's hut to warm up with some soup. Here, Brian tells me that he first learnt about fishing – which can take a few weeks to fully pick up – from his father-in-law. Later, Mike suggested

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taking him and he returned to rediscover its benefits. 'I love fishing,' he says: 'It feels good to catch something and take it home.'

Brian and Mike aren't the only ones using fishing therapy in an NHS setting. Geoff Yardley, Growthpoint project coordinator at the North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare NHS Trust, says there are numerous benefits. 'It can be both a solitary and social activity – allowing space to think or time to

socialise. Having a common interest can lead to interesting conversations with fellow fishermen; it raises an interest in the outdoors as well as in environmental issues. It also provides the opportunity to visit places you wouldn't normally go to and can give people the chance to join a club with others who share the same interest.'

As Brian, Mike and I venture back from the hut and to the water's edge, we concur. Like Brian, Mike and others touting the benefits of fishing, I too have been put under its iridescent spell and relieved of a little anxiety.

To find out more about fishing, see anglingtrust.net



PHOTOGRAPH: DANN TARDIFF/CORBIS