

Mood Walking Our Way to Wellness and Connection: An Evaluation

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Introduction

Helping Ourselves Through Peer Support and Employment (HOPE) is a consumer-survivor organization in Brantford, Ontario. HOPE supports individuals living with mental illness by providing peer support and a range of programming. Mood Walks, one of HOPE's programs, is a weekly walking group which offers consumers the opportunity to participate in a nature hike at different locations throughout Brantford, Ontario.

The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of an evaluation that was recently undertaken to explore the extent to which Mood Walks improves the physical, social, and mental health of participants. We used a mixed-methods approach to 1) evaluate participants' overall mood, anxiety, and energy levels before and after weekly walking sessions and 2) explore participants' perceptions of the Mood Walks program and identify strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis the program. Data sources included a quantitative pre- and post-walk evaluation and a focus group with participants and hike leaders.

Mood Walks is a program that was introduced by the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) in 2014 in partnership with Hike Ontario and Conservation Ontario. A great body of literature suggests that physical activity (especially physical activity done in nature) improves

mental health (Peluso et al., 2005). Mood Walks was developed with the goal of connecting survivors with nature and a community of like-minded individuals also interested in improving their physical, social and, mental health. HOPE initiated an eight-week Mood Walks pilot project in April of 2023 to introduce consumers to Mood Walks and gauge the level of interest among local survivors in participating in a weekly walking program. Participants either walked or were bussed to a series of trails throughout Brantford and hiked for approximately one hour. The walks were planned by a HOPE staff member and bus fare and snacks were provided to participants. In addition to improving the overall health of participants, the program was designed to provide survivors with a low-cost, barrier free experience that would introduce them to local nature trails.

Each week, participants completed a pre- and post-walk evaluation that asked them to rank their overall happiness, anxiety and, energy levels on a ten-point scale. At the conclusion of the final walk, participants were provided with lunch and invited to participate in a focus group which explored what they most enjoyed about Mood Walks, what could be improved about Mood Walks, how they had changed by participating in Mood Walks, and if they would participate in Mood Walks again.

Background

Physical activity is beneficial for individuals who live with anxiety and depression (Peluso et al, 2005.). The benefits associated with regular, physical activity have been shown to last for several hours up to one day (Peluso et al., 2005). There are three hypotheses that have been posited to explain the relationship between activity and mental health. First, exercise provides individuals with a distraction that may temporarily stop depressive or anxious thoughts. Secondly, because exercise can be challenging, it imparts a sense of self-efficacy among

participants. Finally, exercise offers individuals living with mental illness the opportunity to engage in social interaction. There is a sense of support and camaraderie among exercisers that can be especially helpful for those who struggle with anxiety and mood disorders (Peluso et al., 2005).

Individuals living with mental illness often face barriers to participating in physical activity (Usher et al., 2007). The nature of mental illness is such that many survivors struggle with low motivation and/or a feeling of aloneness or isolation which can prevent them from seeking out opportunities for activity (Usher et al., 2007). Moreover, many individuals living with mental illness experience physical ailments including obesity and Type two diabetes that make them less likely to participate in physical activity (McElroy, 2009). Cost can be a barrier that some individuals experience (Firth et al., 2016). The Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP, a provincial program that provides individuals with disabilities with a monthly rental and personal needs allowance) is set at approximately \$1200 per month. This leaves few ODSP recipients able to afford extras like gym memberships or additional bus rides. Because many individuals living with mental illness receive support from ODSP, the likelihood that these individuals will own cars or have access to their own transportation is low. To summarize, living with an illness that depletes motivation and initiative, poor physical health and low income are all barriers that individuals with mental illness experience.

Time spent in nature has been found to be particularly helpful for individuals living with serious mental and other illness (Abkar et al., 2010, Jimenez et al., 2021). Nature seems to provide protective benefits for those who experience depressive or anxious symptoms (Weir, 2020).

Mood Walks was introduced by the CMHA in recognition of the benefits of activity in nature for individuals with mental illness. The program is simple, straightforward, and low-cost.

