Using Parks and Trails to Promote Mental Health: The Mood Walks Program

National Outdoor Recreation Conference, Society of Outdoor Recreation Professionals
April 24, 2018 | Burlington, VT | Ancestral lands of the Abenaki People
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Health Intervention

“an act performed for, with or on behalf of a person or population whose purpose is to assess, improve, maintain, promote or modify health, functioning or health conditions.”

– World Health Organization (WHO)
Outcome: Improved Mental Health

“a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”

– World Health Organization (WHO)
2017 State of Mental Health in America

Source: www.mentalhealthamerica.net
2017 State of Mental Health in America

• Only **41% of adults** in the U.S. with a mental health condition received mental health services (NAMI, 2014)

• 1 in 6 Americans takes a psychiatric drug (Miller, 2016) (e.g., anti-depressants, anti-anxiety)

• Mental health drugs are one of the fastest growing categories in outpatient managed care (25-35% of commercial and public payer health care costs)

Source: www.mentalhealthamerica.net
Mood Walks

Mood Walks is a province-wide initiative that promotes physical activity in nature, or "green exercise," as a way to improve both physical and mental health. Led by the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario, in partnership with Hike Ontario and Conservation Ontario, Mood Walks provides training and support for community mental health agencies, social service organizations and other community partners to launch educational hiking programs, connect with local resources, find volunteers, and explore nearby trails and green spaces.
Intervention Means: “Green Exercise”

Physical activity in the presence of nature (Barton & Pretty, 2010), aka outdoor recreation

Photo credit: www.merseyforest.org.uk
Program Partners

• Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario (CMHA), in partnership with Conservation Ontario and Hike Ontario
  – *New for 2018-2020!* Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health
  – Funding from Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport
  – Additional grants (e.g., MEC Community Grant, Ontario Trillium Foundation)

• Local partners (e.g., community organizations, universities, tribal groups, land trusts)
Population

• People at risk of, or experiencing, mental health issues

Source: http://wmhp.cmhaontario.ca
Approach

• Science-driven health intervention
• Holistic approach to mental health (mind + body)
• Links human health and environmental health
• Highlights role of natural landscapes as settings for health maintenance and restoration (e.g., Healthy Parks, Healthy People) and as social space
Mood Walks as Intervention (*how it works!*)

Local group walks in nature that feature:

① **Physical Activity**
② **Nature Immersion**
③ **Social Support**
Mental Health and Physical Activity

- Reduces stress
- Improves mood
- Lifts self-esteem
- Slows dementia and cognitive decline
- Lowers risk of depression and anxiety

Source: www.sportengland.org
“Overall, evidence suggests that connecting with nature is one path to flourishing in life.” (Capaldi et al., 2015)

“…nature may provide an effective population-wide strategy in prevention of mental ill health…” (Maller et al., 2006)
GPs

Why social prescriptions are just what the doctor ordered

Social prescriptions, from fishing to knitting groups, are helping patients back on the road to recovery
Group Walking in Nature


Mood Walks Program

• Built on the success of CMHA’s Minding Our Bodies initiative (2008–2013)

• Walking, an accessible form of PA for most
  – No training and little equipment needed
  – Affordable, few barriers, especially when using local parks
  – Largely weather independent
  – Can be practiced alone or with others (including pets)
Common Barriers & Constraints to Outdoor Rec

- Personal barriers (e.g., perceptions of safety, personal limitations, lack of social support, lack of leisure time)

- Physical barriers (e.g., lack of natural amenities/seasonal amenities, too far away from communities)

- Policy and cultural barriers (e.g., social norms, pressure to develop open spaces, outdated planning practices, lack of collaboration between planners and recreation professionals)
Mood Walks: Program Timeline

Program Development Process (2013–ongoing)

- Environmental scan of resources
- Planning surveys with stakeholders
- Recruitment of advisory committee
- Development of program resources
- Request for proposals and selection of participating sites
- Pilot Program Launch (2014)
  - Community of Practice webinars
- Creation of newsletters and media releases
- Analysis of evaluation data for pilot program
- Prepared evaluation report of Pilot Project
- Dissemination of Pilot Project evaluation results
- Updated program resources

Source: CHMA, Ontario
Population

Programs

• Mood Walks for Older Adults (2013–2015)
• Mood Walks for Youth in Transition (2015–2017)
• Mood Walks for Campus Mental Health (2018-2020)
Program Supports & Training

