

Podcast Series Empowering Minds

Episode 6: Mental health and environment

Transcript

Jonas Bull: Hello and welcome to empowering Minds, the Brussels-based podcast from Mental Health Europe. In our podcast series we discuss all things related to mental health. My name is Jonas Bull, I am a research and policy officer with Mental Health Europe and your host today. In the past episodes, we discussed young people's mental health, mental health and transparency regulations between doctors at the pharma industry, the use of coercive measures and mental health services and existing solutions and our understanding of normality in psychiatric diagnoses. If you happen to miss those episodes, you can find them at www.mhe-sme.org, and listen to them again.

Jonas: In this episode, we will talk about something that we might not always take into account when thinking about mental health and well-being, and yet is all around us. And yes, you guessed right. Today's focus is on the environment. Going into a year of the global Covid-19 pandemic, and with collective experiences of lockdown, we might have only just begun to understand how important it is to have nature around us, to spend time outdoors in a nearby park or forest, seeing the ocean and breathing in fresh air. Some might also have taken up home gardening, but more about that later. To understand more about the connections between the environment and well-being, I'm joined by three fantastic guests, Carys and Hannah from Generation Climate Europe and Cassie from the University of Maynooth in Ireland. Our first two guests today are Caryss Richards and Hannah Harrison. Caress is a climate activist finishing her master's degree in environment, politics and society at UCL in London and soon to be leading the Interlinked Campaign for Generation Climate Europe. This Interlinked campaign highlights the connections between each sustainable development goal and SDG 13 on Climate Action. Most recently, the campaign has focused on the link between climate action and SDG 3 good health and well-being. Hannah is a second-year geography undergraduate at the University of Cambridge and has recently taken over as a coordinator

off the SCG Working Group at generation climate Europe. In her spare time, she also volunteers, as the publications coordinator for climate talk, a youth led initiative aiming to demystify climate policy and amplify young people's voices in the fight against the climate crisis.

Jonas Bull: Thanks so much for joining the podcast today on having this discussion. I'm very excited and maybe to start with how would you understand the interactions between climate and environmental issues and well-being as such?

Carys: So I think it's really complex. I think you kind of have the impact off climate change environmental issues on individual well-being, which I think falls on kind of a spectrum from really sudden climate change events that have a sudden impact on wellbeing. And then you have kind of that, like longer, longer-term, slow building kind of anxiety that comes with the kind of worsening climate change that I also think there's like a collective impact on the well-being of society. And it kind of grew to certain groups of people. So you have, like, um, if you have groups that are maybe who lived by the sea and are worried about sea level rise, and that's kind of a more of a collective anxiety.

Hannah: Um, as for me, I definitely think there's a direct link between climate change and mental health. Humans are a part of nature. The bio failure hypothesis is basically the idea that humans possess this innate tendency to seek out nature and seek connections with the non-human. Having an environment that is well-looked after, well-maintained, we all have a direct impact on the way that we feel. We've seen that in, you know, the weather, seasonal affective disorder. We all look forward to daylight savings, right? And yeah, sometimes the dark nights, the cold evening aren't something that we all enjoy. But in terms of climate change, you know of the cost of the last few centuries. We Well, I say we in, like, a general sense, but the industrialised world I think we forgot about our place in nature. You know, we've made wealth a metric of success rather than the conservation of our like common home and you know, this has led to you deforestation, extreme frequent weather events like bleached coral reefs and loss of biological productivity. And you as part of nature where human animals at the end of the day and when we see that nature is being distressed. That's gonna have ramifications on our mental health and we're gonna feel distressed, especially when policymakers don't necessarily act in nature's best interests. That's only going to

compound the way that we feel. And so, yes, that's as part of nature. Humans, I think will have a quite innate and intense response.

Jonas Bull: Generation Climate Europe, obviously you have you know, one of the objectives is to bring in the voices and the perspectives of young people into, you know, the different policy debates, especially debates that go around climate, environmental issues. And at the same time when we talk about young persons that are, you know, concerned with climate change and environmental issues, we often hear the risk of increasing quote unquote climate anxiety that you know, increases among young people. What do you think about that?