Results

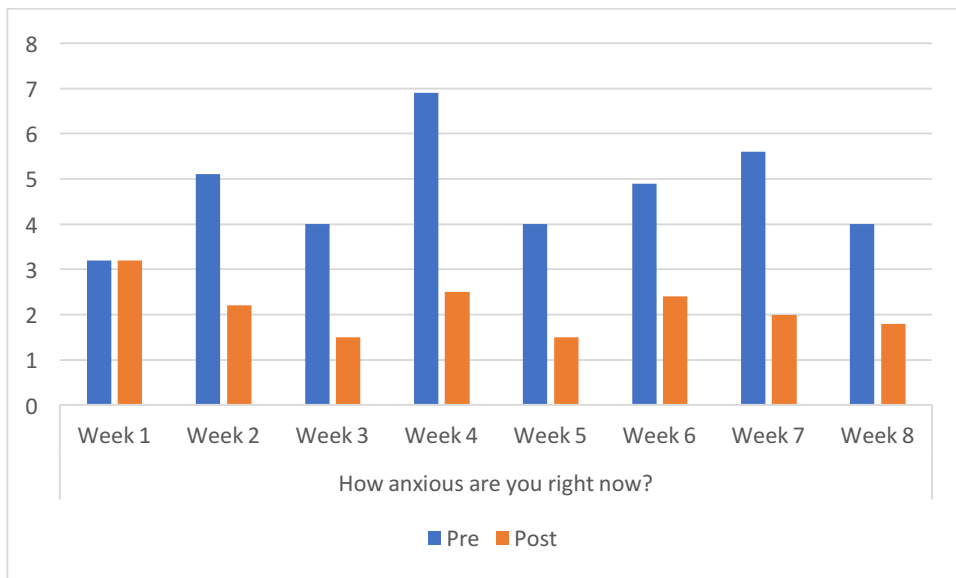
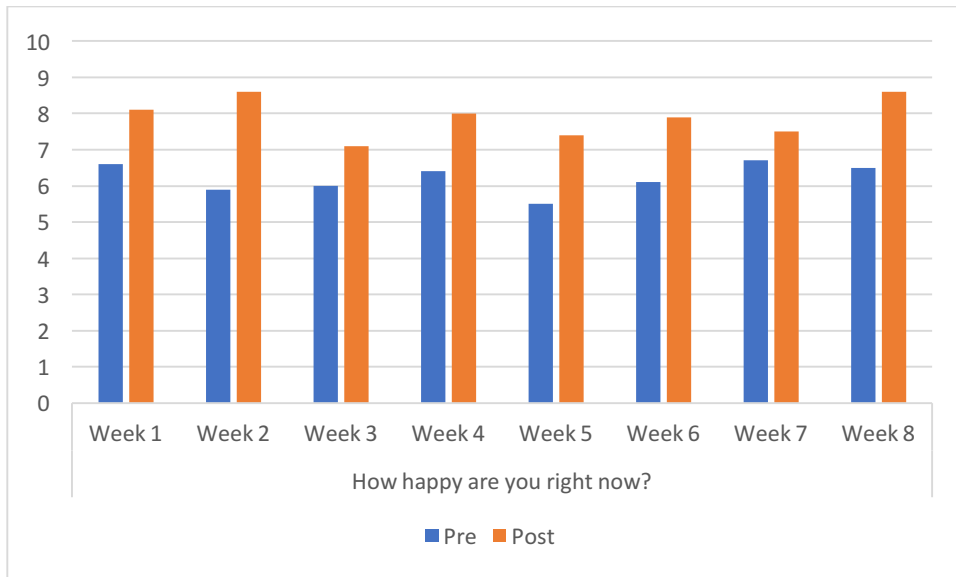
The quantitative pre-and post-walk evaluations asked participants three questions. Participants were to indicate their responses to each of the three questions on a ten-point scale with one and ten being the lowest and highest values, respectively. The questions were as follows: 1. How happy are you right now?, 2. How anxious are you right now?, 3. How much energy do you have right now? Mean scores were calculated and are presented in the following table:

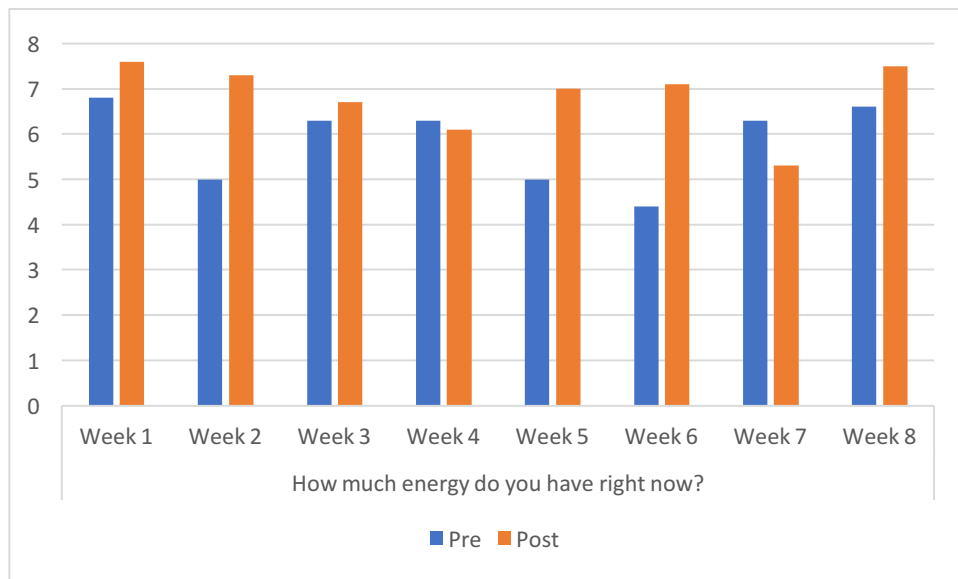
		How happy are you right now?							
		Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8
Pre		6.6	5.9	6	6.4	5.5	6.1	6.7	
Post		8.1	8.6	7.1	8	7.4	7.9	7.5	
		How anxious are you right now?							
Pre		3.2	5.1	4	6.9	4	4.9	5.6	
Post		3.2	2.2	1.5	2.5	1.5	2.4	2	
		How much energy do you have right now?							
Pre		6.8	5	6.3	6.3	5	4.4	6.3	
Post		7.6	7.3	6.7	6.1	7	7.1	5.3	

As the table indicates, mean scores for the first question, “How happy are you right now?” consistently increased post-walk. Some of these increases were notable, particularly in Week 2 when scores increased more than two points. Mean scores for the second question “How anxious are you right now?” decreased post-walk and here there were also some notable differences (see

Weeks, 2, 4, and 7). In the final question, “How much energy do you have right now?”, scores increased each week except in Week 4, when scores decreased slightly.

The following graphs illustrate the results question by question:





Focus group

A focus group with participants and hike leaders was held following the final walk. Of the fourteen participants in the focus group, five were male and nine were female. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 65. Most of the participants received ODSP as their main source of income. Although we did not collect data regarding specific diagnoses, many of the participants indicated that they struggled with depression and anxiety.

Participants commented on the social benefits that they received from participating in Mood Walks:

I like being around people, I liked, uh talking with people around, like in the walk.

... overall walking with people is probably the best thing you can do for something as opposed to walking by yourself, right, so like yeah it was a great program honestly.

Absolutely because I didn't have anything for five years, right? This has been the only interaction, really I have had.

New friends...I look forward to it.

Other participants commented on improvements to their mental health:

Social anxiety has gone down.

It improved my mood, like my anxiety always went down.

For me, it was the sense of get out of bed.

There were a couple of weeks when you know, when it (mood) wasn't up to par and by the time I came back from that walk, it was better (yeah) you know things are not...it is the whole, keeping that mood elevated.

Some participants commented on the benefits of walking in nature and how this experience differed from walking inside:

It's the little things that you enjoy, but it's the little things that people don't appreciate, when you have a walk like that, people know that this plant is what...and everyone is willing to watch birds or whatever (yeah) nature on what is happening in that moment.

