



The Fathom Trust

MAKING WELL

An Ethnographic Study

Prepared by:



Dr Lucy Sheehan,
Cardiff University

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1. Foreword

The English philosopher Alan Watts once famously described his work as trying to 'eff the ineffable'. In this ethnography of our Making Well programme, Dr Sheehan has effed her way through countless hours of GoPro video footage and reams of field notes to bring us a richer understanding of how it is that people came to feel well in a situated context, namely Llanfelltte Farm. Conventional qualitative measures can be limited when they rely on an individual's capacity to tune into and articulate their feelings. The particularity and embodied nature of experience, along with the emplaced nature of wellbeing can easily be missed. When we first considered how to evaluate the Making Well programme, we were aware of the importance of demonstrating some kind of cost-benefit analysis but we also wanted to know whether the programme we had designed was effective in creating a more soulful approach to health and healing. By becoming a 'participant observer' and joining us for eight weeks in the autumn and winter of 2021, Dr Sheehan is now able to offer an account which is faithful and transparent to the experience that she shared with the others in the group. The importance of this, in the context of effective communication between healthcare practitioners and the people who seek their help, cannot be overstated.

As professional disciplines become more specialised, so too does their language, to the detriment of our collective wellbeing. This trend was foreseen by A N Whitehead as early as 1925 writing that, "the specialized functions of the community are performed better and more progressively, but the generalized direction lacks vision. The progressivism in detail only adds to the danger produced by the feebleness of coordination ... in whatever sense you construe the meaning of community ... a nation, a city, a district, an institution, a family or even an individual ... The whole is lost in one of its aspects." If, what we are advocating, is a holistic approach to health and wellbeing, then Dr Sheehan's approach creates for us a space in which we – all those engaged in the practice of Making Well – can engage equally with the question of whether or not our collective efforts are worthwhile, and if so how. In fact, as this work makes clear, a key aspect of the programme that enabled participants to feel well included a holistic approach to wellbeing and a community building approach. For participants, this was a welcome alternative to the biomedical approach which many had experienced as unintentionally dehumanising. By paying patient attention to the people and to the place in which she found herself, Dr Sheehan allows us to see "what is glimpsed is a world in which there is greater trust and less worry; in which mystery or uncertainty do not need to be constantly explained and understood, but can simply be met as they appear...." echoing the words of the cognitive neuroscientist Guy Claxton.

At the heart of this ethnography is the concept of relationality, which helps us to see how humans become well in 'mutually constitutive' relations, with living entities, things, places and movement. In illustrating the key processes through which people come to feel well, Dr Sheehan describes the processes of grounding, embodied awareness, flow, sharing, doing hard things, and experiences of wellbeing during and after each session. 'Processes' here refer to the situated, relational, moment-by-moment practices engaged in as intersubjectively experienced realms of community life. It is useful to understand these processes as distinct, each with a different feel for participants, but interconnected, through the three guiding principles of Fathom, which are craftsmanship, conservation, and contemplation. This emerging sense of feeling well encompassing joy alongside being with how things are echoes research into non-dualistic and sustainable understandings of wellbeing.

Dr Sheehan's claim is that ethnography affords the embodied and analytic mobility required to understand the social organisation of how people come to feel well, and to move away from reductive conceptions of what it means to be 'well'. I hope you will agree that basing the analysis of green social prescribing programmes on the observable, common sense processes through which change is achieved, offers a non-hierarchical approach to research that I think will provide meaningful research evidence, recognisable to the participants involved. Ultimately, this ethnography should be judged on whether or not it has addressed the complexity of the social processes of health and healing apparent in the Making Well programme, and rendered them in terms at once accessible by people within and without the green social prescribing field. Personally, I'd like to commend this approach for its capacity to integrate diverse information about the nature of reality, including diverse beliefs and emotions, and for its ability to give a voice to those struggling to find peace in an unstable world.

Dr. William Beharrell
Founder and CEO of the Fathom Trust



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The Accelerate Programme

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Cardiff University's Clinical Innovation Accelerator (CIA) uses a flexible approach to develop and support Accelerate-sponsored projects such as 'Making Well', enabling agile innovation and collaborative working to achieve long-term improvements in health and well-being outcomes. Accelerate's infrastructure is explicitly designed to promote sustainable economic development for Wales, increasing employment and establishing new enterprises with novel evidence-based products, services, and interventions with potential for local, nation and international impact.



4. Introduction

To fathom once meant 'to reach out and embrace' and was used to describe the act of measuring the girth of a tree with outstretched arms. Today, it tends to be used as a unit of measurement. Much is lost in the current use as individuals are separated from the activity of measurement and the activity of measurement no longer requires reaching out into the natural world with open arms. The Fathom Trust's Making Well programme uses fathoming to signal the importance of returning to a physical connection with the natural world, a sense of depth and discovery, and the centrality of a relational, embodied approach to self-worth. This report is based on an ethnography of the Making Well programme which I experienced as a fellow participant. It describes the processes through which participants, myself included, came to feel well through Making Well.

We begin with an overview of literature and the research methods before describing the Making Well Programme and illustrating the key processes through which people come to feel well. 'Processes' here are understood sociologically and refer to the situated, relational, moment-by-moment practices engaged in as intersubjectively experienced realms of community life. Describing the detail of the processes through which Making Well achieves its aims develops our understanding of how the programme works and how we might conceptualise what it means to feel well. This research suggests that feeling well can be conceptualised as an inherent state made possible through a series of related situated processes – grounding, embodied awareness, flow, sharing and doing hard things. Taking a holistic approach to understanding what it means to be well is a key value of the Fathom Trust, and for the participants of the programme. Consequently, this report aims to provide a feel for the aspects of the programme that enable wellbeing to referrers, commissioners, and policy makers, and to offer a useful contribution to future efforts to evaluate the programme in a manner grounded in the actions and experiences of participants.



