



Case Study:

The positive impact attending a Craft Club has on mental health and wellbeing



By Helen Felcey and Dena Bagi

About Craft Club

Craft Club is the Crafts Council's national campaign that champions everyday making in schools, galleries, libraries and anywhere else you can bring people together to share craft skills. Craft Clubs are free or low cost, friendly and accessible.

The Craft Club network is supported by the Crafts Council team. A quarterly newsletter shares resources and tutorials, from practical step-by-step guides and tips on managing finances as a group leader. We host a list of clubs on our website and organise workshops and events throughout the year. Craft Club started in 2009 with support from UK Hand Knitting Association and the National Federation of Women's Institutes.

Wellbeing plays a central role for many Craft Clubs, with many members attending groups to boost their mood and self-esteem. In the 2019 Craft Club survey, 52% of Craft Club leaders reported that their members would otherwise be socially isolated, and 49% said that members would not otherwise have a chance to engage in the arts. 41% of Craft Club leaders reported that their members attended for therapeutic purposes.

In April 2019, the Crafts Council commissioned researchers Helen Felcey and Dena Bagi to produce a case study highlighting the positive impact attending a Craft Club can have on mental health and wellbeing.



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Methodology:

Helen Felcey and Dena Bagi attended two Knit and Natter sessions in North Manchester, collecting data using focused interviews and informal evaluation methods. A brief report follows, which documents the areas of participant-impact witnessed.



What is happening at Knit and Natter?

Knit and Natter sits within the North Manchester Wellbeing Centre, established in 2007. The founder, Joan, is a public health specialist who began working in a voluntary capacity in 1997, seeking to make a greater impact on improving people's lives. The group meets weekly on a Tuesday morning.

The centre offers several craft sessions, exercise sessions and complementary therapies. The Knit and Natter group was very popular and therefore the group that Joan registered with the Craft Council's Craft Club programme.

There are, on average, 15 participants that attend Knit and Natter. They are all working on a variety of knitting projects, from baby blankets destined for relatives, to Easter chicks being created for a local hospice. Health issues experienced by the participants include stress, depression, anxiety, insomnia, chronic pain, fibromyalgia, post-traumatic stress disorder as well as severe and enduring mental health issues bought on by loneliness, trauma, illness (for participants and family) and other health issues associated with ageing.

Initial observations

Walking into the room, everyone is drinking tea, knitting and chatting. There is some kind of interaction going on at every turn, from someone fixing a knitted bootie, to someone asking about a recent operation or hospital appointment. The chatter, the helpful exchanges or praise, interweave with people's creative journeys.

The activity of knitting is the constant, the cornerstone from which many positive factors emerge – social connections, skill exchanges, positive reinforcements and friendships. Whilst there is joy and appreciation for the finished items, the emphasis is on the process.

This group has been able to sustain itself over a long period of time. It is a steady community which supports participants through difficult health related circumstances and significantly supports transitions in their lives.

The case studies which follow provide insight into the personal circumstances of participants within the group.

Case Studies

Chat. Bad day. Welcome. Help. Stressed. Advice. Catch up. Stories. Belonging. Sharing. Trying again. ¹

Interview 1

Mandy: Staying well

“This is what keeps me going, coming and having a good laugh, and I say a good laugh is a good tonic. You don’t need medicines.”

Mandy first came to Knit and Natter when her husband passed away. Her husband was a photographer and she has always been involved in ‘making’. “I was taught how to do things by my parents; my dad, he was a furrier.” When her father no longer worked, she described how her mum went to the market and came back with some fabric saying, “instead of me buying my aprons, let’s make our own.” Mandy went on to describe all sorts of making projects, from clothes and aprons to furniture. She hates waste, and is committed to making and recycling materials, a passion of a lifetime, which she brings to the group, along with her knitting expertise.

“Everybody does something different, everybody brings something different.” She appreciates the people, the conversation, the diversity of making projects, and the laughs. Whilst we chat, she is asked about chest sizes for cardigans and shares ideas and skills with me and others.

She finds it hard to remember the names of people in the group; since her breakdown, Mandy has struggled to find words and experiences memory loss. However, there is no doubt that Mandy feels entirely comfortable within the group, sharing her life, her knowledge and skills, and learning from others. Knit and Natter helps Mandy to stay well: “this is what keeps me going, coming and having a good laugh, and I say a good laugh is a good tonic. You don’t need medicines.”



Interview 2

Deborah: Caring through prolonged trauma

“It took me weeks to come back after my husband passed, but I knew I should come back, or I’d end up in ‘Park House’ if I didn’t.” Deborah tells us that the group joke about ‘ending up in Park House’ (a local secure unit), if they didn’t knit.