Carys: Um, I mean, I think climate anxiety is I mean, it's no, I didn't get diagnosed like a medicalized condition, but I do think it's kind of the name we can give to anxiety that is brought about by kind of this like existential threat, that is climate change and that we all kind of way all innately, we kind of know is happening. I think I think the young people, I think they feel the burden of climate change or we feel the burden of climate change because it's often spoken about in terms of kind of climate change is this, like, future problem that we're going to have to kind of pick up the pieces and sort out? And so I think, yeah, I think, to some degree kind of climate anxiety or just anxiety is like such a normal human reaction to kind of this existential threat that, um yeah seems to be on the horizon or is even happening already.

Yeah, I think climate anxiety is like Carys mentioned it's no recognised as a medical term just yet. I think what makes it so difficult to ameliorate and to treat is because it is tied up with climate crisis and the climate crisis so complicated there's no like one silver bullet that will, you know, um return us to the time that we weren't set to warm the planet by three degrees. So you know, things like Paris agreement reaching zero degrees, they should be treated as not ends in themselves but being means to an end, um, on to try and, you know, make better the anxieties that we feel about the climate we'll require that. I don't think doctors are scientists involved in the climate are you completely sure about how best to treat young people's feelings towards climate and particularly, you know, now is particularly coming to the fore with the pandemic. It's hard to articulate and visualise it. Like the way that you're feeling and how how to best explain what it is, but at the same time does the realisation that there is a massive issue at hand. I think the more people try to talk about it, the more likely

we are to try and find not necessarily solution. But the best ways and the best practises in which to make ourselves feel, you know, better unless anxious.

Jonas: Generation climate Europe is an organisation that formulates a lot of recommendations. Um, what recommendations would you have also for policymakers to take more into account and to care actually about young people's well-being and mental health in this context.

Hannah: I think we definitely to take into consideration the complexity and intersectionality of how the climate affects everyone. Because, like, caress mentioned earlier, you know it can depend on location, age, gender, sexuality, race and these all you need to be, uh, attributed for in you know how we how policymakers try to care for young people in terms of climate anxiety.

Carys: Yeah, and I think that the idea of yeah kind of de-stigmatising mental health issues, I think is really important. I think it's about giving people kind of more information on with more information you have more power to act, and you have more power to kind of reach out to, you know, mental health support. You have power to reach out to others. If you can kind off if you're not forced to kind of retain your kind of your struggle internally and you're able to share it with others and without kind of this fear of judgement, I think it's actually a collective struggle. I think everyone struggles with mental health to some degree, and I think kind of yeah, being able for policymakers to kind of just keep talking about it. I think would really help people just to feel less alone. But I also think kind off for young people in particular, I think, kind of including young people in politics. That's kind of beyond, like, a tokenist gesture and kind of getting young people young voices into politics and kind off, they have a different. You know, I think we could have a different perspective, you know, with social media, that kind of angle, I think there need to be more avenues for young people to kind of get into politics and share their thoughts.

Jonas: And you mentioned already a couple of things that you do also yourself, you know, sort of, you know, in terms of going out. And how do you sort of connect more, I guess. You mentioned obviously the role that the pandemic has and we're moving into, over a year now that it was declared a global pandemic, right? And I am wondering, maybe in times of

this pandemic what do you personally do to take care of your well-being that maybe could also inspire other peoples that are listening to us.

Carys: I could go fast. It's kind of a bit cliché, but something that I tried to do something that means that I'm physically and mentally engaged in. It leaves little room for me to have other thoughts. I find I love meditating, but sometimes I find, especially with everything going on, I find it really hard to kind of manually, um, kind of push thoughts out of my mind, whereas something like running, which is I was meant to be doing a marathon last year and that's not happened, so I'm still training, but I find that the act of running it kind of yeah, forces other thoughts out of my head, at least for the first couple of kilometres and kind of gets me into, like that meditative state and then I'm able to kind of process all those things that have been going on during the day. And I'm also able just to be outside, which I think is so important during a pandemic. Yeah, it's a big cliché that running is really important to my mental health.