5. Literature Overview

Research into wellbeing has proliferated in recent years in a move that follows a new cultural preoccupation with happiness and wellbeing (Ahmed, 2010). Different ways of understanding wellbeing result in an eclectic yet diffuse range of research literature on the topic. Fields that tend to rely on quantifiable measures of subjective wellbeing include economics, mainstream psychology medicine and evaluative research. Subjective wellbeing measures are achieved through asking people directly, through a survey or questionnaire, how happy they are and how satisfied they feel overall with their lives in a given moment. This approach is deemed useful as it produces easily quantifiable results which can be compared. Yet, it is limited as it relies on an individual's capacity to be aware of and articulate how they feel, it decontextualises experience and overlooks the social and emplaced nature of wellbeing. By contrast, studies in the sociology of wellbeing rely on understanding how participants come to feel well in a situated context. This literature draws attention to three important points about wellbeing: that wellbeing is best understood as intersubjective and relational (Thin, 2012; Scott, 2019); that sociocultural norms inform our experience of feeling well (Ahmed, 2010; Jackson 2011); and that research in this field requires us to grapple with inequalities alongside the 'goodness' of human experience (see Kavedžija and Walker, 2015). Research in this field acknowledges that wellbeing means different things to different people and is best understood using methods that pay attention to how wellbeing is done by people, moment by moment.

Research in social prescribing is dominated by generating quantifiable measures of subjective wellbeing. This work has also begun to take seriously the role of nature contact and nature connection for wellbeing (see Martin et al. 2020). Yet, to focus solely on measurement at the expense of understanding the richness of human experience and the interconnections between humans and nature risks obscuring the very processes through which wellbeing emerges. This study is informed by the sociology of wellbeing and a smaller, related field, the sociology of craft. A suggested reading list on these topics can be found at the end of the report. Committing to a situated understanding of wellbeing allows us to see it as processual and emergent. It helps us understand what tend to be conceived of as biological and psychological phenomena in relation to the people, place, and time in which they emerge as observable and accountable. To develop this understanding, I draw on the concept of relationality which helps us see how humans become well in 'mutually constitutive' relations with living entities, things, places and movement (Ingold, 2021a).

6. Methods

Ethnography is the study of a particular group or setting through becoming a part of it. It requires 'thick participation' which involves bodily participation and engagement, alongside 'thick description' which involves describing the observable and accountable work of a setting. Ethnographic fieldwork and analysis therefore occur in tandem. Ethnographic research is well suited to the emergent nature of small-scale community-oriented green social prescribing programmes, yet is rarely used in the field. Most green social prescribing research is based on realist evaluation and seeks to outline what works for whom and under what circumstance. By contrast, through participant observation and observant participation, ethnographic research describes the situated and fundamentally social processes in the social world of a project. Ethnography therefore affords the embodied and analytic mobility required to understand the social organisation of green prescribing programmes, how people come to feel well, and to move away from reductive conceptions of what it means to be 'well'.

To identify the processes through which participants at Fathom come to feel well, I joined the first 8-week Making Well programme on the taster day and for the 8 sessions that followed as a participant observer. This means that I joined in with each activity alongside other participants, whilst also recording and observing what I experienced. Ethical approval was granted by Bangor University's ethics board as part of the broader Accelerate project which comprises of three related projects: A Social Return on Investment Evaluation; a Good Practice Guide; and this ethnography. Participants provided formal consent and ongoing consent was negotiated throughout the programme. Participants were referred to Making Well through MIND's ecotherapy project 'green minds', and by local GPs and the Community Mental Health Team. Those referred through green minds already had a relationship with each other and with the therapeutic horticulturalist working with the programme, Jess Tanner. Those referred by the GP and CMHT were new to each other.

The particular diagnosis of each participant is not important for this report, nor did it feature in the programme aside from occasions where participants chose to share their diagnoses with the group. Nonetheless, it is helpful to those seeking to understand the success of Making Well to participants from a 'mental health pathway'. Particular diagnoses included: brain injury, stroke, substance misuse, anorexia, bipolar affective disorder, schizophrenia, depression and anxiety. Five men and five women, aged between 25 and 60, were referred to the programme. Eight of the ten participants completed the programme, six of whom continued working at Llanfellt as volunteers after the programme ended.

I wore a GoPro to allow me to record the detail of each day whilst focusing on participating in each element of the day. I also recorded voice memos of my experience following each day and wrote fieldnotes upon my return home. For the most part, the camera was unobtrusive, but in moments when participants or crafters became uncomfortable with the camera, I stopped recording. As I watched and re-watched the video recordings from the programme, I could feel the corporeal and sensory world at Llanfellte and could see the moment-by-moment nature of coming to feel well alongside the processes that enable this. The video data evoked a sense of the atmosphere of a given moment alongside the detail of practices as they unfolded. In order to adequately describe how Making Well achieves its aims, I attended to the seemingly less tangible elements of my own unfolding felt sense alongside the observable practices within the scene. This required attention to the specific, including the relations between people, natural materials, tools, landscape, ecology, time and space. Close attention to felt sense and embodied communication enabled description of the unspoken and tacitly understood, which are particularly important when understanding the experiences of wellbeing through crafting and nature connection.

