

MAC works a treat for young and deprived

Nia Charpentier discovers how a Swiss Cottage charity provides community psychology at its best to help combat mental health

THIS year, David Cameron will gauge the nation's happiness with a large scale survey looking at our quality of life.

As I visit an innovative Swiss Cottage charity aiming to improve the mental health of north London's most deprived and marginalised young people, the question is raised about how they would score in such a survey, if they're even asked.

"I'm not being funny but have you got any food?" is perhaps not something most psychologists are asked at the start of a therapy session.

But for Laura Major, going to the local café for a fry-up because her client is homeless and hasn't eaten for two days, is not unusual.

"On any given day, we might have young people coming in for money for a bus ticket to get to the doctor, for their electricity meter or for food," says the 25-year-old assistant psychologist, who has been working for MAC-UK for a year.

"Some of them have serious mental health difficulties but before tackling those, there are also pressing issues to deal with like homelessness and hunger."

Based at the Winchester Project, MAC-UK is a charity working with some of the most deprived and marginalised young people in Camden. It takes mental health "out of the clinic and into the community". This is "community psychology" in action – which takes a step back from the individualistic approach of more traditional psychology focusing on a particular person, their thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

By contrast, the community approach looks at the individual in the context of their environment. What social, economic and political circumstances are preventing them feeling good about themselves?

"Our young people have grown up on inner city estates where threat and danger are particularly real. Their experiences, combined with the negative stigma associated with mental health issues, means that they are very reluctant to seek help, so we go to them," says Major.

"Therapy sessions often happen on the Rowley Way estate, where many of the young people live, on park benches or

in McDonald's."

Once the immediate needs of the young people have been addressed, Major and the rest of the team spend a lot of their time making phone calls to get other aspects of their lives on track. For those without a home, they might secure a place at a hostel. Others need support accessing benefits or training to make them more employable. It's a long road.

At some point the issue of mental health will be addressed more directly but, in the meantime, there are many other factors affecting the general wellbeing of these youngsters, who are aged between 16 and 25.

MAC-UK was founded in 2008 by clinical psychologist Charlie Alcock and currently works with more than 100 young people across Camden, mostly young men who are, or have been, involved in gangs and other extreme anti-social behaviour. The majority have criminal records and the regular abuse of drugs and alcohol is commonplace.

According to The Mental Health Foundation, one in three young people who offend have a mental health need which is unmet at the time of the offence



Major role ... Laura Major, assistant psychologist at charity MAC-UK. Picture by Polly Hancock

and MAC-UK believes that this plays a major role in why these young people become trapped in cycles of poverty and violent crime.

"Low self-esteem is very common among our young people," says Major.

"This is why everything we do is youth-led. We ask them what they want to do and we support them to set it up and run it. We now have a football group, a cooking group and some of our young people now work in local schools teaching other youngsters how to write

lyrics, MC and DJ. And as they're doing a job, they're paid for it, giving them a sense of purpose, structure and self-worth."

The direct and indirect effects of MAC-UK's approach are evident within the community, according to Major.

"First and foremost, many of our young people are now employed by us, as youth mentors or in schools, which has led to a decline in anti-social behaviour within the local area," she explains.

"But we have also seen

change more widely within local services such as Community Mental Health Teams (CMHT) which, after taking our advice, are now willing to meet young people somewhere that suits them. They recently did a mental health assessment in Starbucks."

This shift in attitude is good news for the young people who walk through MAC-UK's doors on a daily basis. They could well benefit from their help in the future, once they've eaten that is.

□ www.musicandchange.com.

Don't suffer next winter, stock up on herbs

HAVING been struck down by a prolonged bout of flu over the New Year, I can only say that prevention must be the best strategy for this heinous seasonal disease – so next year, I'll be having a pre-emptive jab.

But if you are unlucky enough to fall prey to the pandemic sweeping the country, west Hampstead resident, nutritional and herbal medicine dispenser Lorna Driver-Davies has some useful remedies to help with seasonal coughs, colds and flus.

A lecturer on herbs at The College of Natural Medicine, Driver-Davies understands how natural ingredients can help with congestion, shivers, sneezing, coughing and breathing problems.

