

# 'Strong Roots' – Therapeutic Garden Project

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## SYNOPSIS

The aim of this article is to convey how *Strong Roots*, an innovative therapeutic garden project, combines psychological therapy with being in a garden setting in a non-prescriptive way in order to encourage participants' personal development. It shows how participants find out about the project and discusses the role of volunteers. Methods of monitoring and evaluation are described, followed by case studies that demonstrate the value of the project. The ongoing promotion of *Strong Roots* is highlighted, along with the development of the project and its funding.

'Strong Roots' is a unique and innovative therapeutic garden project based on four adjoining allotments in Norwich (Norfolk, UK). It aims to provide a safe and supportive environment that encourages participants' personal development through making connections with nature, themselves and others through group work and/or individual sessions. The name is metaphorical – strong roots being essential for healthy plants. The same is true for people.

## Background Story

The idea arose from my experience as a professional garden designer and my own therapy, which I started having whilst a part-time art history student at the University of East Anglia (UEA, Norwich). In autumn 2001 I decided I wanted to be a therapist but, understanding that Norwich was flooded with practitioners, thought I would be a horticultural therapist – whatever that meant! UEA seemed a good starting point for training.

I also undertook voluntary work with organisations in Norwich where gardening provided a focus for interactions with people. My experience in these situations led me to develop the idea of a community garden in which anyone could come for their own personal development and be accepted for how they were without any expectations. At the time, two other projects in the country seemed to do what I was thinking about: combining psychological therapy with being in a garden setting in which there was a shelter. With these two aspects in mind, I started training. The process of setting up the project and acquiring the necessary facilities is described briefly in the appendix.

## The Ethos of Strong Roots

The approach I have developed, and with which the trustees are fully in tune, is non-prescriptive. *Strong Roots* invites 'being' rather than 'doing'. It is the combination of the therapeutic benefits of being in a garden setting with psychological therapy, on offer to anyone interested in their own personal development and wanting to be outside, which makes the project unique, innovative and so valuable. The space is a calm, no-pressure setting big

enough for participants to feel that they are not being overheard by neighbouring allotment holders. There is no sign indicating the location or the nature of the project.

No experience of gardening is required. The participants decide on the nature and level of their activity and whether they talk and what they talk about. This principle is underpinned by the input of volunteers, who are responsible for ensuring that the gardening is done. Their role is expanded upon later.

Everyone, if they wish, can contribute to the development of the site, which includes several productive fruit trees and numerous borders, some of which are for flowering plants and attracting wildlife, whilst others are for growing crops in rotation. Everyone is encouraged to have a share of the produce which, as far as possible, is grown organically.

## The Referral Process

Until March 2012 participants were referred by local statutory and non-statutory agencies. Since then Strong Roots has been taking self-referrals. This development is in a bid to do preventive work by attracting people who are struggling with their sense of well-being, before their situation becomes critical. For example, someone might decide they are interested in attending Strong Roots, having heard about the project through word of mouth, or having seen a promotional flyer in a medical practice or other service, or having been told about it by, for instance, their General Practitioner.

The first point of contact is a telephone call or an email. I arrange to meet the person in the allotment car park and walk with them past other allotments to Strong Roots. This first exploratory session will include talking and/or doing some gardening, and a discussion about whether the participant/s would prefer to have an individual session or to take part in a group session, and when they would like to attend. It will include talking about the length of the session (50 minutes for an individual, and 1 hour 50 minutes for a group) and payment, with the amount being flexible and determined by what the person feels able to afford.

Some people may feel the need to focus on their own issues, or may perhaps feel nervous about attending a group. For them, an individual session might be preferable. They might then find that they would like to join a group and share, in a non-judgemental atmosphere, their experiences with other people and be fully accepted however they are. This experience may lead to the discovery of new aspects of themselves. It can be very

liberating to witness someone else being who they are, and can enable us to appreciate and be enriched by the differences and similarities we have with others. Some may benefit from a combination of individual and group sessions.

Whatever they decide to do, participants find their way to the allotment independently for the second session. On this occasion they are given a Code of Conduct (shown in the Annual Report on the website at [www.strongroots.org.uk](http://www.strongroots.org.uk)), which they formally accept by completing and signing a form.