This project inevitably generated large amounts of data that faithfully show the rich detail of the programme. For accessibility, this report presents the key processes through illustrative vignettes that offer the reader a feel for what it means to participate in the social world of Fathom. They include the relational, embodied, sensory detail of a moment alongside accounts from participants. I shared the vignettes with the Making-Well team to engage in a dialogue about their adequacy in portraying the key processes that run through the programme. This dialogue supported me to understand the processes from the perspective of the people delivering the programme and to make a distinction between each crafter's pedagogical practices and the general processes central to participants' experiences. Each vignette is supported by a brief analysis of how each social process is achieved. Basing the analysis of green prescribing programmes on the observable, common sense processes through which change is achieved, offers a non-hierarchical approach to research that provides meaningful research evidence, recognisable to the participants involved.

7. Summary of Making Well

'Making Well: Health and Healing Through Green Crafts' is a 'green prescribing' programme aiming to promote healing for people experiencing psychological distress by using traditional craft making, conservation, and contemplation. The programme, led by The Fathom Trust, brings together local artisans with mental health service users and health and social care services, landowners and the third sector to create opportunities for community-based rehabilitation. The six-month pilot project was funded by Accelerate, in partnership with the NHS Powys Teaching Health Board, Cardiff University, Bangor University's Social Value Hub, Mind, the Brecon Beacons National Park and the local community. Two taster days and two eight-week 'Making Well' programmes took place at Llanfellte Farm in Blwch, Brecon. Referrals were made through MIND's ecotherapy project 'green minds', local GPs, and the Community Mental Health Team. Each session was spent outside on the farm, working with natural materials through willow weaving, whittling, and therapeutic horticulture. These crafting activities were interspersed with and framed by a range of contemplative practices. This report describes the processes through which participants in the 'Making Well' programme come to feel well.



8. The Place - Llanfelle Farm

A visual depiction of Llanfelle alongside descriptions of the key sites and activities aims to support an understanding of how the farm was used by crafters and participants of Making Well, and of the movements across and engagement with the site during each day. These drawings were created by a fellow participant on the course who drew on her experiences in response to the ethnographic vignettes.

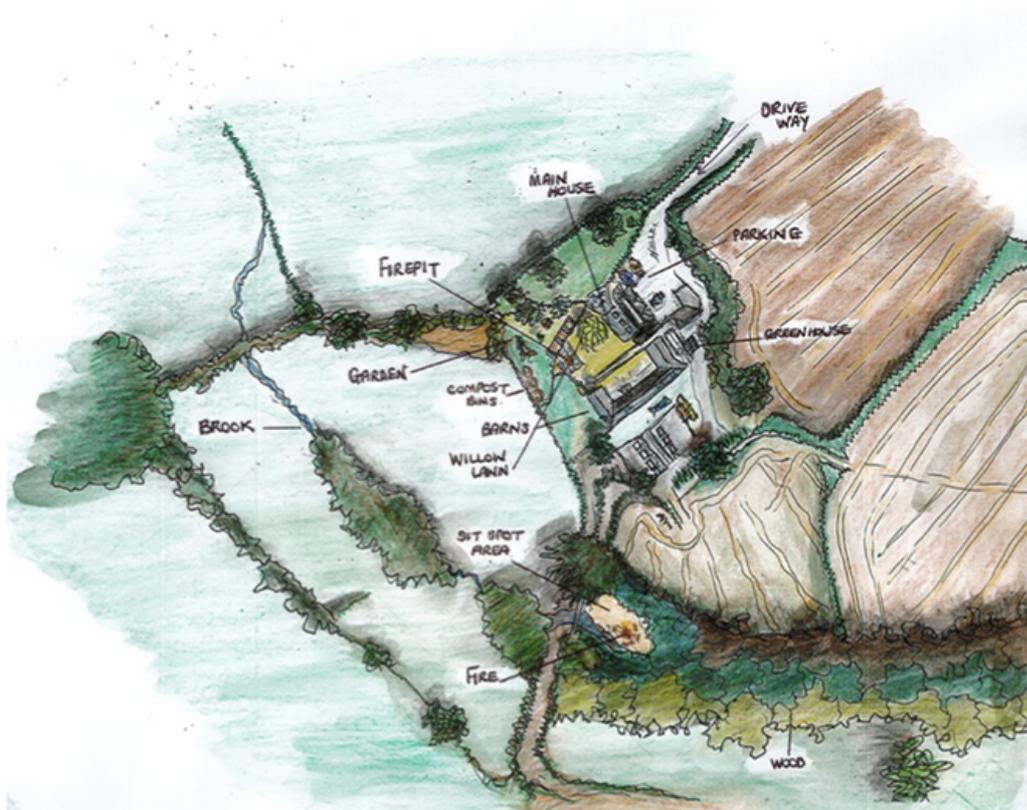


Illustration by Alison Stratford

The farmhouse

A stone farmhouse is the first building to welcome you upon arrival down the long drive at Llanfelle Farm. A series of barns provide shelter for lunch, bathroom breaks, and respite from the cold and rain when needed. These buildings are part of the fabric of the social organisation of Fathom, though the majority of the programme is spent outside on the willow lawn, in the woods, and in the farmhouse garden. Llanfelle Farm is located on Buckland Hill, Bwlch, Brecon, with views from the garden extending to Tor y Foel Hill. The farm was offered as a location for the Making Well programme by the then owners Kathleen and Phillip Keene who supported with the logistics of the programme. The farm is now part of the Buckland Estate and owners Robert and Kate Filmer-Wilson continue the generous agreement that preceded them.