Onion & Horseradish Elixir:

This elixir contains store cupboard staples which all have natural anti-bacterial and antiviral properties. This natural combination is an expectorant (breaks up mucus), disinfects the throat and 'warms' the throat and lungs, helping to improve breathing. It also generally warms the whole body. Ingredients such as the chilli pepper are rich in antioxidants which help to support the immune system and garlic is known to be nature's 'antibiotic'. Almost everyone should find this quick, easy and

cheap to make.

You will need:

A blender / liquidiser
500ml of apple cider vinegar
A rough handful of each: fresh root of ginger, hottest chillis and Horseradish root (if you can't find it, use a tablespoon of paste)
1 tsp of ground black pepper
2 or 3 white onions (chopped)
1 whole bulb of fresh garlic

Directions:

Blend together all ingredients, adding 500ml of the apple cider vinegar – until it becomes a thick pulp. Keep in the fridge for up to 6 months in a glass jar/container. Strain off small amounts only as needed (the pulp mixture will become stronger and stronger if left to 'pickle' over weeks/months).

Use:

To alleviate symptoms, take as many teaspoons as you like throughout the day. It can also be used long term as a preventative winter tonic. Add to a little juice to disguise the taste. The elixir is suitable for those on medication but do not use if you are allergic or intolerant to any of the ingredients.

Driver-Davies says there are several herbs that may help prevent or lessen cough and flu symptoms. These include:

Echinacea: As a preventative winter aid, it may help reduce



Prevention is better than cure ... nutritional and herbal medicine dispenser Lorna Driver-Davies tells us how natural ingredients can prevent coughs and colds.

colds, flu and chest infections. Echinacea works as a modulator or facilitator of the immune response, rather than as an immune stimulant and therefore it can be used continually without taking a break. Use when symptoms first appear or take long term as a preventative measure. Choose products which use the Echinacea root only.

Goldenseal and olive leaf are excellent anti-viral herbs and if used when symptoms first appear, they may help to reduce the length of an infection.

Thyme, lobelia, mullein, eucalyptus and elecampane may help to soothe, clear and reduce infection in the lungs. Choose any one or two of these and they can be used alongside the onion

and horseradish elixir.

Siberian Ginseng, Rhodiola, Ashwaganda, Astragalus, Schisandra are part of a group of herbs called 'adaptogens'. They can help to support the immune system and aid in the recovery from illness by supporting the adrenal glands and nervous system, helping to alleviate the fatigue associated with being unwell.

Driver-Davies, who also offers private consultations at her Belsize Park clinic and is one of a team of nutritional advisers at The Nutri-Centre in Park Crescent, Regent's Park, points out that this health advice does not replace any recommendations from your doctor.

But as the daughter of Medical Herbalist Jill Rosemary Davies and the great great granddaughter of an apothecary, she has believed in nutritional healing and herbal medicine since she was able to walk.

Her childhood and teens gave her the foundation of understanding that healthy food and medicinal plants can have an amazingly positive effect on mind and body.

She says "Herbs, super foods and whole foods were my first foods as a baby. Later, I would sit in on professional lectures given by my mother and other

expert nutritionists, biochemists, botanists, medical Doctors, naturopaths, iridologists and medicinal herbalists... so I got to hear about plant and nutritional chemistry and the benefits of good food, detoxification and using foods and herbs to heal. I loved what I was absorbing and these experiences helped to build the passion I have for natural health today."

□ *Anyone interested in learning more about how to make and use traditional herbal remedies can join Driver-Davies' 'Herbs for Everyday Living' course, a 12 week evening class held at The College of Naturopathic Medicine near Oxford Circus. The £295 course is designed for beginners to learn practical applications of every day herbs so they can begin to self-treat common ailments and create their own 'kitchen pharmacy' for the whole family. For more information visit www.naturopathy-uk.com or contact CNM on info@naturopathy-uk.com or call 01342 410 505.*

□ *To find out more about a private consultation with Driver-Davies on eating for better health, go to www.feelbetternutrition.co.uk.*