The relationship between sustainable environmental practices and positive mental health

Mental Health Foundation 2011

Summary

The natural environment is fundamentally important to both our physical and psychological wellbeing, so actions that promote and protect our natural environment help to increase our ability to flourish in life. In turn, people and communities that are flourishing, i.e. have high levels of wellbeing, tend to be environmentally responsible in their behaviour and can, therefore, contribute to environmental sustainability.

The Mental Health Foundation urges those concerned with promoting good mental health to reflect on key health promotion documents that acknowledge the importance of the natural environment to health, such as the Ottawa Charter. It is also essential that indigenous models of health that recognise the need to develop strong relationships with nature and harmonise human activity with the natural environment are explored and learnt from. It is recommended that those calling for better health outcomes consider becoming more engaged in the protection and promotion of the natural environment, and promote wider recognition of further potential positive impacts on community and individual wellbeing.

If we bring the work of health promotion and sustainable development together, we can create flourishing individuals, communities and environments.

Introduction

> Humanity stands at a crossroads. Depending on the choices we make now, future generations will either look back at our time with anger or with gratitude.
> (New Economics Foundation, 2009)

Despite large increases in the wealth and social circumstances of people in OECD countries over the last 50 years, there has been no substantial improvement, and may even have been a deterioration, in psychological wellbeing (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Huppert & So, 2009). There are also now many more stressors and strains on mental health in general as a result of the

increased pace and complexity of life, and the breakdown of stable communities (New Economics Foundation, 2004). Adding to this is generalised fear and anxiety (Mental Health Foundation UK, 2009), including the fear for our future. There are currently global threats to positive human progress, including climate change and the depletion of natural resources. To address these issues, we will need to find innovative solutions to these human-created problems, and will need to reconsider both our relationship with the rest of the environment and with other people.

The Mental Health Foundation believes that such an approach will require the integration of a variety of knowledge sources, including indigenous wisdom and conventional scientific research, with current thinking on environmental sustainability and the promotion of positive mental health.

This paper analyses the links between sustainable development and mental health promotion, as we believe that both areas, if brought together, can lead to flourishing environments, communities and individuals. Firstly, the discussion will explore definitions of positive mental health and sustainable development. It will then highlight some goals of sustainable development and how working towards these goals will contribute not only to sustainability, but also to positive mental health. This paper will go on to discuss how individuals and communities who are experiencing positive mental health may, in turn, be more likely to contribute to sustainability. Lastly, this paper introduces two case studies of innovative initiatives that are resulting in flourishing, sustainable communities.

What is positive mental health?

The term 'mental health' is commonly only used in relation to mental illness or mental health problems. However, mental health is a universal experience that is fundamental to personal wellbeing and social functioning (World Health Organization, 2011a). Positive mental health, which is increasingly referred to as 'flourishing', can increase resilience, physical health and general wellbeing, and can reduce the risk of mental health problems (Keyes, Dhingra & Simoes, 2010). People who are flourishing have been defined as individuals experiencing positive emotions, engagement, meaning, accomplishment and positive relationships (Seligman, 2011).

Keyes (2010: 20) has proposed that the opposite of flourishing is the state of being mentally unhealthy, or languishing, 'which is tantamount to being stuck and stagnant, or feeling empty or feeling that life lacks interest or engagement'.

Following her extensive studies on positive mental health, Fredrickson (2011) described flourishing as a qualitatively different state from moderate or languishing mental health, using a metaphor of how water is different from ice. A tipping point of positive but realistic internal states leads to expanded awareness and positive regard for self and others, including concern for the wider environment. This state tends to be self-reinforcing, as described in her 'broaden and build' theory.

Whanau Ora has a more communal focus in its description of wellbeing, which may be more relevant for Māori (Whānau Ora Taskforce, 2010).

Flourishing in a population can be increased through a variety of personal and social changes (Mental Health Foundation, 2010). It is crucial that social infrastructure protects and promotes the social determinants of positive mental health, i.e. the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age (World Health Organization, 2011b). These conditions are influenced by the distribution of power, money and resources at local, national and global levels. Positive mental health is promoted through the more equitable distribution of wealth, strong participatory democracy, education systems that promote creativity and resilience, good housing, well-designed environments, and cohesive, supportive communities (Fisher & Baum, 2010).

What is sustainable development?

A common definition of sustainable development, which is also currently used by the New Zealand Government, states that development is sustainable when it 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; New Zealand Government, 2003).