The willow lawn

A statuesque willow tree grows on the lawn near the farmhouse and the barns. This willow tree is a focal point, a backdrop, and a companion to the activities run on the lawn. Each morning, we meet here before the ecocraft activities begin, informally catching up and expressing relief at being back at Llanfellte. On many mornings, the welcome exercise takes place here, where the group stands in a circle, sharing how they are feeling or how their week has been. This was usually led by Dr William Beharrell who founded the Fathom Trust and organised the Making Well programme. The welcome is followed by a grounding exercise in which the group are invited to close their eyes and settle into the surroundings, and the sensory and affective experience of arriving here, as a group. We return here throughout the day for lunch and for sharing our experiences of ecocrafting. The hardstanding adjacent to the lawn is the location for willow weaving with Heather Dickens, and often for whittling with Barn the Spoon, offering an ideal spot to sit around the fire pit and craft as a group. Protected on one side by the farmhouse and the willow tree, and open on the other with a view down the valley, this bright, open space, though exposed to the elements, feels like a safe, inviting place to settle for the day. As with arrival, the willow lawn also serves as the place for departure, where the group say their goodbyes and share thanks for the day together.

The woods

Further into Llanfellte, past the willow lawn, through a small field and down a farm track, we come to the woods. Through the gate, there is a small clearing with a large tree trunk laying on its side, blackened by bonfire. Between the tree trunk and the newly planted trees at the entrance is our primary location for whittling around the fire. Beyond here are the woods, the place where we coppice for hazel, for material for our wreaths, and where we find our sit spots to meditate. These activities are led by Jess Tanner the therapeutic horticulturist. They are supported by Clare Clark the occupational therapist who makes herself available for one-to-one support throughout each day, and shares ideas for journaling practice inspired by experiences of the programme. A stream runs through the woods and alongside the clearing, down the valley, and its sound alters each week, with rainfall and wind. Grounding exercises at the start and end of the day also take place in this clearing, shielded from the wind, protected by the trees. The ecocrafting and contemplation activities take place in relation with the trees, water, and weather, and together, provided a sense of holding for the group.

The garden

The farmhouse garden, next to the willow lawn, is enclosed by a half stone wall and slopes downwards to the valley and mountains beyond. The garden is organically managed as a therapeutic space. It features a kitchen garden area for vegetable and herb production as well as an area dedicated to the production of cut flowers. There is a small orchard area of fruit trees, as well as a newly planted circular living willow enclosure to hold space for one-to-work work and work with small groups. The garden takes inspiration from the surrounding rural landscape, with many of the structures created using hazel and willow coppiced from the woodland onsite. The garden offers a space to notice the change in seasons, the ebb and flow of life, and our connection to other living things. Here, we plant bulbs, harvest herbs, grade hazel and willow, make woven compost bins, sketch with charcoal we made, and are led in a range of contemplative activities. We tend to the garden, plant bulbs that will emerge as the new cohort begins and build structures to be used by the cohorts that follow.



9. The processes of Making Well

1. Grounding



Illustration by Alison Stratford

"We gather in the woods today for our morning grounding session, standing in a circle we share how our week has been one by one. There is a nervousness between the group that happens upon arrival, before we have settled in for the day. People look down to the floor, shuffle their feet, and speak quickly and quietly about their weeks. Jess leads the group into a sit spot exercise, where we are each invited to find a spot in the woods to sit, to sense how it is to be, and to journal. Today, I find a fallen tree next to the stream and sit, feeling safe in the shared quietness of the group, and tuning into the sound of the water passing by. When we return, we are invited to share our experiences. There is a stillness within the group, we look at one another with gentle smiles. We realise this was the first moment that each of us had really checked in with ourselves and the world since last week. One woman felt compelled to write a poem and was overcome with tears as she began to share it. Two women spoke of the life of the woods allowing them to feel the loss of and connection to loved ones who had passed away. One man shared, 'Just standing there listening to the water, it just takes you away from your mind. I've been feeling very negative and standing there I feel more positive. Just listening to that sound of the slow moving water, it's going somewhere, we don't know where, forever. It makes you emotional.' Another woman noted the importance of shared contemplation, 'I think being here, with other people, and knowing that there's other people make it possible. You have to be very brave to go into the woods alone and sit, and very honest to share with others what's going on inside. These things are hard and together this group makes them possible. It helps you realise you're not the only one."

Grounding refers to the process of shifting into a state of awareness of your own felt sense, that is, noticing your experience - your physical and emotional sensations in a given moment. It is a process in that it involves a shift from activities as usual, into a moment where the instruction is to cease talk and industrious activity, instead becoming still and noticing. Space for grounding is built into the structure of each day of Making Well, through a range of contemplative practices, such as the grounding exercises that bookend each day, sit spots, and the mindfulness meditation exercises in the gardening sessions. As such, grounding through contemplative practice is woven through the fabric of each day, offering a contrastive yet aligned experience to the crafting activities, and contributing to the 'therapeutic taskscape'. Critics argue that the practice of tuning into felt sense can be seen within individualised conceptions of mindfulness and self-responsibility that are becoming increasingly popular solutions to burnout and improving productivity. Here however, tuning into felt sense is relational and emplaced. Relational grounding is made possible by the sense of safety and togetherness provided by silent contemplation with fellow participants, and the holding provided by contemplation with and in nature. Participants spoke of the safety of the supportive holding of the group and how relating to the natural world enabled them to feel. Emplaced grounding is made possible through the ritual of regular sit-spots in the woods, as participants come to know this is what we do here. We know that we gather in the clearing of the woods, disperse, and re-gather as a group to discuss our experience. We know the social expectations of each element, of pausing, noticing, feeling and sharing, which allows for the possibility of honesty, vulnerability and bravery at each point.