Deborah has attended Knit and Natter for 18 months. She was a carer for her husband and a carer’s charity referred her to the group for support after he passed away. Deborah also cares for her son daily, who has been diagnosed with manic depression and schizophrenia.

“This is ‘me’ time... my mind has been taken off what is waiting at home for me—an intense atmosphere. My son doesn’t trust the NHS, so I am his sole carer.”

The group has provided long-term support for Deborah, through traumatic and on-going life situations. When she comes to Knit and Natter, she feels surrounded by ‘people who care and don’t judge’. “I’ll sit down with anyone here. Sometimes my niece comes with me and I’ll natter to her. I trust everyone and can be open with them.”

She goes on to say, “Coming here has uplifted my social confidence. It’s one of the only places I will come on my own. I went everywhere with my husband.”



Interview 3

Sally: Dealing with Isolation: “Someone like me, that’s on the edges of everything.”

“Before I started at the day centre I locked myself away for three years. I used to walk to the shop with my head down thinking people couldn’t see me because I wasn’t looking at them. I was in a really bad state. I just didn’t have much life. I don’t have much life now, but I’m a lot better. I will go out now.”

“When the day centre closed [Harpurhey Wellbeing Centre]¹, I felt as though I’d been cut off, completely. It’s the centre of my life.”

Sally has experienced multiple health issues, including isolation and loneliness. She lives by herself but has a son who phones her everyday.

“Sometimes I have to get away quick, if it’s very noisy, I can’t stay long. I can knit, but I don’t, it gets me all worked up.” Sally only attends this group. “I just come to give my magazines. I can have a little bit of a talk if I’m really worried.” Sally came last week because she needed to talk to someone about an operation she has been asked to have.

When asked if the knitting is important, Sally responds with: “I just say I’m going to natter, and it means I’ve got something to talk about.” For Sally it is social contact—and what that contact brings. “It builds your confidence, because you see a lot of different people. It gives me something to focus on. I feel guilty if I don’t come.”

Through Knit and Natter, Sally has re-connected to a community of people: “People here don’t know a lot about my family, but they know all about my son, as I’m dead proud of him. They all ask where he is and where he’s going because he’s got a really interesting life. He makes hats for people, very creative. And I used to be a hairdresser.”

Whilst Sally doesn’t place emphasis on the knitting, it’s important to emphasize that Knit and Natter is the only group that Sally has felt able to attend. In dealing with severe social isolation, the human connection and generosity of Knit and Natter has provided a lifeline for Sally.





Summary

Me. Health. Home. Family. Wellbeing. Social. Different. Stress.
Passed. Confidence¹.

The following points identify key qualities of wellness—tools and practices—seen at Knit and Natter.

Human Connection

The needles, the wools and knitting come out of the bags and the process begins, simply and steadily. There is no pressure, no rush. You only have to pick up the needles and begin to stitch. Joan cites that “knitting in particular has been useful as many people can already knit or crochet... it is a safe and non-threatening activity where happily chatting at the same time works well.” There is a familiarity and simplicity to knitting, which participants use as a crucial support. The knitting is a tool which enables people to come together. With this in place, a safe space is created where people can comfortably talk about their lives and their conditions, providing a vital point of emotional support through human connection.

Moment-to-Moment Awareness

There is a steadiness in the stitches. Through a process of hand repetition with simple tools, the knitting unfolds with every moment. Conversation unfolds too—the attention can move, the knitting can be put down, and then returned to with ease. It is a process which naturally enhances moment-to-moment awareness, which in essence, is a mindfulness practice. This mindful process can strengthen our self-awareness, support our focus and bring emotional balance. Through engaging in the process of knitting, participants experience these benefits and, crucially, they can begin to carry these benefits into their daily lives.

Generosity

The knitting provides a centre-point from which a spirit of generosity unfolds. It’s witnessed through the sharing of skills, the kind words and gentle attention to others’ emotional needs. People are full of praise for one another, from the skill used to create a blanket, to the colour combinations used in a cardigan. Gifts are made for friends, for family, for strangers. The sense of meaning and purpose this gives is clearly evident in the group. Participants adopt ‘roles’, from treasurer to ‘expert’ and tea maker. Joan notes, “people’s confidence grows and they often start to volunteer in the centre, friendships are formed and social outings are often arranged between members.”

Helen Felcey and Dena Bagi work together on projects that explore the holistic benefits of clay. Helen is an artist-curator and Dena is studying for her PhD at The University of Sunderland. Both Dena and Helen have a long-standing professional relationships with the British Ceramics Biennial, as an education manager and freelance producer/artist. They both teach across the Manchester School of Art’s MA programme, and Helen also teaches ceramics at the Liverpool John Moores School Of Art & Design. They work together on numerous freelance research and evaluation projects, including their current Pick, Roll, Make project at the Venice Biennial’s Research Pavilion.