Hannah: You know, my answer is quite similar, actually. As a student currently, I'm spending quite a lot of time staring at my laptop screen. I'm going through lectures doing, reading, have exhibitions. Um, so getting outside and going for a walk, you know, just once a day in the middle of the day, really divides the day up. It's very easy for the days to just blend into one, because of the pandemic, that's what I enjoy. I live in a little village in the north of England, which is quite nice to walk around. There's a nice so I like walking. I'm next the river and seeing all the people who live that live around me. Also the second thing that I really enjoy doing. and it's quite paradoxical, really. I've got the opportunity to meet fellow, um, young people involved in the climate movement. Three Jixi and also through climate talks, which is this youth led organisation that aims to demystify climate policy. And, we have fortnightly zooms we meet and just chat about things that interest us. I think if you can get into these groups where you have, like, this common understanding this common shared belief, be it about the climate or something completely different. It could really help you seal the connection between you and another person. You or another group of people and it's I was a complete antithesis to what the pandemic is currently preventing us from doing, but it's that I found this really helped my mental health, just meeting new people. Ask them about how are you getting on? What is it like in such a country? Um, how are you doing? And reaching out and seeking those connections really made me feel less alone. And many of generation climate Europe I've never met in person. And it might be a while until we ever do.

But even still, I was still holding my friends and they've been quite a key. The key reason as to why I maintain a positive mental health structure over the past 12 months.

Carys: Yeah, I think it's very amazing that how many how many groups have kind of sprung up during the pandemic? Because, you know, we have this group that is so international that even locally, I have this, like where I live in Wiltshire and that we have the world's climate lions and there's so many different people from so many different backgrounds. We have people as young as five on people as old is like 80, and we all talk about climate change and all talk about what's going on in our local area, and it makes you kind of restores your faith when you're feeling a bit down. Just being able to talk to people that care about the same things as you and are just as passionate about the same things that you really Yeah, I think it really it legitimises your own feelings, but also you can share the weight off the problems.

Jonas: Our final guest today is Cassie Murthy. Cassie is an environmental psychology PhD researcher at Maynooth University working on the Horizon 2020 project Called Go Green Routes. Cassie is interested in the well-being benefits off being connected to nature and the natural environment. Having grown up on Valentia Island in the south west of Ireland, she's no stranger to nature exposure and the benefits of spending time in this environment, especially during the pandemic restrictions. Okay, so thanks a lot for joining today and maybe to start with, last year you started a survey to find out more about people's opinions and attitudes about nature, the environment and sustainability, especially in the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic that we're still sort of living in today. Um, could you maybe tell us more about the survey and why did you decide to launch it in the first place?

Cassandra: Yeah, of course. So, uh, mainly from personal experience. I lived during the pandemic on an island in the south-west of Ireland and in Ireland wWe were very restricted to having to stay within five kilometres off our home. In cities five kilometres from your home might actually get you anywhere close to some green space and I had been living in Limerick prior to pandemic on DH. I was lucky that five kilometres got me to the nearest park, but for other people it definitely wouldn't have. I had noticed a lot of people at home started going out on more walks. That they wouldn't have gone on. Where we lived is a very tourist focused area and during the summers, we are trump tourists. They're absolutely everywhere and we

don't get to enjoy the natural spaces much because it's really busy. There's always people. But strangely enough, the pandemic gave us a chance to get back out into nature. I swam for the first time, I'd say, in maybe 4-5 years. So I guess from my own perspective, I was interested in it to see was this just me because I was back at home? Or is this something else? Everyone else was going through because the stress of the pandemic alone meant people needed an escape. We were always inside of our houses. They were in front of screens. Even at the moment, I saw someone mention to me that we go from spending our day in front of our medium size screen to relaxing in front of our small screen, and then the afternoon we sit in front for a large screen. SWe're just going from screen to screen to screen. We were approached by another horizon, 2020 project leader on Mario Belson, who's running the re-nature project in Malta and he had kind of suggested that this was going on in Malta. He wanted to look and further into it would we be interested in pairing up, taking a look at what was going on. The survey focuses on Limerick, Cambridge and then Malta, but we're looking ash all over Europe. Everyone's welcome to take part, but they were just the four that we had partners in so we just focus on them. It looks at people's experience within nature before the lockdown, during the lockdown after the lockdown. Obviously, for some places, the lockdown is still happening. But we did have brief periods where we were left out of the confinement and we were allowed to go further than five kilometres and experience nature a bit more. We look at what people did in nature, why did they go out to nature. Um, we also look at their well-being. We use the W H 05 to, take a look and see how they were feeling. We also looked at how connected to nature they were and then their environmental behaviour. What were there, not even the recycling habits but how aware were they about their behaviour towards the environment before and after. And if there was a bit of a change? Because there there's research out there that proves the more connected you are to nature the more likely you are to recycle at home or, you know, make more conscious choices in your clothing. It's just mainly out of personal experience and interest.

Jonas: Thanks so much for saying that already. You mentioned that the survey is still ongoing, right?