As is evident in the shift in atmosphere before and after the sit spot exercise, and in participants' accounts, grounding not only involves a shift in doing but also a shift in feeling. Grounding tends to be accompanied by a sense of calm or a rush of emotion upon noticing how this moment is for you. The intentional pause and noticing essential to grounding, alongside the sensory landscape, can allow us to see ourselves as relationally connected to others not present, such as loved ones who have passed, and to the natural world of which we are a part. It can also bring forth a rush of creativity or form of expression, as seen in the lyrical accounts of participants and their creative endeavours. Of course, grounding can be difficult, and it is not possible for everyone to be with the experience. Being with the experience can bring up awareness of painful emotions or physical sensations in the body that can feel intolerable and being unable to notice rather than engage with one's thoughts can feel like a failure. Sharing following the sit spot provided the space for participants to share both difficult and pleasant experiences. In these accounts, it is evident that grounding is socially negotiated, oriented towards others, and influenced by relationships, encounters, and interaction, which influence how participants define its meaning. Through the process of emplaced and relational grounding, contemplative practice, community, and nature are not separate, isolated domains but are simultaneously experienced and offer a connection to the present and to people and spaces beyond the present.

2. Embodied awareness



Illustration by Alison Stratford

"We are sitting around a fire in a clearing in the woods as we observe Barn make 'nice shavings' from a piece of aspen. Barn instructs slow, gentle, processual movement to enjoy making shavings. I attempt to follow his words and mimic his actions. I am quickly frustrated by my lack of capacity to do as Barn does. My shavings are not smooth, they dig in at the middle of the wood and taper off at the end. Intent on making shavings correctly, the pace of my strokes becomes quicker, sending shavings flying off towards my neighbour. To my relief, she is also having difficulty and expresses this to Barn. 'I can't do it like you're doing it'. This is unsurprising as we haven't whittled before, yet the desire to be good, competent and proficient quickly arose nonetheless. Barn reminds us, 'whenever it's not quite going to plan, take your time, be gentle on yourself and on the tools and materials. Just try to adjust your technique rather than trying to do it quicker or using more force – that's the rule really.' As Barn demonstrates that making shavings is a matter of positioning the whole body in a more careful posture, I notice how my body is moving. With the wood being carved in my left hand, which reaches across my body and towards my right hip, and the knife in my right hand, I realise I had been making jerky movements with only my arms, with a tightness and rigidity that suggested I was working against, rather than with, the rest of my body and the wood. I pause to inspect the wood and I notice how where the knife has worked with the grain of the wood it has left a smooth surface that reflects the light. Turning my body to the right opens up my chest and allows fluid movement as I make contact with the wood to take slivers of shavings. Making shavings becomes a smoother and gentler process. This results in a pleasing pile of shavings forming to the right of my chair."

Crafting is a process which involves embodied learning and awareness, observing emotions and thoughts, and working in relation to the natural material. It is not simply a matter of copying the object made by the crafter but an emergent process that involves interactions between maker, materials, tools, and circumstances which may not be foreseen, such as knots in the wood, nicking oneself with the knife, or taking too much wood. As you work with the wood, the wood also works on you, as you shift your knife grip or hold to work with the grain of the wood, with harder and softer parts, and around knots. This requires prolonged observation and interaction with the material, through which you appreciate the unique qualities of the wood whilst noticing how each stroke of the knife feels, adjusting and adapting to the material as you go. This sensory engagement with the wood allows one to notice far more than just a piece of wood, as the smell, textures, colours, and density bring forth a vitality that goes unnoticed to the untrained eye upon first look. This way of seeing is supported by whittling whilst surrounded by the life of trees. Trees, young and old, grow in the woodland, whilst the fire, where trees whose lives have come to an end burn, offers warmth and the deeply nurturing sound of a gentle crackle.

Embodied awareness then, like grounding, is a relational process. When learning to whittle, not only do participants become aware of where they place their body, they also notice how their body feels when making a stroke, and how they feel emotionally when doing so. This interplay is crucial for learning to craft and is implicit in Barn's instruction to slow things down. Psychological literature has considered the role of interoception, the ability to perceive one's inner bodily feelings, and introspection, the ability to perceive one's own emotional states, as the key mechanisms through which mindful practices help us to feel well. This ethnographic data suggests that this is more than inner experience, rather, it is social as it is learned, practiced, and accountable. Relational embodied knowledge occurs through interaction with the crafter, with fellow participants, with natural material, and with the natural world. Participants are instructed to become aware of how they are using their bodies and, through doing so, they alter their experience of themselves and their actions. In this instance, this enables shift in the meaning of crafting from something to be good at, to something to be curious about and to explore through embodied and sensory experience. This process is supported by a series of crafting instructions that operate as broader life lessons, such as focusing on enjoying making a peeling which offers a lesson in attending to process over outcome, as well as slowing down and being gentle with oneself in the face of difficulty. The course was often delivered through craft metaphors that came to life through embodied experience and took on meaning for participants in their lives beyond Llanfellte.

