

Working Wellies



at



TheHorseCourse

**Supported volunteering with horses,
hens and horticulture**

Based on NHS 5 ways to Wellbeing



Connect



Be Active



Notice



Learn



Give

BACKGROUND

TheHorseCourse specialises in equine-assisted services to build psychosocial skills when talk-based support isn't working. Our referrals come from NHS mental health, Social Care, Schools and other specialists - and often our participants have been struggling for a long time with multiple needs and challenges.

Our ReStart programme is short and intensive and over time we learnt that whilst highly effective (see www.thehorsecourse.org/evidence), our participants sometimes need help with the next steps: for example to build confidence with social groups, and to integrate into mainstream education, training and work or community life. In 2020 we started our supported volunteering programme, as a way of providing this longer term support in the context of growing and eating from seed to table - and caring for animals and each other. We run groups for adults and for children and young people. Most people come weekly or more often. The approach is progressive but not time limited.

We work within the framework of the *NHS 5 Ways to Wellbeing* - a well-established approach which fits really well in the outdoors.



Our Working Wellies “theory of change” shows how we work on each of the five areas of the [NHS 5 Ways to Wellbeing](#), and the outcomes we see in practice. A little more about each of the five areas and how we work on them in our context is explained overleaf.

Theory of Change: *Working Wellies* supported volunteering

Referrals:

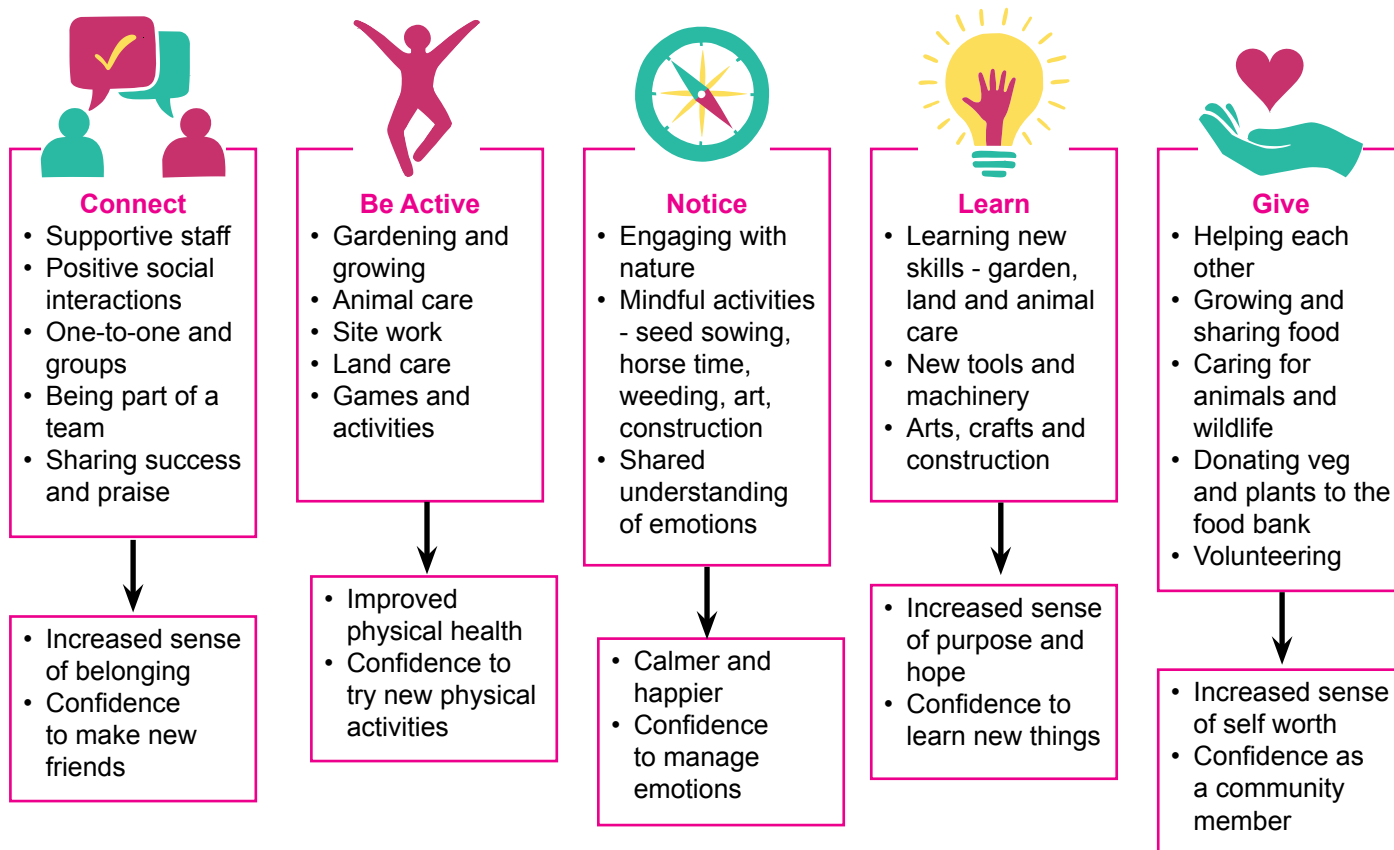
- Referred by professionals
- Continuation support after TheHorseCourse ReStart programme or a Taster session – familiar with TheHorseCourse eight core psychosocial skills