Another definition that may have more resonance for health promotion is that used by the United Kingdom Government: 'Sustainable development is about ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come' (HM Government, 2005). This definition is becoming more widely accepted by governments, civil society organisations, companies and many others. Understanding how sustainable development relates to quality of life may help to make the concept more meaningful, more aspirational and, hopefully, more focused on finding solutions.

The natural environment and wellbeing

The natural environment is fundamentally connected to our psychological wellbeing in many ways. It is increasingly recognised that people and the natural environment do not exist as independent entities, but are part of a complex, interconnected ecosystem. Evidence suggests that not only are people dependent on the natural environment for material needs such as food and water, but also that the natural environment is equally essential for fulfilling psychological, spiritual and emotional needs (Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown, & St Leger, 2006). Therefore, it seems crucial that mental health promotion should acknowledge the importance of ensuring access to natural environments and protecting these areas for our wellbeing.

Te Pae Mahutonga and the Ottawa Charter are two key models that underlie the work of the Mental Health Foundation in promoting positive mental health. Both models emphasise the importance of protecting our natural environment as part of mental health promotion and so are useful in linking strategies of mental health promotion and sustainable development.

Te Pae Mahutonga

Indigenous models of health promotion, including Māori models, highlight the importance of the natural environment for our general wellbeing. Te Pae Mahutonga, the Māori name for the constellation of stars known as the Southern Cross, is also the name given to a symbolic chart for mapping the dimensions of health promotion that was developed by Professor Mason Durie (Durie, 2004). This model covers both the internal and external determinants of positive mental health. The four central stars of the Southern Cross represent Waiora (environmental protection), Mauri Ora (cultural identity), Whaiora (participation in society) and Ngā Manukura (effective leadership), while the two pointers represent Toiora (healthy lifestyles) and Mana Whakahaere (autonomy). Waiora is linked to the natural world, and connects human wellbeing with cosmic, terrestrial and aquatic environments.

Durie (2004: 12) stated that:

> Health promotion must take into account the nature and quality of the interaction between people and the surrounding environment so that there is balance between development and environmental sustainability. It should recognise that the human condition is intimately connected to the wider domains of Rangi and Papa, the sky and earth parents. In this context health promotion is about harmonising people with their environments by actively promoting those indigenous values that have underpinned the human-environmental relationship over long periods of time, and creating opportunities for people to experience that relationship first hand.

Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion

The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion is another key health promotion document that acknowledges the importance of environments in supporting health. The Ottawa Charter states that there needs to be a socio-ecological approach to health due to the inextricable links between people and their environment. This approach recognises that to successfully promote and manage health, a holistic, multi-disciplinary method is needed that clearly advocates for the protection of built and natural environments, and the conservation of natural resources (World Health Organization, 1986).

Flourishing and environmental responsibility

As well as the natural environment promoting positive mental health, a connection has been shown between positive mental health and engagement in environmentally responsible behaviour, which refers to actions that reflect caring about and for the natural environment, such as reducing energy use, purchasing local produce, and using public transport or fuel-efficient vehicles (Villacorta, Koestner, & Lekes, 2003; Brown & Kasser, 2005). Research suggests that some aspects of flourishing may be precursors to environmentally responsible behaviour, or at least that flourishing and environmentally responsible behaviour may be correlated (New

Economics Foundation, 2006). For example, Brown and Kasser (2005) found that individuals who are flourishing are often living in more environmentally sustainable ways.

Brown and Kasser's (2005) research suggests that there are two factors that increase flourishing and fulfilment whilst encouraging environmentally responsible behaviours: intrinsic orientation and mindfulness.

Intrinsic orientation refers to motivation by internal goals, such as affiliation, self-acceptance and a sense of belonging in the community. Brown and Kasser (2005) suggested that external goals such as financial success and social recognition oppose the intrinsic goals that contribute to positive mental health. Research also shows that pro-environmental behaviour may increase alongside the development of these intrinsic goals (Villacorta et al., 2003).
A growing body of literature highlights the importance of self-determination, a feature of flourishing, in promoting and sustaining environmentally responsible behaviour. Self-determination refers both to the positive attitudes that support people to define goals for themselves and the capacity to take initiative to accomplish those goals (Ward, 1988). Villacorta et al. (2003) found a positive relationship between autonomous self-regulation and accounts of engagement in environmentally responsible behaviours. This study also found that individuals who regularly engaged in environmentally responsible behaviour were more likely to experience positive emotions and less likely to experience negative emotions.