3. Flow



Illustration by Alison Stratford

"Sitting around the fire on the Willow tree lawn, we are making willow lanterns. Heather instructs us to choose pieces of willow with the right qualities, malleable pieces. She offers each person patient instruction one by one and tells us that feeling into the movement, rather than overthinking, will make things easier. My neighbour helps the woman next to her, explaining that to make a wider base you need to hold each piece of willow further out. As we weave our lanterns, I feel the warmth of the sun on my face cooled by the gentle breeze and hear the willow tree sway. There is a sense of shared calm as everyone crafts together. I fold one piece of willow over another, hold it in place with my hand, then fold another, then another, then another, and another, completely absorbed. There is nothing else in the world but this moment. Then my lantern is complete. I notice a deep relief to be absorbed in doing rather than my thoughts, to be outside and away from the screen, in the company of these people, and focused on what is here. This relief is in contrast to the busyness and stress of my life outside of these days at Llanfelltte that I find myself wanting to make more lanterns, to remain absorbed. This sense of the craft activities as a respite is echoed in conversations with the group over lunch. As we sit outside the barn eating warm vegetable soup, one woman describes the activities as 'a respite where I get to completely focus on a task, where social anxiety drops away, and the focus takes up the space in my thoughts that would usually be busy thinking about what to say to the person next to me, how to be with people, worrying I'm being strange. It gets rid of it and allows just you and the task in the group to be enough.' These moments of absorption scattered through each day offer each of us respite in different ways."

Flow describes the process through which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter, where the experience of time shifts and one ceases to feel separate from task or world. It describes a therapeutic experience that occurs through the interplay between bodily activity, the environment, and others. For participants in Making Well, flow was made possible through providing an experience that contrasted with their daily lives and other activities in the day at Making Well. Coming to Llanfelltte offered participants the opportunity to be in a place and with people outside of their daily lives. Participants spoke of the rarity of spending a day outside and a day in the company of others. They talked of time working differently at Llanfelltte as each day seemed to fly by. The shape of each day also supported participants to experience moments of flow, particularly through weaving, gardening, and whittling activities. These moments stood out to participants as they offered a contrast to the grounding offered through the contemplative activities and to the moments in the day where social expectations returned, such as arriving, walking between spaces, and lunch breaks. Knowing that during ecocraft activities one was expected to focus on the task at hand and that conversation would be limited enabled participants to relax into the moment and become absorbed by the task. Less conversation however does not mean less sociality. Participants were held and supported by fellow participants and by the natural environment, as they interacted and created with natural materials in moments of flow. Participants related the contrast in people, place, sense of time, and type of activity to their experience of flow helping them to feel well. The feeling of absorption in moments of flow offered participants the chance to experience the world differently through making. Many had not experienced such focus and absorption since childhood and expressed surprise that it was possible for them to have respite from anxious thoughts. This element of realisation that accompanied moments of flow led participants to discuss how they might integrate these experiences into their daily life. Knowing that different ways of experiencing the world exist opened possibilities for feeling well that participants had previously not thought possible.

4. Sharing



Illustration by Alison Stratford

"After a long period of quiet, industrious whittling, accompanied by the sound of the fire crackling, the stream running by, and knives on wood, a man pauses and begins to talk to the group. He shares a feeling of sadness at his family struggling to understand how long it is taking him to get better. He describes relief at being away from home and 'being with people who are in the same situation'. The two men next to him offer kind words of reassurance. The woman next to me says, 'It can make you feel like everything is your fault, but I do believe a lot of it is about fear because they don't know what to do with you... I'm really pleased to meet you and be a part of this journey together. It's great that you're here.' The man smiles in response and says, 'I think you've got to have something to look forward to you know. Being here is helping me realise that I've done a lot in my life, meeting people who've never done anything like whittling or basket making. People who understand. It feels like a beginning, makes your heart feel warmer'. Barn shares his experience of being part of a healing community and agrees that a group coming together to support one another can be powerful. He hopes to achieve this on a more permanent basis at Llanfellte. A quiet sense of understanding one another better fills the space. We return to whittling as the gardening group walk over and our session winds down."

Spontaneous sharing during ecocraft activities provides a form of social connection distinct from the formal sharing that follows many of the contemplative activities. Formal sharing is tied to the informal sharing described here, as it teaches participants about the purpose of the course by encouraging them to feel into, reflect upon, and share their present moment experiences as a practice in developing self-knowledge, self-confidence, and social connection. Here, a sense of flow, with each person sat around the fire entirely focused on whittling, provided the safe space required for one participant to share his troubles, and for other participants to receive him. As he shares, the participant develops an account that works up the shared experience and shared understanding between himself and the group, which he distinguishes from the lack of understanding from his family. His fellow participants take up this idea and develop an explanation of why those who do not experience mental health difficulties struggle to be supportive and in doing so, they affirm his belonging in the group. Crafting in group also allows comparison and assessment of one's skills – those who could once make things, draw things, or feel confident to go out into the world, remember these skills, whilst others find them.

This brief interaction showcases the sense of belonging and the sense of feeling well that can emerge from the space created by industrious crafting alongside fellow participants with shared experiences. Of particular importance is the lack of judgement experienced by participants. This echoes research into the kinship that develop on retreats, highlighting that these experiences are a place for connection, not just for self. Whilst participants rarely shared the detail of their mental health difficulties, the sense of similarity between participants arose through the framing of each day and many of the sessions as mindful activities to support wellbeing. The sense of belonging that emerged through occasions of sharing was accompanied by a fear that it would be lost when the programme ended. This reflects the experiences of participants of the short-term nature of wellbeing programmes. Taking a longer-term approach, Making Well built in the idea of community building from the outset, inviting participants to identify their passions and skills and continue as volunteers. That six of the eight participants have taken this up is testament to the community building possibilities of the programme and the importance of that community to participants.