Resources:

- Staff member (Volunteering Leader)
- Community volunteers to support individuals and groups (Wranglers)
- Kitchen garden, hens and horses
- Peaceful, friendly site

Change Mechanism

NHS 5 ways to wellbeing delivered in an outdoor setting – actions and outcomes



Long term Outcomes

- Improved resilience and wellbeing leading to **reduced reliance** on NHS and social care,
- Increased confidence, ambition and engagement leading to **inclusion in education, training and work**
- Increased participation and social confidence leading to **increased social inclusion**



CONNECT



Our Working Wellies supported volunteering is usually a follow-on option after the intense 1-to-1 equine-assisted ReStart programme. Joining a group can be uncomfortable, but the staff and the place are already known and trusted. New volunteers are supported to manage their own comfort zone - perhaps joining a group for short periods at first, having a 'safe place' to retreat to, or a trusted 'buddy' to work alongside. Conversation between volunteers is never forced but comes naturally as we work amongst the plants side by side. We break for drinks, biscuits, healthy snacks from the garden (carrots and sugar snap peas are particular favourites), creating

opportunities to share successes or setbacks, and to find common interests. Cooking and eating together is a great way to forge bonds, while developing healthy eating habits. We make soups, salads, stir fries, noodles and pizzas with the ever-changing harvest.

"She has made new friendships - one in particular. We are now arranging to meet with that friend in our spare time. For our child this has been a huge milestone and she has really grown in her self-esteem and courage" (Parent)

BE ACTIVE



From filling haynets for hungry ponies, harvesting veg and mucking out barns to mowing, strimming and even small building projects – volunteers build strength, stamina and fitness with purposeful and meaningful activity that suits them where they are starting from. We know our volunteers well and some need to get moving straight away to calm their busy minds, whilst others may need a quiet 5 minutes feeding the hens before getting stuck in with the group on a more physical task.

remembering to have fun – we might run around the horses' playground field, jumping over the ditches and climbing on the giant tractor tyres, or play games – it all helps to build an appetite for new activities and to notice the impact on emotional fitness too.

"At school I'm terrible at sports but I've just discovered I can catch a frisbee!" (Young volunteer)

NOTICE



Noticing the here and now, or mindfulness is framed here as "finding neutral" in mind, body and emotions. This is something we work on intensively during TheHorseCourse ReStart and then build on throughout volunteering. It's a shared common language which makes it easy to remind



each other when challenging situations arise. Volunteers take note of what activities help them to find neutral – for some it might be repetitive tasks like sweeping for others it may be time with the hens or pricking out seedlings, or it could be ripping up or digging over old plants crops – getting active and getting dirty. It's all about noticing your own emotions and having the tools to manage them, and then, noticing the needs of others and helping them too.