Mindfulness has been defined as 'paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally' (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Brown and Kasser (2005) noted that mindfulness is associated with positive mental health and is also linked to reduced materialism, as it enhances the ability to take a step back from consumerist images that encourage hyper-consumption. The quality of consciousness that mindfulness provides also encourages reflection on the environmental impact of one's actions. Furthermore, individuals who are mindful are more likely to seek out choices that are less harmful to the natural environment, despite real or perceived barriers to doing so. This research goes against the common assumption that living sustainably involves sacrifices that will interfere with wellbeing, instead suggesting that living in an environmentally sustainable way promotes wellbeing, as Kasser (2009) has argued. The positive associations between environmental sustainability and individual wellbeing may occur partly because living sustainably creates environments and supports behaviours that satisfy psychological needs. However, more research is needed to develop robust links between positive mental health and sustainable behaviour.

The Mental Health Foundation promotes mindfulness as a tool for increasing positive mental health. We also intend to advocate for more research into the direct relationship between flourishing and the adoption of environmental behaviours.

Sustainable development strategies and mental health promotion

The Sustainable Future Institute and Sustainable Aotearoa New Zealand (SANZ) are both working towards a sustainable future in New Zealand. These organisations aim to inform, support and inspire all New Zealanders to take part in debate and action on sustainability. Many of the goals and strategies of these organisations have relevance to the strategies of the Mental Health Foundation in promoting positive mental health, and so the Foundation aims to work with these organisations to aid in the achievement of these goals. This section discusses the relevant goals of these two organisations and highlights the connections with mental health promotion at the societal, community and individual level. The following goals have been adapted from Sustainable Aotearoa New Zealand's (2009) *Strong Sustainability for New Zealand* report and Sustainable Future Institute's (2009) *Project 2058* report.

Goal 1: Integration of social, cultural, economic and environmental goals

Sustainability must be pursued through the integration of social, cultural, economic and environmental goals in a way that acknowledges the interconnectedness of our world. Planning for sustainability must take a systems approach, respect human rights, celebrate diversity and seek shared solutions to shared problems (Sustainable Future Institute, 2009). To date, sustainable development has been thought of more or less exclusively as a force for environmental change, and yet by acknowledging the importance of celebrating diversity, respecting human rights and working collaboratively between sectors, sustainable development shares many features with mental health promotion. Sustainable development and mental health promotion are also both concerned with determinants of mental health, such as equity and social justice (Wilde, Boydell, & Rugkasa, 2006).

Goal 2: Regenerating natural and social capital

Capital describes the range of resources that communities potentially have access to. Natural capital is considered to consist of natural resources, ecosystem services and the aesthetics of nature, while social capital is defined as 'features of social organisation, such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit' (Putnam, 1995). Both natural and social capital must be protected and renewed to obtain sustainability and a flourishing society (Sustainable Aotearoa New Zealand, 2009).

Available evidence suggests a relationship between flourishing and natural capital. For example, Vemuri and Costanza (2006) found that a country's natural capital was strongly associated with collective life satisfaction across countries, and argued that natural capital is a better predictor of life satisfaction than social capital. However, the relationship between flourishing and natural capital is not yet well understood.

Social capital represents the degree of social cohesion that exists in communities, and strengthening this is not only a goal of sustainable development, but also a key goal of mental health promotion to create flourishing communities. Both wellbeing research and social capital research show the profound importance of social capital to mental health (World Health Organization, 2005), suggesting that social capital can enhance positive mental health and reduce the impact of mental illness.

Cultural capital is another important aspect of wellbeing. It is defined as a set of norms, values, traditions and behaviours that individual group members and groups as a whole can develop into resources or assets to leverage social, political or economic gains. For example, cultural capital can be converted into other forms of capital that promote social cohesion, such as events and festivals.

Goal 3: Affirming the value of local communities

Local communities not only reduce environmental impacts, but are also important to mental wellbeing. Being actively engaged in the local community has been shown to contribute to a personal sense of wellbeing, as well as having positive knock-on effects for other people (Keyes, 1998; New Economics Foundation, 2004). The relationship is positive in both directions: involvement increases wellbeing and, conversely, flourishing people tend to be more engaged in their local community. There is also a link between mental wellbeing and democratic involvement (New Economics Foundation, 2004).

