

Case Study – Sailing and Mental Health

Sea Sanctuary, Falmouth

Sea Sanctuary is an innovative marine-based health education service, providing a mental health intervention combined with sail training. It is a registered charity, a member of the Association of Sea Training Organisations, an RYA Sailability site, is professionally accredited through the ILCM and is the only marine-based organisation whose services are commissioned by the NHS.

More information about Sea Sanctuary can be found on their website:

<http://www.seasanctuary.org.uk/>

Independent research shows that sail training enables people to develop life skills such as self-confidence, resilience, team working and leadership skills:

<http://www.sailtraininginternational.org/vessels/research/edinburgh-2007>

Most, but not all, sail training organisations work with young people. Sea Sanctuary works with people of any age, subject to an assessment, via self-referral or clinical referral through the NHS. They take groups of people with a variety of needs, ranging from people with long-term mental illness to those who want to improve their mental well-being or de-stress, on residential sail training voyages. Non-clinical interventions such as CBT and mindfulness are delivered by qualified and accredited therapists. Learning to sail a yacht is not the primary aim of the voyage, but being at sea in an environment that for most people is outside their 'comfort zone', and having to play your part and work together as a team, is all part of the therapeutic experience.

On every voyage the Sea Sanctuary staff include therapists who have learned to sail, and qualified sailors who have undertaken mental health awareness training.

I met Dan Newman, Sea Sanctuary's Operations Manager, to find out more.

How do clients react when they are referred to Sea Sanctuary for therapy? For some clients with mental health problems, even getting out of bed or catching a bus is a big challenge. Everyone comes along for an initial assessment, which gives them an opportunity to gain an understanding of what they'll be doing, so that when they come to sail it isn't a completely strange environment. There is also a half-day safety briefing and familiarisation with the boat at the start of the voyage, before we go to sea.

RYA Sailability sites mainly work with people with physical, sensory or learning disabilities. Do people with mental illness see themselves as disabled? Probably not, although their conditions can often be disabling in that they have times when they don't feel able to leave the house, can't socialise, and don't look after their physical well-being. The RYA Sailability ethos that sailing is for everyone fits well with Sea Sanctuary's aims.

Is the benefit of sail training on mental health related to the activity of sailing, or being in a marine environment? Doesn't everyone feel better when they're by the sea? Being

near or on the water certainly seems to be good for mental well-being, however the sail training element takes people out of their comfort zone and shows them that they can do things they never believed they would do, because they're part of a team and everyone needs to contribute to sailing the boat.

Sea Sanctuary also delivers land-based courses such as Mindfulness and Art & Writing, in a studio overlooking the water, to complement the sea-based therapy.

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