“When I came here I knew nothing – now I am one of the leaders in a new community garden”



LEARN



All tasks can be adapted so that everyone can be successful, whatever their fitness and knowledge. Being part of a team that celebrates small successes is motivating, and learning new skills opens up options that volunteers may not have considered.

Many of our volunteers have had little opportunity to engage in nature, gardening or animal care. Here they learn all about hens and horses, how to grow veg and how it tastes when it's picked fresh, how to build a bug hotel or a pond and identify the wildlife that comes, have a go at arts and crafts on rainy days. The learning is as organic as the veg, but the biggest gain is the confidence to try new things and not fear failure. We offer intensive support which moves gradually to more independence in tasks and with tools, ultimately to teaching others too.



The vocational skills that people learn at TheHorseCourse Working Wellies are transferable into employment, and some volunteers go on to train and work in horticulture, farming or animal care. These skills are also transferable into wellbeing – we encourage our volunteers to take what they learn here and join other community groups or grow their own food at home to share the knowledge they've gained with their friends and families.

GIVE



Giving is baked into the ethos of everything we do. For volunteers, the shift from “service user” to provider is profound. Providing care and support to our animals, our staff and each other; making the farm look and feel wonderful and tranquil for new people who may be arriving at their lowest ebb; taking home veggies, eggs and plants to share with friends and family; and delivering surplus to local foodbanks – it all builds a deep sense of belonging and self-worth.

“This place totally turned my life, and to be brutally honest my feelings about living, around” (Adult volunteer)



ETHOS

We asked our volunteers what they value:

“Having a good sense of humour.”
“Understanding people’s needs.”
“Being willing to learn and adapt.”
“Remembering peoples’ likes and dislikes.”
“Understanding non-verbal signals.”
“Having awareness of safeguarding.”

“Providing equal opportunities.”
“Being non-judgemental.”
“Being able to be silly.”
“Having a sense of fun.”
“Giving a warm welcome.”
“Understanding mental health”



The thing that is mentioned most often is being able to be silly, not being too strict or taking things too seriously. We want our volunteers to feel at ease here, to feel that they can relax and be themselves without worrying about being judged or criticised.

Somehow, at the same time, something that really stands out about the Working Wellies is the high standards we hold ourselves to. We’re here to get things done, but hand in hand with socialising, engaging with nature and bringing a playful quality to all our tasks.



We also build a shared ethos about behaviour, lines in the sand that shouldn’t be crossed. But we recognise that our volunteers are sometimes learning how to socialise and we’re here to help them understand their own and other people’s boundaries.



The standards we try to instil are:

- Believe in yourself and believe in each other
- Be inclusive and kind – give everyone the same opportunities
- Celebrate success and failure in a safe, supportive environment
- Call out inappropriate or discriminatory behaviour or language
- Welcome new people to our groups
- Value everyone for what they are able to do
- Provide a safe space for worries and concerns
- Take care of animals, plants and each other





TRAINING

We provide induction training for new volunteers including Level 2 safeguarding training, which we deliver to every member of the Working Wellies, both adults and children. This shared, common understanding of values, standards and safeguarding is crucial to ensure a shared ethos and care, kindness and safety for all, including our wonderful animals.

Our staff and Wranglers (volunteer leaders) are trained with our Non-Verbals Toolbox to read body language and implement strategies in the moment to help people regulate their emotions and behaviour. This dynamic, attentive approach helps us to tailor activities to people's needs: if you can't stand still or you're on a high speed rant, let's go for a quick run around the arena! If it's time for coffee break and you're stood in the corner avoiding eye contact with anyone, let's buddy up with another gentle soul and find mutual interest for you to talk about. If you're overwhelmed we can retreat and reapproach the task gradually.

MOVING ON

Some volunteers come for a couple of months after their ReStart and then feel like they're ready to move on with the skills they've learned; some stay with us for years keep benefiting from the purpose and support we can offer them. We're here for both groups of people and everyone in between, whatever the weather.