Cassandra: Yeah, it's and you can still find us. You can either look at go green routes or re nature's Twitter pages, and it's easy to find there. We'd love to have more participants, more voices heard.

Jonas: Wonderful, and we will also add it to this podcast in the description. Since the survey is still going on, I know that probably you're going to still dive into the big analysis. But are there maybe first takeaways or first impressions that you can share from the survey already? Something that comes to mind?

Cassandra: Yeah, definitely one of the main questions, we left it as an open question and it was simply why did you visit natural space during confinement? And there were some really interesting answers coming through already. There is obviously the main ones, like for the mental health benefits, or get a break from working at home. Get out of the house for a lot of people as well. Just take the kids somewhere so they weren't running around and screaming while you're trying to be in work calls. But then there were some like to not have to wear a mask and to connect with nature because they have no access at home to any natural spaces. So they had to leave their house and find that. And I think there was a very interesting one, which was someone wanted to escape the construction that was going around or going on around them and when they went out for their walk and try to access nature they started to notice that there was construction going on everywhere. And then they started to get frustrated and angry because they were finding it more difficult to go out and find this green space because everywhere was built up and the higher you build the buildings, it's going to be harder to find small little spaces that are green you can't see them. They're not easily visible on. Then they even said that they had to leave because they heard gunshots and then their safety was at risk. So I found that was really interesting in the middle of all these people, saying it was just for mental health benefits, just to escape. Then there was this one person that was like It was difficult. We needed a way, just couldn't find it. It was frustrating. Everywhere was built-up. It's kind of one of the main things that we've seen so far in the study. Obviously, we haven't analysed it to look at problem by environmental behaviour, people's level of nature connectedness. But even just the reasons people, were going out into nature like they're vastly different but I think it's all stuff that we can relate to.

Jonas: Absolutely, thank you so much. And I believe also their reflection on just accessing nature, right? Especially when there's a shared experience off lockdown measures, of being at home and sort of trying to get out of that space as well. And so I'm wondering. But how do you think will maybe people's attitudes change. Attitudes about nature, environment in the future. Beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, when you know things will be opened up again

what many hope for, I guess in the course of this year, what do you think has sort of more sustainable changes and attitudes?

Cassandra: I think for a lot of people, they're aware of the the benefits nature has for their well-being. But I think people often get confused between being connected to nature and spending time in nature. So spending time in nature, it has positive effects for your well-being in terms of your emotions and short-term benefits of feeling good. Whereas actually being connected to nature. It has more of a benefit in terms of functioning well and having more control over your life. And just feeling like you're able to tackle the world, that kind of feeling that we all strive for. And then it also has the benefits off pro environmental behaviour. If you care about the environment and if you feel connected to nature, you're going to want to protect it. The amount of people I've seen that have started gardening during the pandemic it started as a hobby, but now it's something they care about. You're seeing this small little plant that you saw is maybe a seed or little bud is now blooming and it's a living thing and people are creating that connection, too. This is more than just something that we pass on our walk. So I think it is bringing people back to the kind of natural space and they're going to seek out nature a lot more. They're going to want to spend their time in nature. It was also that safety element for people during the pandemic. We were told not to meet up indoors, we were told to meet our friends and go for walks. There's also that social element that I don't think it's going to leave maybe in certain countries when it gets a bit cold. People won't be going for walks in the snow but I don't think that ... people have found their safe space in nature. I think that is going to live on. I hope it's going to live on I. I know for me it definitely is. But I think as well, even in the during the pandemic, we lost social elements. A lot of people genuinely couldn't meet with friends. Maybe they'd friends working in hospitals, working as doctors or nurses and they couldn't be exposed because of the virus. And nature was almost that buffer in between where the nature was your social companion, like there's people, I think nature goes beyond the trees and the flowers. It goes to the animals. If you've a dog at home, you're connected to nature. They're an animal. They're part of nature. So I think people's opinion will definitely change. Their attitude will change, and I think we will start seeing more pro-environmental behaviour, people who want to protect the Earth that helped them feel safe during one of the toughest periods of their life.

Jonas: Thank you so much. Yeah, and I can relate to many of the elements that you touched upon, especially the home gardening. Actually, I'm very proud of my plants at the moment, so I hope that will be the case.

Cassandra: I've heard a lot of people say that they've never thought of gardening before and people bought them gardening kits during a pandemic. They would have never considered it before. And now they've got little gardens on their balconies. It's their most prized possession from the pandemic.

