

Get Out Get Active // Phase 2

Case Studies

M.A.D Hikers, North Wales

___(Mental Health, Anxiety & Depression)

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M.A.D Hikers



A project M.A.D. Hikers, formed during the Covid-19 pandemic, was set up to bring together a community for those addressing Mental Health challenges. The Group uses walking, hiking and outdoor pursuits in a pledge to support each other and promote the positive effects of physical activity in the great outdoors.

Background

During 2020, many of us were working to adapt to the 'New Normal' as it was announced we were in the process of a Global pandemic.

The impact of Covid-19 had a profound effect on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of the population. Social isolation, financial insecurity, physical distancing or the loss of a loved one affected many people.

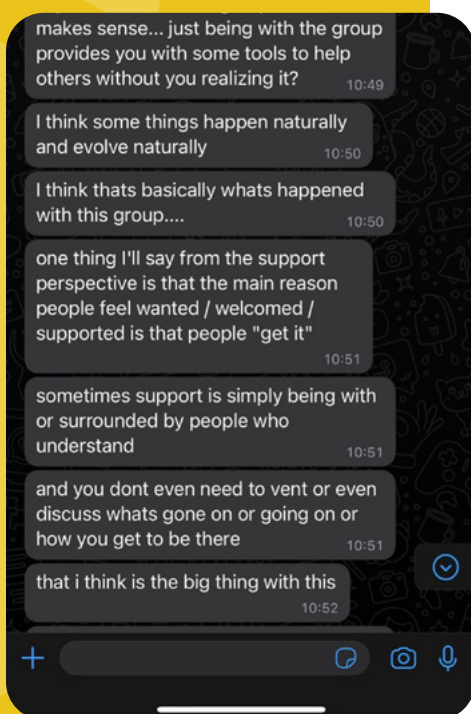
Ste Falvey, Founder of M.A.D Hikers explained how his own mental health journey promoted him to take action.

"I was at rock bottom mentally, the only way I could cope was to go to the doctors and try and sort my head out. The tablets only put the issues to the back of your mind. I started researching how to cope with mental health naturally as I didn't want to become dependent on drugs for life. I carried on hiking and slowly weaned myself off the tablets. I spoke to friends who suggested I set up a facebook group, and M.A.D Hikers was formed." – Ste Falvey, Founder M.A.D Hikers

The group started out with 10 participants meeting for a socially distanced walk up Moel Famau. One member reports driving to the wrong car park so missed the start:

"I did drag myself up to the top and take in the air, after all I had fought my fear of going somewhere and meeting new people. I messaged Ste to explain my mess up and he set up a WhatsApp group which means we can all now keep in touch with each other."

The sessions saw a growth in participants and Ste began to notice a change in his own well-being and that of others. The impact of the intervention, utilising the benefits of exercise on mental health and wellbeing also highlighted the additional benefits, such as reduced feelings of isolation, reduced feelings of stigma, and some participants shared how they felt their physical fitness also began to improve.



Impact

Amongst the respondents who engaged with the GOGA case study interview, many openly shared their motivations for initially engaging with the M.A.D. Hikers Facebook group.

Bereavement, Cancer, Diagnosed and Undiagnosed Neuro Diverse conditions, Divorce/seperartion, Psychosis, PTSD and Suicidal thoughts were referenced as experiences faced by participants.

Participants stated that confidence has been gained by a feeling of security where others may have experienced something similar to theirs. One participant explained how there is no pressure to share or disclose personal information, the feeling of being understood creates a sense of belonging.

The group has 86 members on their WhatsApp group and 2300+ likes on Facebook and Instagram. The group has set up a M.A.D. Dogs Committee for volunteers. The group also runs Mini M.A.D. Hikers and M.A.D Adventures; (Adventure Days such as kayaking, gun range and underground caves.

Participants also plan smaller group walks between themselves and feedback how meaningful friendships have been formed.

Session Data

There have been 24 Sessions engaging 371 Participants to date.

2020-2021

12 sessions with 116 participants overall.

- Moel famau 29th November 2020 – 10 people.
- Moel Arthur 13th December 2020 – 8 people.
— Travel restrictions due to Covid —
- Moel Arthur 2nd May 2021 – 14 people.
- Alwen Reservoir 30th May 2021 – 7 people.
- Llyn Brenig Reservoir 27th June 2021 – 9 people.
- Moel Famau 1st August 2021 – 15 people.
- Great Orme 15th August 2021 – 12 people.
- Dilyn Bothy 12th September 2021 – 18 people.
- Drum 17th October 2021 – 10 people.
- Sychnant Pass 7th November 2021 – 8 people.
- Swallow Falls 12th December 2021 – 5 people.

2022

12 sessions with 255 participants overall.

