



How to knit a flexible mind

Katy Bevan meets Betsan Corkhill of Stitchlinks to talk about her new book and the therapeutic nature of knitting

Someone admires your knitting on a train, and you enter into an easy conversation, feeling boosted by their admiration. Or you are making a gift for a friend's new baby and they are bowled over by your skill and generosity. You're meeting up with some of the friends you met at the local knitting group to see a film. Or you stay home and watch TV, but you are using your time effectively by knitting at the same time. Sounds familiar? We all know that knitting is good for you, but did you know by how much?

I met up with Betsan Corkhill at the Holburne Museum in Bath to talk about the launch of her new book, *Knit for Health and Wellness*, a self-help book where knitting is the answer. Betsan describes knitting as a "bilateral rhythmic social intervention" (I bet you didn't know that you were doing that) and it's not just for people who are 'sick', it's for the rest of us too. "We get no rest from information, news and technology. People feel guilty for sitting and doing nothing. This gives people permission to sit and be quiet," says Betsan. "People don't tend to let their minds roam freely, so it allows the mind to quieten down and open out." It enables people to be in a group without feeling self-conscious and to be better at listening to others.

The subtitle to the book is 'How to knit a flexible mind'. I've seen patterns for knitting a brain, but I'm not sure that's what she means. Learning to knit also encourages people with low confidence to begin to make decisions and take risks. If you make a mistake it's easy to

correct it in knitting. Like that feeling when you are half way through a sweater front and you spot the error you made right at the beginning. You could go back and do it again, or you could decide to learn to live with your mistake: either way it's a great life skill. Being more adaptable to change increases resilience and the ability to deal with all the stuff that life throws at us.

STITCHLINKS

Betsan set up Stitchlinks, a hub for therapeutic knitting, nine years ago and has been causing a stir in knitting circles ever since. In 2010 Stitchlinks produced a survey with Cardiff University to discover how knitting affected the mental and social wellbeing of individuals. There were lots of questions, over 50 in fact, and the compilers were concerned that they wouldn't get enough completed surveys back. They needn't have worried. The knitting networks worked their magic and they received 3,514 valid responses in two weeks from 31 different countries. When asked why they knitted one of the most common answers from respondents was for relaxation. Other reasons included being productive while engaging in other more passive activities such as watching TV, travelling or waiting; social connections and a having creative outlet. The majority said that knitting improved their mood, while 81% of respondents with depression claimed that knitting made them feel happier.

Another interesting outcome from the

survey is the connection that became apparent between knitting and cognitive ability. We are encouraged to use crosswords and computer quizzes to keep our brains agile, though it seems these are nothing compared with negotiating a complicated pattern. Betsan explains; "If you sit doing nothing your brain declines, and there are care homes full of people just sitting there. We know that if you are mentally active and socially engaged you are less likely to develop dementia."

So surely everyone should be encouraged to take part then? "Activity groups that give people purpose and enjoyment could save a huge amount of money for the NHS."

It seems like it's a no brainer for the NHS but real long-term funding is slow in coming as it is so hard to prove the benefits definitively. A knitting group can fit in well with a clinical unit as a low-risk and low-cost solution. Even paying for a group leader would only be for two hours a week – not a huge cost. Clinics are full of people on the maximum doses of antidepressants and morphine-based drugs for pain relief. They take up time clinicians don't have, so there has to be another approach. At the other end of the spectrum a high percentage of people visiting their GP aren't going with a solvable problem, more for a listening ear. "A GP's time is taken up with people who could be using a social knitting group in a GP's surgery run by a district nurse, potentially saving the NHS millions of pounds," says Betsan.



Join in with the #wellMAKING Craftivist Garden and connect





One of the many Knit Stop knitting groups getting together at the Hidden Treasure Tea Room in Exeter



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RELATED PROJECTS

- The **#weIMAKING Craftivists Garden** is a collaboration between the Craftivist Collective, Falmouth University and Arts for Health Cornwall & Isles of Scilly, and is a Connected Communities project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Join in and make your own flower at www.craftivist-collective.com or download the Craftivists app.

- **The Knit Stop** is a Neighbourworks CIC project funded by the People's Health Trust and run by Debbie Judd in Exeter. They host a range of therapeutic knitting groups locally and are currently collaborating with PhD research at the University of Exeter Medical School to better understand how knitting, particularly in groups, impacts on people's individual wellbeing. www.theknitstop.co.uk

- **Fresh Arts Festival** Art therapist Ali Brown is knitting with patients at Southmead Hospital in Bristol. They will be contributing a giant jumper installation to the Fresh Arts Festival in October 2014.

- **Stitching Out Stigma** Anorexia and mental health issues are hard to talk about. This project in South Wales encourages people to X-stitch their thoughts. www.stitchingoutstigma.co.uk

Knit for Health and Wellness: How to knit a flexible mind and more... by Betsan Corkhill ISBN: 9781910291337, £11.99. E-book also available for £5.99 from www.stitchlinks.com



THERAPEUTIC KNITTING

So is there a difference between a regular knitting group that meets in a café once a week and a therapeutic group? A therapeutic group might be held somewhere friendly and non-threatening, not just for those too afraid to go out, but also for husbands who would worry about their wives leaving the house. For the same reason single-sex groups seem to work best – conversations explore a depth of feeling that could be inhibited in a mixed group. "It's much like a regular knitting group except that the space needs to be safe," Betsan explains. "It needs to be within a clinical environment, like the hospital that they are familiar with. Patients might not have the confidence to join a group in a public space. That's a part of the progress, when they move on to another group."

As facilitator she has to manage some disruptive behaviour though, of course, as Betsan points out that can occur in a regular knitting group too. Every knitting group will have a range of people with everyday issues such as moving house or divorce. "I run a social knitting group too, but once people find out what I do they ask for advice about managing their pain, what to do with their problem children... if you really dig deep the groups are quite similar."

A high number of people are managing long-term pain or post-traumatic stress and don't have access to this kind of activity, explains Betsan. "There is a huge problem in society in that we have developed a very passive attitude to health care." People who take responsibility for themselves are being pro-active: knitting puts the power back into their hands.

KNITTING FOR HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Lorimer Moseley, Professor of Clinical Neurosciences and Chair of Physiotherapy at The University of South Australia, has written a supportive introduction to the print version of *Knit for Health and Wellness*: "... Betsan's book is about so much more than knitting and pain. It is about embracing the complexity of how and why our brains produce experiences. It is about making things, giving things, sharing things, while you make your own journey to recovery."

Written as a self-help book and couched in lay-woman terms the book has a light touch that makes it easy to read. There is much that will ring true to the everyday knitter as well as those who struggle with health problems.

Despite the stigma surrounding mental health, lots of patients have come forward with their stories. Betsan's next book will be based on some of these knitting stories, published with permission, from patients and people who have approached Stitchlinks. Betsan has a collection of 700-800 stories, some of which are profound and moving. Future books will focus on the specialisms of working with pain or mental health problems. So now you know – you don't have to struggle with the sudoku, stick with the knitting and you'll be fine.

If you have a story to tell send it to Betsan at Stitchlinks.com. All contributions are anonymous and you don't have to give permission to publish.