## The Structure of the Sessions

At the beginning of any session I welcome the individual or group, and invite the participant/s, if they wish, to talk about anything on their mind/s. The participant/s are also asked whether they wish to do anything or not. The task is chosen by them, even if I might consider that something else is of greater priority. I do gardening alongside them and, if appropriate, invite reflection on their thoughts and feelings as they arise. During the session a tea break may be taken if desired; the individual or the group decides when and where this occurs. It might be in the welcoming seating area of the wooden benches, in the summerhouse, in the shade of a tree, sitting around a border or, in the winter months, around a fire. It might be somewhere never considered before! At the end, sufficient time is left for leaving the site safe, welcoming to other individuals or groups and mindful of other allotment holders. I also make sure that there is time for participant/s, if they wish, to talk about anything of concern before leaving.

## Different Experiences

Some participants may wish to do nothing and simply be in the space. Some may, with our cultural emphasis on the importance of goals and achievement, feel challenged by the invitation to do nothing. Others may want to talk or do gardening, or perhaps do both. Participants may be in any mode at any moment according to how they feel. I will invite them to talk about their feelings if they wish to do so.

Some people may feel wary of saying anything and perhaps seem 'stuck' energetically. I might invite them to do something energising, but their choice to remain as they are is respected and, if appropriate, acknowledged in some way. I might, for example, invite an exploration about their state of inertia or their choice not to engage.

Some people find talking easier whilst working alongside others. They may be drawn in by the atmosphere and engage with an activity such as digging,

weeding or watering. They might feel energised by their movement and the physical sensations, such as contact with the soil, plants and the elements, become conscious of experiencing feelings, which they might wish to talk about whilst engaged with the activity or in a pause from it. They might then find relief from the process of reflection by refocusing on the calming physical activity of further gardening.

Often people have said they love digging. For some this appears to provide a channel for pent-up energy and an enormous sense of relief, which might be reflected on whilst working, during a tea break or perhaps later in the session. Sometimes, children have wanted to dig big holes. Any attendant dangers have proved useful material for exploration! For example, the appropriate use of tools can provide a good opportunity to consider issues of health, safety and respect for self and others.

Others include fellow allotment holders. I might invite reflection on being mindful and having a sense of responsibility in this context, in which physical boundaries are not always apparent and do not provide a shield from unwelcome noise. On one occasion a group of boisterous teenage boys, excluded from mainstream education, wondered about the impact of their behaviour, and were keen to express their concern to a neighbouring allotment holder – a person in their senior years. I arranged a meeting between them during the session. To the boys' surprise, the latter expressed their appreciation of seeing and hearing the young people enjoying themselves! This encounter may have helped address possible stereotyping and potential prejudices.

I might invite reflection regarding mindfulness in relation to the environment. For example, creating organic soil rich in humus made from composted material can be helpful in addressing people's dislike or fear of wildlife, and in encouraging appreciative respect for, and even awe of, the natural world. This sense of wonder was already evident in one teenage boy; he loved wildlife and enjoyed gardening.

With someone like him, gardening can be used as a metaphor for personal issues, which may therefore be explored in a non-intrusive way. For example, maintaining a border is like looking after ourselves: we need to keep the plants we want free from other species, which need to be removed on a regular basis. Similarly, to maintain our own well-being it can be helpful to develop an awareness of how we undermine ourselves with unhelpful beliefs such as 'I'm not important. I haven't got time to care about myself.' I might offer this kind of comparison, but leave it for the individual to decide what they make of it for themselves.



If it feels appropriate the reflection might shift to a more personal level. For example, I might raise the question as to how a lack of self-respect developed and what effect this may have on the person's relationship to the world in general. I might then invite exploration into the importance of self-care in a holistic sense: emotionally, physically and spiritually.

The importance of self-care includes the willingness to make 'mistakes' and regard these as good learning material. For example, sometimes people say they are afraid they will kill something and are worried about pulling something up by mistake due to thinking it was a 'weed'. I might pose the question, 'What is the worst thing that can happen? If the plant dies it can be put on the compost heap to recycle.' I might then invite an exploration of the consequences of making mistakes. Perhaps, for example, due to earlier experiences an individual came to fear rather than value and learn from them. Reflection of this kind might prompt them to take a risk in the safe, judgement-free environment of Strong Roots, engage with the gardening without fear and, consequently, to emerge from their troubling inner world by connecting with nature through physical sensations, such as the movement of the activity and contact with soil, plants and water.



This shift of energy from the mind to the body is calming and allows the individual to be present. Then it may become possible for the individual/s, if they wish, to talk about their experiences and feel a sense of relief, release and perhaps some clarity from being able to do so. In a moment like this they may wish to express, for example, how they feel in response to something that has been said or done in the session. This expression of feelings about what is happening in the present moment may help throw light on the quality of interactions in other contexts, such as with family and friends.