- Moel famau 23rd January 2022 – 37 people
- Gwydyr forest 13th February 2022 – 14 people
- Llyn elsi 6th march 2022 – 30 people
- Mad adventures kayak day 20th march 2022 – 17 people
- Drum 3rd April 2022 – 17 people
- Cwm idwal 1st may 2022 – 13 people
- Llyn crafnant 15th may 2022 – 25 people
- Tal y fan 12 June 2022 – 30 people
- Mini mad hikers Llyn sarnau 18th June 2022 – 32 people
- Sychnant pass 26th June 2022 – 17 people
- Mini mad hikers aber falls 3rd July 2022 – 21 people
- Great orme 7th august 2022 – 19 people

M.A.D Dogs Vounteer Group

12 Participants.

Members have accessed DIT Training and Mental Health First Aid training via GOGA. The M.A.D. Hikers events are free of charge and welcome people from all backgrounds and levels of fitness, making it an accessible way for people to enjoy the beauty of the region.

"Everything is free at the moment, and I'd like to keep it that way. Life's expensive as it is and the mountains, adventures etc. majority of it is free so I don't see the need to charge anyone." – Ste Falvey, Founder

Planning routes with accessibility in mind, organisers make a concerted effort to ensure activities well-suited to those with anxiety in social situations, or around large crowds.

Many of the walks organised are off the beaten path, avoiding tourist hotspots, which allows members to feel comfortable at ease when visiting these spots of natural beauty. One member said:

"I find myself falling back while on some walks to help support those that are struggling but to be honest, I feel as a group that tends to happen naturally... people just help each other out."

Lack of mental health resources, waiting lists and delayed diagnosis plus the loss of some services post lockdown has only exacerbated the challenges for those tackling mental health and mental health illness. Research by the charity Mind, has shown that people with pre-existing mental health problems became at greater risk during Covid-19 with many reporting their conditions to have worsened (www.local.gov.uk)



Image: M.A.D Hikers
15th May 2022
Llyn Geirionydd, Conwy

Members of the M.A.D. Hikers shared their experience with mental health and 100% reported an increase in wellbeing and a feeling of increased resilience. The feeling of 'belonging' and supporting each other was reported as one of the main reasons for retention to the group.

"I am fitter both physically and mentally. I feel like I'm becoming the person I always 'should' have been." – Person C M.A.D. Hikers participant

The WhatsApp chat helps to plan routes, share stories and images of the adventures. Having the chat really helps keep participants connected. People share jokes and information and for some people it is a valuable support for just checking in and feeling valued.

The group worked together to design a M.A.D Dogs logo, Volunteer B purchased T shirts for the group as a contribution. The Shirts are intended to bring a sense of identity and belonging and raise funds for the group. Volunteer B, a chef by trade also bakes cookies and snacks for the walks.

"The group has kept me going and brought me out of my shell. Everyone supports everyone no matter what, if we've been in the group for ages or a newbie."

The group offers to share lifts and pick-ups to help reduce barriers for those struggling with transport. Again, this is done via the What's App chat and locations, routes and pins are shared.

Mini M.A.D. Hikers have proven successful with the aim being to support single parents, those who may need a lower level of physical activity and or for anyone who doesn't feel comfortable in larger groups. Being able to bring children and dogs to hikes has made a more inclusive offer and it has been reported that some members feel happier whilst being to engage with their children.

Plans for the Future / Sustainability

M.A.D Hikers has a growing Facebook Community. They have received a number of reviews.



"Lucky to have found this group, forever keeping good spirits, always there to chat...kind and passionate individuals."

– Simone Burridge 20/2/22



Ste and the MAD Dogs volunteer group have plans for development. They sometimes use their sessions as an opportunity to consult as a collective and share ideas and feedback.

Starting as a voluntary group they are keen to understand how they can form a stable framework to access fundraising and developmental support and we as partners are keen to assist and signpost them to the right support for this.

We aim to work together with Sported to support governance and due diligence is in place to establish a fundraising and development plan. Together with GOGA we hope to establish and identify M.A.D Hikers aims, relative organisations for signposting and support and anticipated outcomes for sustainability.

We have contacted Outdoor Training providers to understand the required qualifications and pathways for Ste and Volunteers to lead walks and public liability insurance for their project.

- A guidebook for quieter non-touristy walks with significant interesting aspects but also maybe focus on the mental health aspect too. **'The M.A.D Hikers' Guide to North Wales'**
- I'm hoping to do something more in the future which will involve getting a piece of land or renting a building to try to have like an adventure hub there which will involve activities, bushcraft, and other things there but that's long term which will need a lot more thinking and funding etc.

- *Everything is free at the moment, and I'd like to keep it that way. Life's expensive as it is and the mountains, adventures etc. majority of it is free so I don't see the need to charge anyone. In the future we would like to look at a fundraising plan to grow M.A.D Hikers and keep it going. We have set up the M.A.D Dogs volunteer group to help us with things like admin and social media.*
- *Mental Health First Aid Training was good to help us to be able to signpost our members to support if needed. Emma also shares opportunities with us for things that might suit our volunteers.*
- *We are working with GOGA to help ensure we are fully inclusive and reaching out to our LGBTQ+ members and others in our communities.*

"I would NEVER have done this, only for the confidence and support and the 'I don't give a damn' approach that being part of this amazing gang has given me. Onwards and upwards (typically up the steepest, muddiest route if King Ste has anything to do with it)."

– Person C M.A.D. Hikers participant