It's a nice change from the sirens and the...

No...get me out of civilization, get me out into the trees, because I don't wanna walk at the Gretzky Centre (a local, indoor recreation facility), I don't like it.

Yeah, definitely, I wouldn't have signed up if it was...something indoors...or something that doesn't make sense to me, right? You hike to be in trees, to be outdoors or whatever, not to run around a man-made track.

Participants commented on the fact that the friendships formed in Mood Walks, transcended the group:

Yeah, I went fishing with (participant's name)

Oh great, so you made, you guys made a friendship, there was a real social connection?

Yeah...

That is great.

Yeah we went down by the river.

I made a friendship with (participant's name) during mood walks (ok, ok so you have a friendship too?) Yeah, right (participant's name)?

Some participants described the Mood Walks group as a welcoming group and discussed their level of comfort with the group. There was a sense of community experienced by participants:

Yeah, right from the get-go...that is when my anxiety gets up, when I first have to, the initial...but it was like everybody talked with everybody, we were good right from the get-go.

The way I look at it with Mood Walks, it's great company, great just good I don't know how to say it...just everybody in general are very open and company and meet people and just being part of a group is maybe what they need right, because they don't know community, they don't know how to reach out but this is the best way. It's a small group as opposed to a large group, but everybody mingles and we all talk among ourselves (yeah) and you know we go back and

forth...you know I don't know about you guys, but I just bounce beginning to end if I am the sweep, I just try to, you know make sure everybody is part of the team.

Participants surprised themselves with what they were able to accomplish on the weekly walks:

To do it, yeah but, five kilometers I thought would be too far, and it is far but I can do it. So...

Other participants discussed the normalizing potential of Mood Walks:

I guess the talk is different (yeah) so you're not talking mental health, you're not talking...you're talking plants, bees and mosquitos and...you're just in the moment...yeah.

Participants commented on the fact that transportation was provided by H.O.P.E.:

I really appreciate the fact that our transportation is paid for, on the bus, that is awesome, I wasn't expecting that and would still have gone but that's a bonus so thank you.

There was very little that participants wanted to see changed or improved about Mood Walks.

One participant suggested some out-of-town walks as an alternative to staying in the city:

I think it would be nice if we had, like I know it's hard because we only have really like one person who drives, just go to other locations, maybe not just in Brantford but like an out-of-town trip.

Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative data presented in this paper illustrate that the Mood Walks program has benefits for participants' social and mental health, normalizes mental illness and eliminates some of the barriers individuals with mental illness experience to participating in physical activity. Mood Walks is a low-cost, simple physical activity program which has a range of benefits for participants. Weekly walks had a noticeable impact on participants' moods,

anxiety, and energy levels. This was apparent to the participants who commented on these differences in the focus group. Moreover, Mood Walks, helped participants extend their social support systems by providing them with the opportunity to establish friendships with other participants. These friendships existed outside of the Mood Walks program.

Walking in nature offered participants a healing experience. Participants were quite clear in identifying the important role played by nature in facilitating their increases in happiness and decreases in anxiety.

Mood Walks provided participants with goals and the encouragement to achieve them. One walker surprised herself with what she was able to accomplish during one of the weekly walks. Mood Walks seemed to have provided her with the opportunity to push herself and overcome a self-imposed limitation.

Participants indicated that the Mood Walks program might be improved by including walks in other cities.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to report on the results of an evaluation of the Mood Walks program, a weekly walking program that was piloted by HOPE from April to June of 2023. We were interested in identifying the extent to which Mood Walks supported the physical, social and mental health of participants and exploring participants' experiences with the program. We undertook a mixed-methods evaluation of the program and results indicated that Mood Walks increased overall happiness, decreased anxiety and improved energy levels. Participants found the program to be welcoming, made friends with other participants and experienced better social and mental health. Participants highlighted the role played by nature in facilitating these

improvements. It is recommended that the Mood Walks program be extended into summer and advertised on social media and among community partners so that a greater number of consumer-survivors may benefit from the program.

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