For some this level of interaction may be easier around a fire in the winter. Even withdrawn individuals seem unable to resist the draw of the noise, colour, heat and smell, which can provide a focus for contemplation and connection, and may help some individuals to be themselves. This experience can be inspiring on beautiful bright cold sunny winter days. In dull cold weather, or even in snow, the irresistible attraction of the fire may help individuals to persevere in otherwise seemingly hostile conditions, and interact with their environment and others. This experience might inspire further interactions in other circumstances.

For some the prospect of connection is easier with people being alongside each other rather than opposite.

Eye-to-eye contact becomes a gentle proposition, the experience less intrusive than sitting opposite someone in a room, face-to-face within four walls.

## Flexibility of the Facilities

In inclement weather the summerhouse may provide a suitable environment for talking. The space, with its veranda, is enclosed but not confining. There are gardening books and charts, as well as drawing materials for those who prefer an activity, such as drawing or writing, which may be very useful for conveying an experience otherwise difficult to verbalise.

Importantly, the facilities offer individuals the freedom to walk around if they wish or, indeed, to withdraw themselves from the group and be alone. Some people might find talking easier whilst sitting on the ground or on the benches in the seating area. This flexibility is an important factor in meeting individual needs and promoting empowerment.

For some, the absence of doors and walls is liberating; for others, it may be confusing. They might feel that it is acceptable, for instance, to walk in on a session if they are early; this can be usefully reflected upon. My part in this might be to invite exploration of the idea that in the absence of boundary walls, respectful relating is the key to how to approach the situation. With this in mind, people who arrive early are asked to remain at the entrance of the allotment, rather than walk in to someone else's session, until they are invited in for the start of theirs.

## Volunteers

The flexibility of the project is made possible by the contribution of volunteers. They are required to keep busy with the gardening, otherwise the site would quickly get out of control. During an individual session, a volunteer will work in a separate part of the allotment. However, they may be present in a group session if it feels appropriate. This will be with the understanding that they, like the participants, must respect confidentiality and not talk about anyone else outside the group. Their input as an accepting, listening presence may be affirming and contribute to the clients' self acceptance. If the group includes a child brought by a parent or guardian, a volunteer may be asked to be with the child during the session so that the parent/s or guardian/s are free to talk.

Recruitment of volunteers is based on their interest in their own personal development, which is the secondary aim of the project, and in gardening. They are required to read and sign the Code of Conduct and, if they wish to

help on site, to commit themselves to a minimum of two hours a week. They are encouraged to be themselves. Any issues that arise are reflected on after the session with me.

On occasion, volunteers undertake other tasks as the need arises. One volunteer does maintenance on the buildings.

## The Co-ordinator

I manage the project, and am an integrative therapist and counsellor. My ongoing personal development is partly met through regular supervision by an experienced psychotherapist who is extremely supportive of the work of Strong Roots. I am accredited through the process of the Independent Practitioners Network

([www.i-p-n.org](http://www.i-p-n.org)) and registered with the United Kingdom Council of Psychotherapy (UKCP). In addition, I attend workshops and conferences as appropriate.

I have experience of working with a variety of vulnerable groups, including children with emotional difficulties, adults with mental health problems and families whose distressing experiences threaten their ability to live fulfilled lives.

## Monitoring and Evaluation

I report to the regular trustees' meetings. If appropriate, I will include feedback from participants who, in their second session, are invited to complete an initial evaluation form. This is followed by quarterly evaluation forms, and, if possible, a final one when they stop attending. The forms consist of a list of statements to which ticked responses on a scale are required. It is emphasised that the evaluation is intended to indicate how helpful Strong Roots is to them rather than how they are, although the feedback may reflect their own personal development. Verbal and written comments are the most valuable feedback.

## Benefits

Everyone who attended the allotment, even if only once, will have benefited from the project in terms of getting fresh air, having space and walking. Therefore there may have been positive effects which are not possible to record. People often comment on how calm they feel whilst at the allotment. This is an example of a benefit to mental well-being which might arise from just one visit, but which is not measurable. On many occasions, participants have said that being in an open calm space helps them to be more open in themselves, and to connect and interact



Regular evaluation from January 2008 to June 2012 shows a positive change to mental well-being, with 63 per cent giving feedback indicating significant change as a consequence of attending Strong Roots.

## Case Studies

One individual has gained enormously from reflecting on their experiences. Their auditory and visual hallucinations have diminished considerably. The possibility of being able to shift between gardening and or talking at any moment has proved invaluable, and has been enhanced in the calm open space where no one will hear, as supposed to a room in which the conversation might possibly be overheard by people in other parts of the building.