Goal 4: Valuing nature intrinsically

> We need to become more aware of the importance of nature. All wealth comes from nature. (Jack Santa Barbara, Board member of Sustainable Aotearoa New Zealand)

A strong connection with nature contributes to sustainability and positive mental health. To live sustainably we must develop a robust human-Earth relationship. We must feel that we are, in fact, a part of nature, and that 'what we do to nature we do to ourselves' (Sustainable Aotearoa New Zealand, 2009). Furthermore, a substantial body of research focusing on the psychological benefits of a strong human-Earth relationship has shown that nature provides us with a sense of meaning, which is a significant component of flourishing (New Economics Foundation, 2005), as well as helping us to reflect, inspiring awe, contributing to personal growth and evoking feelings of belonging (Huppert, Baylis, & Keverne, 2005).

Sustainable Aotearoa New Zealand (2009) has suggested that exposure to open and green space helps to strengthen our connections with nature. Such contact has been shown to be important in promoting relaxation and reducing stress (Maller et al., 2006). Studies have also shown that open green space has a positive impact on stress recovery, with individuals experiencing a faster and more complete recovery when exposed to natural settings rather than traffic environments or pedestrian malls (Ulrich, 1991). On the other hand, damage to natural local environments has been shown to have serious psychological impacts on people (Berry, Bowen, & Kjellstrom, 2010).

Goal 5: Promoting non-material sources of happiness

Just as valuing nature is important to sustainability and flourishing, so is our involvement in activities that are engaging, fulfilling and not focused on material acquisitions. The New Economics Foundation (2005) has suggested that increased material consumption is not bringing more wellbeing to developed countries, but instead is making us less mentally healthy. It is also well recognised that increased material consumption is the main driver for many of our environmental issues. Evidence suggests that once basic needs are met, people quickly adapt to their material circumstances and wish for more (Diener & Seligman, 2004). As societies become wealthier, an increase often occurs in mental and social problems, while life satisfaction plateaus (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Research suggests that a life that is meaningful, fulfilling and engaging is generated through involvement in activities that are unrelated to the heavy use of material items. Csikzentmihalyi (1999) supported this view, stating that our lives can be more satisfying when engaged in activities that are both materially light and purposive.

The Mental Health Foundation believes that the strategies required for New Zealand to become a sustainable society are in many ways similar to those required for a flourishing society. It is therefore important that we advocate for an integrated approach to social, environmental and economic issues, and seek to increase collaboration between social, cultural, economic and environmental sectors.

The Mental Health Foundation also acknowledges the importance of supporting and empowering local communities to come together to decide how to improve the long-term sustainability and wellbeing of their local areas. In addition, the Foundation advocates for increased community engagement through initiatives such as time banking and community gardens (see case studies below).

Case studies

Below, we present two case studies that will hopefully provide additional insight and inspiration to readers. The first illustrates how community gardens can play a role in promoting flourishing and sustainable living through developing a sense of community and enhancing connections with nature. The second highlights how innovative community initiatives such as 'timebanks' can increase flourishing and sustainability through community connectedness and by encouraging a market that promotes democracy and civil society.

Case study 1: CCS Disability Action Community Garden, Auckland.

> I am no more peaceful than when I am in the garden.
> (Scott Thiemann, community gardens co-ordinator at CCS Disability Action)

Gardening is one of the most common ways in which people interact with nature and green spaces. Community gardens provide a range of opportunities for individuals and communities to flourish (D'Abundo & Cardeon, 2008; Kingsley, Townsend, & Henderson-Wilson, 2009). In addition to improving local environments, community gardens are an opportunity for people to come together and develop a sense of community, belonging and achievement, as well as inducing relaxation and stress relief.

CCS Disability Action's Community Garden has been running for over 25 years. Nested in the heart of Auckland City, the garden is a peaceful haven away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. The community garden aims to create an organic space where people from diverse backgrounds can come together and share in the growing of plants and produce. The garden has an inclusive community approach, which values the contributions of all community members, regardless of background, age group or culture. The garden's main goals are to be accessible for everyone, to have a wide diversity of people involved, and to encourage environmental sustainability.

CCS Disability Action recognises the wide range of health and social benefits that the garden provides. Scott Thiemann, community gardens co-ordinator at CCS Disability Action, sees the gardens as a community hub, where relationships within the community can be built and strengthened. Community-building aspects of gardening are becoming well recognised, with research finding that useable and accessible community gardens can foster a sense of community amongst residents (Kingsley et al., 2009). According to Scott it's the best way to make connections with others, as the gardens create a space for people from all walks of life to connect and build friendships.

People who engage in community gardening also experience a sense of achievement. For example, Kingsley et al. (2009) suggested that gardening can help increase self-worth through skill development and the process of overcoming challenges associated with growing plants and produce. Scott concurs with this, suggesting that the ability to be able to physically see the changes being made can help build a sense of accomplishment and contentment. As he notes, many people express that working in the community gardens is a meaningful activity; they are involved in doing something useful while helping others.

