

ALTERNATIVE approaches to treatment of mental ill health are growing.

The Daily Record (Scotland's largest newspaper), April 3, 2004

Campaigners claim medication itself is not enough, with critics of programmes such as Care In The Community arguing that the approach looks good on paper but is failing patients in practice.

Recent figures have shown that the number of people committing suicide in Scotland is on the increase. Last year alone in Glasgow around 100 people took their own lives.

Campaigners like Theatre Nemo's Isabel McCue claim early intervention and even simple talking therapies might be able to prevent some cases reaching this tragic conclusion.

Others have found approaches such as art and music therapy are crucial on a number of levels.

Dan Stradford, founder of Safe Harbor Project, the world's leading non-profit organization for non-drug mental health education, insists groups such as Theatre Nemo can be very positive.

He says: "It is remarkable how many non-conventional therapies will help alleviate the symptoms of mental illness. For example, art and music therapy. People with mental disorders commonly suffer from greatly altered thinking patterns and debilitated communication skills.

"Artistic expression, be it music, painting, writing, or other outlets, can act as a mental workout of sorts, allowing the person to put into motion - in a safe and enjoyable way - mental and social processes that may have fallen into disuse.

"They also allow the individual to communicate things that may be too difficult or painful to express through normal channels."

Dan reckons that even simple achievements, such as painting a picture or performing in a play, can have a profound effect on someone's self-esteem.

He says: "People with mental troubles commonly have serious morale problems because their value to the world has crumbled and personal productivity often comes to a standstill. Producing a painting or a play or perhaps a small concert can be strong medicine toward raising the individual's sense of self-worth and hope for the future. And there is no more powerful potion than hope."

He adds: "The simple use of work as a therapy, while perhaps seeming unconventional by today's standards, has been successful for centuries in helping the mentally unwell find their bearings again.

"This is exactly why so many older institutions were located near farmland. A schedule to keep, the carrying out of ordinary tasks, getting things done - these things put order into the disordered world of those with mental disorders.

"And the fresh air, sunshine, and exercise of a daily work schedule can do a lot for people who have lost their appetites, can't sleep, or can't take their minds off the demons that are haunting them.

"To be mentally healthy, we need to eat a balanced diet, get enough exercise, communicate to deal with our problems, be productive and, ideally, enjoy some creativity through whatever art form we find pleasing.

"A mentally unwell person needs these things even more.

"I'd like to see a much wider use of such unconventional therapies."

While studies suggest that rates of self-harm among the UK are higher than anywhere else in Europe, Dan points out Britain is ahead of America in employing complementary approaches.

He says: "The UK is actually much further along than the USA in controlling the epidemic use of psychiatric drugs.

"They were the first to require labels on anti-depressants stating that they may cause suicidal impulses - and the UK was the first in banning the use of major anti-depressants on children."

Paul English

Useful Sites: www.alternativementalhealth.com - Home of Safe Harbor, a US-based group who champion alternative approaches to the treatment of mental illness