5. Doing hard things



Illustration by Alison Stratford

"We set off from the garden down to the woods to coppice hazel from which to make our compost bins. Jess instructs who is to get what sizes of hazel, gives us suitable tools, and describes the importance of coppicing carefully to protect the health of the tree. In the woods, I notice how out of my comfort zone I feel going off the beaten track and how stepping into the edges of a woodland feels unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Getting in amongst the holly to get at the hazel, I am careful not to cut myself or rip my clothes. A woman in our group held the holly back to allow me access. Using the secateurs to coppice the hazel is physically tough, requiring the confidence and strength to make a clean cut. Having collected enough, we drag the hazel back up to the garden and process it, stripping it back, organising it by size and grading it. The gardening session that follows where we build the compost bins from hazel and willow is physical too. Working with branches over 12 foot tall, we work in pairs to weave the branches through the uprights, following the natural curve of the branches as we go. My partner and I negotiate how to help each other keep the uprights in the right place as we put the butt ends against them and make a continuous weave from one piece of willow to another. Stepping back to see the compost bins, we are surprised at how they have taken shape and are beginning to look quite beautiful. The next gardening group finishes the bins which, along with our planting work, will be an important part of the gardening process at Llanfelltte."

Doing hard things was central to the Making Well Programme and involved both physical and social challenges, with an accompanying sense of achievement. Working with the changing seasons is central to the design of the programme and this cohort participated in the autumn and winter garden preparations for spring. One of these activities was building compost bins for the garden. This was a challenging and equally rewarding process. Coppicing and sorting hazel and weaving with tall branches was a physically demanding process. This sense of difficulty was experienced throughout the programme. Participants experienced callouses from gripping tools too tightly, scratches from the woodland, and stiffness and chill blains from sitting in the biting cold. This invited shared solutions such as placing wood under feet to protect from the cold, helping each other by moving branches, and regularly getting up to move. Social challenges came in the form of working together on particular activities, such as the compost bins and weaving trugs for the garden. Each of these activities involved negotiation that was at times playful and at times focused and industrious. These negotiations tended to focus on the nature of the material we were working with. Here, we shifted our approach based on the shape and stiffness of the hazel and how it bent around what was already there, and we took great pleasure in finding the perfect alignment of a sharp curve fitting neatly against an upright to make the bins stronger. This negotiation, much like going off the beaten track in the woods, was unfamiliar and edgy territory for many participants, which contributed to the sense of achievement, both in oneself and in the object created. This echoes broader ecotherapy literature which ties moving out of one's comfort zone with a sense of self efficacy and developing trust in the support offered. Uniquely, for Making Well participants the memory of physical and social challenges was quickly softened not only by shared pride in our accomplishments, but also by the knowledge that our efforts would be of practical value to the groups that followed.

6. Well-being



Illustration by Alison Stratford

I leave with a sense of calm, having moved my body and been in easy company with others and with Llanfelltte. I feel 'outsideness' in my body. My lungs feel full and my body feels tired. I can still sense the tactility of natural material in my hand, the feeling of tingling skin after gripping the wood knife, the willow and the bodkin; the softness of the sage leaf, and ridges in the ferns. I can still see the vibrant colours of the autumnal leaves set against the green valley, a stark contrast to the grey of the city. My body feels alive and I am noticing how I feel joyful yet quietly settled. There is a sense of accomplishment too – together we made vegetable trugs to use in the garden. I feel inspired and filled with ideas about how to spend more time doing what feels like enlivening work. This feeling is so pleasurable I want to hold on to it. Similar feelings were echoed by participants as we stood around the fire in the final sharing exercise of the day. Each person felt more at ease, calmer, and felt a sense of satisfaction. One woman who was having a difficult day with her mental health spoke of feeling comfortable not to be sunshine and rainbows, and to take herself off when she needed. For her, being outside and feeling safe and supported gave her a lift in mood. Another woman spoke of feeling a rush of creativity that she hadn't experienced in years and her keenness to draw and write poetry again. One man described relearning lost skills, 'being here is helping me realise that there's things I can do again'. He talked of feeling love in his heart for the group but also a deep fear of loss at the potential the group and this feeling might end. This sense of feeling well affects each of us differently, yet we share in our wish to keep returning to it.

It is possible to see how the multiple, overlapping processes described in this report create the possibilities for participants to feel well across moments of a given day of Making Well. The coalescence of these processes contributes to the sense of wellbeing participants are left with after each day of Making Well. As feeling well is a social process, it is experienced in ebbs and flows during and after the Making Well days. The vignette presents moments in which wellbeing is made accountable, through group sharing, and through a description of wellbeing as sensory memory. The end of the day offers a moment for taking stock and the opportunity to share reflections of how the experience has left people feeling. The framing of each activity as an opportunity to 'make well' is important as the group understand the purpose of the programme and the expectation that these experiences offer a chance to feel well. Wellbeing is made accountable through the sharing following each session through which participants develop a shared language. Participants beam as they share feelings of burgeoning creativity and a reconnection with past passions and competencies. Simultaneously, they describe the sensitive, non-judgemental holding of the group that creates space for participants to come as they are, without constricting social expectations and programme structure, which offers an opportunity for participants to feel well whilst also experiencing flux with their mental health. This emerging sense of feeling well encompassing joy alongside an acceptance of how things are echoes research into non-dualistic and sustainable understandings of wellbeing.