SAM (13)

Referred to TheHorseCourse by the SENDCO at his school with a diagnoses of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Sam was noisy and disruptive in school and found it difficult to form relationships with his peers. At home he was sometimes aggressive towards his mum and dad and at school he's been prone to outbursts of swearing and aggressive language, struggling to control big emotions.

Sam completed the ReStart programme feeling much better, and joined the Working Wellies programme the following week, happy to be in an environment he'd already got to know. To begin with, volunteering was tricky – staying focused on one task for more than 10 minutes was really difficult. When things went wrong or became challenging, he might swear or throw something. Things did go wrong quite often: a full wheelbarrow of horse poo tipped over and had to be picked up again; he accidentally spilled a whole watering can in his welly; he was rushing and couldn't get the pruning saw to cut a branch smoothly.

We were able to remind Sam of the strategies for “neutral” he learnt during his ReStart. He has found activities that help him with his itchy feet: he's proud he can balance a full wheelbarrow up the muck heap ramp; he loves hosing down the yard, but he now knows to respect other peoples' boundaries about getting wet! He especially enjoys throwing a frisbee or kicking a ball as hard as possible in the fields, and he is always first to offer to run and grab a tool that is needed. He has also learnt to find moments of calm from observing bugs and birds in our natural setting. Sam has formed healthy friendships with other young people, and when things go wrong he knows it's ok and that there are people here to help.

“Apart from coming here to the horse course I never used to go out, now I meet up with my friends once or twice a week and volunteer here two days a week” (Adult volunteer)

LIAM (50)

Liam was referred by drug & alcohol services, as talk-based support was not helping with his PTSD. Liam often relapsed and depended on alcohol as a coping strategy as he struggled to ask for help. His self-esteem was very low due to his estranged relationship with his partner and child.

Liam has been volunteering for over 2 years and regularly attends twice a week. He finds peace in the monotonous tasks such as mucking out, weeding and planting seeds. Liam has become a lynchpin – managing to mix friendly banter with a great ability to empathise and offer support and encouragement to others. Liam has explained that by going for daily walks in nature and volunteering regularly, he is able to find neutral when feeling overwhelmed. He is now able to maintain his mental health and keep away from drinking. Liam is now caring for his daughter every Saturday and during school holidays. His experience of working with our horses has led to a common interest as she has started riding lessons.

"I love coming here, I get to see all the ponies and help look after them" (Adult volunteer)

POPPY (17)

Poppy was referred by NHS CAMHS as her therapist couldn't get her to talk and they felt a more action-based intervention could be helpful. She had acute social anxiety, had become withdrawn from parents and friends and couldn't cope with attending school post-COVID. She was regularly self-harming.

It took Poppy quite a few visits before she felt safe enough to start engaging with the horses and begin her ReStart. She hardly spoke, but at the end of the course, Poppy said she would like to try volunteering. Mum brought her every week at 3pm on the dot and, for a while, Poppy couldn't get out of the car and would just sit and watch from there. Eventually, she got out to visit the chickens and found an egg. Little by little, she started to join in with other activities and to talk and engage with the rest of the group. She had to practise her neutral when she was feeling super anxious and the chickens helped her with this. She loved watching them looking for food in the grass and giving them cuddles

Poppy also discovered her green fingers. She found calmness sowing seeds: getting the compost sieved just right, counting out the seeds, covering everything up evenly and making sure everything is labelled and watered. She discovered that it's ok for her to express her thoughts and feelings and, if she doesn't like something she learnt to say so! A highlight was when Poppy took over as leader of a game of wildlife ID cards. We found a fun, cheeky side to Poppy and we loved seeing her chatting and laughing with her new friends. We couldn't be prouder that she has now started a course in Horticulture at Kingston Maurwood College.

"I have volunteered elsewhere before and it made me feel small and spoken down to, here I can just get on with the jobs and when we suggest things we are listened to and we work out problems together"
(Adult volunteer)

"My daughter needs routine and needs to come here as she feels like this is a safe place where she doesn't have to think about the worries in her life. I'd bring her here every day if I could, I found that it really helps her at school and I notice a big difference when she has attended the sessions" (Parent)



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