Jonas: Absolutely. I usually do the Saturdays I use for home gardening sessions to plant more. You mentioned at the beginning already a project under which also the service running, which is the Go Green Routes project. Actually, the Go Green Routes project Mental Health Europe is also a part of. Maybe could you just briefly explain to us the goals of the project, the objectives and especially with regards to well-being mental health and the environment in nature.

Cassandra: I'm doing my PhD is part of the Go Green Routes project and Go Green Routes is a 10.5 million EU-funded project that's really focusing on reconnecting people with nature and helping people find how nature can help them improve their health and well-being. We're looking at well-being, and health as more of a holistic view. But it's not just your physical health and your mental health. It goes as far as what you're teaching the environment around you, how you're sleeping. It's a lot more than just the basic. How is your mind? How is your body? It's everything that's in between. It all makes up how we function daily. So yeah, Go Green Routes is looking at this from a green point of view. It specifically looks at urban cities and how implementing more green infrastructure can help people function better. My project in particular, is looking after this idea of nature, connectedness and specifically urban nature connectedness. We're trying to be more inclusive, even thinking of my own experience. I'm I feel really safe in the wilderness and being outside in vast green areas or like living on an island. There's cliffs, over the sea everywhere, and I feel safe in that environment. But if you told me to like maybe early afternoon to walk into an urban park, I wouldn't feel that safe. That's not my natural environment. But for other people who grew up in cities, they rather be in the urban park environment. If you told them that they'd go for a walk in the forest, they wouldn't know what to do. It's not safe for them. We're trying to help people reconnect to nature, to make it safer for everybody and also to let people know that there's those of

different types of nature. It's not just simply the green outside. We're working on elements of virtual reality. People who can't actually go out to the green space and actually be exposed to it, which we saw a lot during the pandemic. There is a lot of people who for health reasons couldn't actually go outside. We're bringing nature back to them. We're doing it in a digital element as well. We saw a lot of streaming services online, they started bringing out more nature-based documentaries and that was another way for people to connect with nature. We're just trying to bring it back. We know it's not going to be for everybody, but we're going to try and make it for the majority. Even if you don't want to engage with it that you have the opportunity to engage with it. It's just helping people feel like they can form that connection and that they could get the benefits from that also.

Jonas: If you want to know more about the different topics that Cassie and I were discussing free to look into the description off this podcast. Also at Mental Health Europe, you will find more information about Go Green Routes, about the project they're running at main if university. The Covid-19 survey and also, if you feel like it to, relax and click on one of those videos that they developed walking through a forest and being connected to nature and at the end of the podcast, let's take a quick look back and draw some key takeaways from the discussions. For me personally, there are three or four points that I have in mind. In my discussion with Carrie and Hannah, they pointed out the humans, innate tendency to seek out to nature and to connections within the environment. So an environment that is well looked after would also affect our well-being. We also discussed the need for policymakers to show clear commitments to tackling climate and environmental issues to seriously respect young people's mental health. When we see that nature is distressed, we become distressed, too. Young people's voices should be systematically included in political decision-making to bring in their perspectives and views. In the second talk with Cassie, we discussed the survey on Covid-19 and its mental health impacts. The survey shows that in times off lockdown people actually reconnected to nature, but also showed a certain reflection process examining access to nature in the immediate environments. And beyond the Covid-19 pandemic it seems that the re-connection to nature and realising the benefits of being in nature will last and sustain over time. In fact, we can assume that once we reconnect to nature, we start caring about it and, thus also want to protect it in the future.

On this more optimistic note, we hope you enjoyed today's episode. Thank you and goodbye.

Thank you so much for joining us today on the podcast. It makes me want to go out immediately, so I'll be doing that very soon. Especially because there's a sunny day in Brussels, which is not always the case. Thank you so much for joining us.

(Outtakes)

Thank you. Thanks for having me.

This is obviously the project as a whole would be trying to make that more successful. Bringing more nature based in Oh, my God, my brain stopped. Nature based solutions.

I tried running as a medicine form, but I'm not very good at it. But I actually started. I mean, I did cook a lot before but I do it much more actively now. And I think one factor for knowing if it is meditation or not is that you lose a sense of time and I do lose a sense of time when I could see it takes sometimes a couple of hours, and I only realise afterwards how long I spent in the kitchen.