Seemingly individual benefits of the programme, such as developing a renewed sense of meaning, purpose, and confidence, cannot be separated from the intersubjectively experienced realms of community life through which they emerge. Feeling well at Llanfellte develops through relationships between people, the natural world and objects. It is sustained by the processual nature of feeling well alongside practical efforts to develop an enduring community. The processual nature of feeling well means the feeling does not simply end when the session ends and the moment to share has passed, but it continues as an embodied sensory memory following the session. Participants felt attached to feeling well and the processes that enable it and described an anticipatory sense of loss at the prospect of the feeling ending. Arguably, this concern demonstrates the value participants place on feeling well, and this sense of value heightens the sensory memory of the experience. Participants spoke of returning to their sense of feeling well as a resource between group sessions that helped them to cope with their fluctuating mental health. They also described feeling buoyed by a sense of hope that the group would continue to meet and craft, and that they would have a part in it.

10. Conclusion

Participants of Making Well come to feel well through the processes of grounding, embodied awareness, flow, sharing, doing hard things, and experiences of wellbeing during and after each session. It is useful to understand these processes as distinct, as each has a different feel for participants, while retaining an understanding of their interconnection through the fabric of Making Well as a whole. Many of these processes, such as grounding, embodied awareness, flow, and wellbeing, tend to be described with a primary focus on individual experience as they have been considered in scientific and psychological literature. The Making Well programme understood through the embodied, sensory and analytic mobility of ethnography helps us to view these seemingly individual processes as fundamentally social, relational, and overlapping. Each process involves connection to self, connection to others, and connection to nature, which in any given moment are difficult to disentangle. The different ways of being experienced as possible such as: flow allowing respite from one's own thoughts and social conventions; grounding offering a space to be with oneself, with nature, and a sense of lost loved ones; and embodied awareness offering a different way of knowing and doing in the world; all worked as resources that helped participants to feel well beyond the programme.

Key aspects of the programme that enabled participants to feel well included a holistic approach to wellbeing and a community building approach. For participants, a holistic approach to wellbeing was a welcome alternative to the biomedical approach which many experienced as unintentionally dehumanising. In Making Well, participants were not asked to subscribe to a treatment model or fit a diagnosis, and instead experienced an approach to coming to feel well that accepted where they were. It is important that this sense of meeting the whole person as they are is retained going forward. This presents a challenge to be met when working with referring and funding organisations who work with the measures of subjective wellbeing described above. The community building approach was also central to the success of the programme. A feeling of belonging alongside assurances of the longevity of the programme, helped a sense of community to grow. The future oriented aspect of the programme enabled participants to invest in relationships with others and with the place. The mechanisms through which the Fathom Trust support the community to continue currently include a community café and craft clubs. Participants describe their continued involvement in the programme as a lifeline. In a public health system dominated by notions of individualistic self-responsibility and time limited care this perhaps raises alarm bells. However, the possibilities that Making Well affords participants to develop and maintain relationships with the natural world, with one another, with themselves, and with a craft, offers opportunities for participants to learn new ways of understanding and being with their fluctuating mental health whilst supported and held in community. Such a holistic approach to supporting wellbeing also presents a unique starting point from which further creative and sustainable approaches to public health delivery can develop.

The Making Well programme was as much about the growing of the team as it was about the benefits to participants. The practices of the crafters is the subject of a Good Practice Guide that is in currently in development. It is enough here to note that the team would benefit from being supported through contemplative group supervision and one to one supervision. Going forward, both the team and participants would benefit from the development of a role responsible for liaising with participants and referrers to reduce barriers to inclusion, and to support the team and the participants to understand what each participant wants to achieve. This role could provide a useful form of feeding back participant experiences of what is and what isn't working for them on the programme. As Making Well grows, the team will also need to pay careful attention to how space is held for each group. Outside observers of this close-knit cohort shifted participants' experience of the day as they felt on display. Running multiple groups alongside one another may produce similar perceived barriers for participants to overcome, whilst also offering opportunities for making social connections, and sharing knowledge and experience.

Contemplative programmes such as Making Well require equally contemplative research methods to understand the essence of what makes the programme meaningful for participants. Ethnography enabled me to embrace wellbeing, to do wellbeing, alongside participants, and develop a deep understanding of what wellbeing meant for different people in different moments. Embedding ethnographers in social prescribing programmes offers a significant opportunity to develop our understanding of wellbeing, and to counter the tendency towards reductive conceptions of wellbeing, humans, and nature. One benefit of describing the processes through which Making Well works is the development of a common sense language that can be understood by participants, policy makers, and researchers alike. Going forward, this approach will be developed with the team in the development of a meaningful good practice guide.



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13. About the author



Dr Lucy Sheehan

Lucy is an ethnographic researcher, with a PhD in Social Work and an MSc in Social Science Research Methods from Cardiff University. Her ethnographic work has explored the topics of self-transformation in social work; and the role of nature connection, crafting and mindfulness practices in supporting wellbeing. She is part of a research group writing on ethnography, ethnomethodology, and phenomenology.

After studying International Relations at Exeter University, Lucy completed a master's in social work at Cardiff University. She has experience of working in a therapeutic social work team for addictions, and within mental health and children's social work.

Lucy is a movement teacher and trainee psychotherapist. She specialises in 'being' practices that help us tune in with ourselves, each other, and the world around us through the wisdom of the body. She understands the transformative nature of movement, meditation, and psychotherapy, and draws on her experience in sharing these practices with others. Lucy is a qualified yoga teacher and is currently training in contemplative psychotherapy at the Karuna Institute.

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