Scott also says that the garden provides a sanctuary from the pressures of the world and the opportunity to feel closer to nature. Watching plants grow and actively participating in the process increases people's connections with the natural environment and gives them a sense of joy. Many people describe the garden as being a way to release tension, like meditation. Scott believes that the garden offers a de-stressing environment for people, where they can get fresh air, be outdoors in a pleasant atmosphere and simply be themselves.

The positive mental health benefits that come from CCS Disability Action's community garden are clear. This case study highlights the ways in which community gardens can contribute to the vision of a flourishing, sustainable society by increasing community cohesion, bringing a sense of achievement and reducing stress.

Case study 2: Lyttelton Time Bank

> A time machine taking us back to an age when we knew each other and trusted one another. (Edgar Cahn, founder of Timebanking)

The Time Bank, based in Lyttelton, Christchurch, is helping the port town to become more sustainable and self-sufficient. The time bank has been actively running for 5 years and was the first of its kind to be set up in New Zealand. The aim of time banking is to increase social capital and recognise the value of the non-market economy – that is, an economy that is not based solely on the consumption of material goods. Time banking involves the exchange of skills and time, rejecting price and valuing all hours equally, regardless of the type of help offered or received. Distinct from traditional volunteering, a time bank creates a 'give and take' relationship between people who contribute their skills and time, helping to form reciprocal relationships between community members.

Studies regarding community connectedness and timebank initiatives have shown that 72% of people engaged in time banks experience a stronger sense of community as a consequence (Botsman & Rogers, 2011). Seyfang (2003) also stated that time banks can increase individual wellbeing, confidence and social relationships, and engage vulnerable groups of people in taking part in community activities. Time bank initiatives also aid in the creation of a market that values democracy and civil society, and help to develop active citizens (New Economics Foundation, 2008).

Margaret Jefferies, chair of Project Lyttelton, has drawn attention to the ways in which the project helps to strengthen social connections and promotes a sense of community in Lyttelton, and has many inspiring stories to share around the connections that have been made through engagement in the time bank. Margaret says that active involvement in the time bank has been integral to the community's recovery from February's Canterbury earthquake. The time bank worked closely with Civil Defence and similar agencies in the immediate time after the earthquake, helping the community to get back on its feet. Through the time bank, people knew how to get involved in helping out in their community at such a critical time. As Margaret suggests, it also aided in the healing process, by bringing people with similar experiences together.

Margaret notes that the initiative provides a sense of engagement and interest, a feature of flourishing. She says that an underlying motivation in offering your skills is to 'do what you enjoy.' Margaret has seen the passion and joy that comes from people doing something they get pleasure from, while at the same time helping others. She has even seen some people take up new career paths due to the experience.

The Lyttelton time bank has grown from strength to strength and now has 300 members in a town of just 3,000 people. This case study indicates that by strengthening social capital and creating a market that values democracy, time banks are fostering aspects of life that are conducive to positive mental health.

Conclusions

There are important connections between the natural environment and positive mental health, and there is a mutually beneficial relationship between individual and ecological wellbeing. Consequently, sustainability and mental health promotion have many common goals, so health promoters need to be engaged in promoting and protecting the natural environment and cultivating practices such as mindfulness, which can increase both flourishing and sustainability. The two case studies outlining the value of community gardens and time banks demonstrate how some communities are already engaged in activities that work towards meaningful lives that do not cost the Earth.

The Mental Health Foundation is committed to environmental sustainability, and suggests that this commitment could be demonstrated by:

- Developing organisational policy and practices that promote environmental sustainability within the Foundation, including making events carbon zero.
- Building and strengthening relationships with a range of sustainable development organisations.
- Providing information and resources on the wellbeing benefits of sustainability.
- Supporting events that promote activities that strengthen environmentally responsible behaviours.
- Inviting sustainable development workers to speak at seminars to increase understanding of sustainable development in the health promotion sector.
- Advocating for sustainable policies and practices in submissions to local and regional government.
- Promoting environmentally sustainable initiatives and their wellbeing benefits through social marketing and public education.
- Incorporating the wellbeing benefits of sustainability into relevant presentations and workshops.

By placing sustainability on the agenda of public mental health, whilst simultaneously placing wellbeing at the heart of sustainable development, we present an innovative vision about the sort of society in which we hope to live. This paper is not the final word, but the start of a conversation about how we move towards the path of prosperity where current and future generations are able to flourish, and where the needs of the planet are valued and respected.

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