• 2-day annual leadership retreat for lead agency staff, volunteers, key partners
• Support from Mood Walks Project Manager
• 6 key program resources
• Assistance with developing community partners
• Help with recruiting Student Volunteers
• Mood Walks Summit (2015, 2017)
• Safe Hiker training
Key Program Resources

1. Website with evaluation tools
2. Infographic poster
3. Program manual
4. *The Mood Walker* newsletter
5. Customizable presentation ("Mental Health Benefits of Physical Activity and Exposure to the Natural Environment")
6. Webinars
Explore Your Community

64,000 KMS OF TRAIL
2,500 KM OF WHICH ARE AT CONSERVATION AREAS

329 PROVINCIAL PARKS + 6 NATIONAL PARKS + 400 CONSERVATION AREAS + 292 CONSERVATION RESERVES

You may be closer to nature than you think!

= 800,000+ Ontarians Take A Hike Each Year

Benefit The Natural Environment

Promote Healthy People
&
Healthy Ecosystems

Protect Habitat

Ensure Our NATURAL SPACES Are 50% PROTECTED FOR GENERATIONS TO COME

Walking in nature promotes our wellbeing and the health of our natural environment.

Regular Use Of Natural Areas For PHYSICAL ACTIVITY Can Reduce The Risk Of Mental Health Problems By 50%
Website: Member Dashboard
Program Manual

- 88 pages—comprehensive (English & French)
- 15-week Mood Walks Plan, with 10 sample themed walks (e.g., focus on posture, mindfulness walk, scavenger hunt)

Table of Contents:
- Planning
- Participants
- Training
- Challenges
- Evaluation
- Next Steps
- Appendices
Safe Hiker Training

• Modified Safe Hiker Training for Mood Walks
  – 8 hours over 2 days (including trail time)
  – Preparation, packing and outfitting, hitting the trail (e.g., LNT)

• Free for all participants, leaders, volunteers

• Training provided by Hike Ontario
  (www.hikeontario.com)

• Safe Hiker Instructor and Certified Hike Leader training available to walk leaders

Photo credit: CMHA, Ontario
Profile: CMHA Middlesex

• All ages Mood Walks every Tuesday (11 -12 pm)
• Partnership with the Thames Talbot Land Trust
• Four bus trips to land trust areas for fall hikes
  – Funded by Ontario Trillium Foundation
• Environmental stewardship opportunities
Profile: NEOFACS

• North Eastern Ontario Family and Children’s Services
• Monthly Youth in Transition Mood Walks in two rural towns from May until September
• Group visited NEOFACS Camp Cadanac
• “Mud Walk” followed by lake swimming
• Plans to expand activities (e.g., snowshoeing)

Photo credit: NEOFACS/Mood Walks
Profile: WIND (Walking In Nature Days)

• Student Wellness Centre and Outdoor Recreation at McMaster University
  – Funded by Ontario Mental Heath Innovation Fund
  – Trail interpretation by volunteer hike leaders (Outdoor Recreation Club)
• Drop-in format with 10-15 students participating each week
• Local hikes include Royal Botanical Gardens properties
Connected to Broader Initiatives

- Conservation Ontario’s “Healthy Hikes Challenge” (May 1 – October 31, 2017)
- David Suzuki Foundation “30x30 Nature Challenge”
Evaluation

- Completed by participants:
  - Pre and post-program questionnaire (SF-12v2, NRS)
  - Weekly sign-in
- Completed by mental health agency
  - Leader’s tracking
  - Post-program focus group
- Completed by program partners
  - Final program report (e.g., older adults, youth in transition)
  - Feedback from partner agencies

Source: Scott Mitchell, CHMA, Ontario
Pilot Program Evaluation

*Mood Walks for Older Adults (2013–2015)*

- 22 groups/communities, 37 participating community agencies
- M=6.4 participants per walk, 64% walked at least 10 weeks
- 140 group hours of walking in natural areas (M=70 min.), 896 hours for all participants
- Hiking club members contributed average of 36 hours
- 220 people participated in 9 webinars
- 257 participants received Safe Hiker Training, 51 new Certified Hike Leaders, 21 new Safe Hiker Instructors, 2 new Certified Hike Leader Instructors
- 42% of hikes in Conservation Areas

Source: Mood Walks Pilot Program Evaluation
Pilot Program Evaluation

• 78% of participants achieved their personal goals for the program; 18% “somewhat”; 4% “no” (lack of attendance)

• Post-walk, significant positive change in happiness, anxiety, and energy scores

• SF-12 mental health score increased from 44 to 47 (50 population average)