A young single parent, formerly a cause of considerable concern to the social services, has expressed the value of being in a calm open space for talking and reflecting.

At Strong Roots I've been able to find myself and grow in confidence. Since starting I have let go of habits that weren't great, and have been able to go about my life much clearer and stronger. I like the atmosphere in Strong Roots. It is very peaceful and it lifts any tense feelings I have.

Since coming I have found myself again and I can move forward and create a better life for myself and my son.

A young person with mental health problems said:

I find small rooms claustrophobic but I feel more open in an

outside space. I find it easier to talk because it is peaceful but not completely silent.

I like coming to Strong Roots because it is quiet, therapeutic and makes me feel good about myself. I also like watching the butterflies and the bees fluttering among the flowers.... I like the winter when we have a nice warm bonfire. I feel good about myself when I talk about different issues.

The one-to-one discussions are more suited to me than a group.... The gardening has helped the talking, as being in a natural environment... in an open space is less confining. The talking has helped me to be more open.

## Promoting and Sustaining Strong Roots

A sense of what Strong Roots is aiming to do is conveyed in promotional flyers which have been distributed to local General Practitioner (GP) surgeries, mental health services, and other statutory and voluntary organisations. The flyer also features as the welcome page on the website, which has a link to a podcast of an interview on Future Radio (a local radio station) with myself, a participant and a support worker with Baseline (Future Projects, Norwich).

Open days have been held to which local dignitaries, such as the Lord Mayor and local Members of Parliament, statutory and voluntary organisations, participants, volunteers and any other interested parties are invited. These are promoted in the local media. The aim is for newcomers to find out about the project from those with personal experience of Strong Roots.

Many people have limited financial means. Therefore the need for other sources of funding is ongoing. The income, costs and benefits can be seen in the Annual Report, which is designed by a volunteer who is a graphic designer, and is available online. For more information, please see our website [www.strongroots.org.uk](http://www.strongroots.org.uk)

## Appendix


The Refugee Orientation Project (British Red Cross) proved to be fruitful with regard to the first step in acquiring facilities. In the spring of 2004, I and two other volunteers rented two adjoining allotments for use by asylum seekers and refugees, from the very supportive Norwich City Council. Later, these would be augmented by the addition of one on either side. A small grant to pay rent, insurance and buy tools was acquired from Community Champions (Department of Education and Skills). At Christmas 2004 my fellow volunteers left, and in the spring of 2005 I found myself in sole charge. Another Red Cross volunteer commended the project

to the Central Norfolk Early Intervention Service (part of the Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust), which engaged its services. An evaluation of this project demonstrated the potential psychological and physical health benefits, which appeared to also play a role in reducing social isolation.

Strong Roots evolved from this pilot project. It adopted a constitution in March 2006 as an unincorporated association with a board of enthusiastic committed trustees. A shelter in the form of a summerhouse was purchased in the spring with money from Community Champions, 'Making It Happen' (Norwich City Council) and the Central Norfolk Early Intervention Service (part of the Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust).

Strong Roots received ten months' funding from an Acorn Grant (European Social Funding) in July 2006, was awarded three years' Well Being (Big Lottery) funding in January 2008, and in July became a registered charity whose aim is to provide a therapeutic facility for people coping with social isolation. In May 2010, a composting toilet was installed and four wooden garden benches were acquired, using some of the funding, for enhancing the experience of participants. The funding ran out in February 2011.

Since March 2012, Strong Roots has been charging participants for attendance. In July a grant of £5,000 was awarded by the AB Charitable Trust as a contribution towards running costs. In October 2012, £1,000 came from the Mrs Green Charitable Trust Settlement. Other individuals and organisations have also made donations.

Strong Roots has been awarded a grant for 21 months from July 2014 from Enable East, as a part of their Wellbeing in the East portfolio. Anticipated outcomes are around mental well being, physical activity and healthy eating. 



**Lucy Scurfield** founded Strong Roots in Norwich in 2006. Lucy has a BSc in Integrative Therapy and Counselling, is UKCP-registered and accredited through the Independent Practitioners Network; has an MA in Conservation of Historic Landscapes Parks & Gardens, a BA Hons in Art History, and a Certificate in Education. Formerly she practised for 20 years as a garden designer in London. The combination of working as a gardener, studying and having therapy inspired her idea of a therapeutic garden project for anyone interested in their own personal development and wanting to be outside.