• Knowledge of local hiking trails and parks increased from 3/5 to 4/5

Source: Mood Walks Pilot Program Evaluation
Mental Wellbeing Dimensions

**Emotional**
(e.g., perceived life satisfaction, happiness, cheerfulness, peacefulness)

**Social**
(e.g., social acceptance, group belonging, sense of community)

**Psychological**
(e.g., self-acceptance, personal growth, life purpose, spirituality)
Pilot Program Evaluation

Participant goals...
1. Increase physical fitness
2. Connect with people
3. Connect with nature
4. Feel good
5. Be more physically active
6. Explore new places
7. Have positive experiences
8. Have something to do
9. Increase knowledge and comfort hiking

“Most liked” about Mood Walks...
1. Connecting with nature
2. Social aspect
3. Learning and gaining skills
4. Feeling of accomplishment
5. Positive experience
6. Exploring new places
7. Engaging with partners
8. Exercise

Source: Mood Walks Pilot Program Evaluation
“I start out on a walk and I am anxious, but then we start connecting with each other and I feel better. I have lived here my whole life and I did not know that these trails exist in my community.”

“I really liked getting outside and exploring areas of the city that I hadn’t really been to before. I feel like I have better knowledge of the city”
“Mood Walks are awesome—I feel energized mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually.

“I lost some weight, saw some new places, had fun with friends. I feel better about things. I can do things that I thought I couldn’t.”

“Mood Walks was a great experience and helped me ease my mind. Being in nature and meeting new people help me explore my community.”

Credit: Aaron Harris, The Toronto Star
Pilot Program Evaluation

• 92% of partners described their partnerships as “successful”

• 73% said they would “definitely” continue those partnerships in future

• Partners: Increased awareness of nature’s influence on mental health, awareness and comfort in dealing with people with mental health issues, strengthened ties to community

Source: Mood Walks Pilot Program Evaluation
Original Stakeholder Concerns

Top 5 anticipated challenges:

1. Staff time
2. Funding
3. Participants not having appropriate gear
4. Liability concerns
5. Staff comfort and willingness to run an outdoor program

Source: Mood Walks Pilot Program Evaluation
Pilot Program Evaluation

“Challenges and barriers for leaders”: 

- **Staff scheduling and time pressures**
- Transportation
- Paperwork
- Weather (and mosquitoes!)
- Lack of participant commitment
- **Lack of staff buy-in** (forgetting phone calls, unaware of health benefits)*
- Format didn’t fit with drop-in program
- Varying physical abilities of group members
- Prohibitive age limit (target age 50+)

Source: Mood Walks Pilot Program Evaluation
Agency Experience

“We met with staff at the conservation area to get some hiking ideas. They waved the (entrance) fee to the conservation area. A (staff person) provided us with a guided hike focused on "forest therapy" or meditation while in the woods. Very neat.”

“Mood Walks has been an a great addition to the service we can offer our clients. We saw clients transform before our eyes.”

“I would absolutely recommend the Mood Walks program to other organizations. I hope to share the outcomes of the pilot group with my department to support continuation of this group (to) inspire more support and commitment to offer physical health activities.”
Highlight Relevant Amenities

• Trails
Highlight Relevant Amenities

• “Blue” trails
Highlight Relevant Amenities

- Inclusive trails
Highlight Relevant Amenities

• Natural playgrounds
Highlight Relevant Amenities

- Sensory trails
Highlight Relevant Amenities

- Other types of “green exercise” (i.e., outdoor recreation) amenities
Highlight Relevant Amenities

- Contemplation & meditation spaces
Highlight Relevant Amenities

- Special wildlife/migrations, rare plants
Highlight Relevant Amenities

• Seasonal amenities and programs
Reciprocal Relationship

• Moving beyond “nature” as object or instrument (or commodity, e.g., Williams et al., 1992): Returning the favor
  – Integrating stewardship activities into the project
  – Partner with local animal shelters to bring dogs on hikes?
• Serving = meaning = life satisfaction and wellbeing

OptOutside Partners

As part of this year’s #OptOutside initiative, Subaru was proud to partner with our kindred spirits to invite dog lovers everywhere to #OptOutside with their dogs on Black Friday. After all, who loves outside more than dogs?
Your Park(s) & Mental Health

• Is your park or agency involved in programs that focus on the mental health benefits of green exercise?

• Which of your park’s/parks’ amenities could be used by a programs like Mood Walks?

• Are you interested in having your organization explore partnerships similar to Mood Walks?
Resources

• Mood Walks (Canada)  
  www.moodwalks.ca

• Walking for Health (UK)  
  www.walkingforhealth.org.uk
Thank You

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