

Mile in My Shoes: Andy's story

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My name is Andy Miller. I work for Alzheimer Scotland as an outdoor community activity organiser at Badaguish, which is near Aviemore in the Highlands of Scotland.

My work role involves organising outdoor and nature-themed activities for people living with dementia and their carers. We've been here for about two years, we've been open for two years, since June 2022... It was really the brainchild of two of my colleagues who really saw a need in this area for community activities for people living with dementia and their carers, but with a twist of nature. Because this area, Aviemore, is really associated with outdoor sports, hillwalking and nature in general. And many of the people that live here have got a strong bond with that.

I'm not an outdoorsy person... But since taking on this job, my love of nature has grown and grown. I find that the more you know and the more you learn about nature, the more you love it, and the more you feel connected to it. I've gone skiing, I like to go skiing in the wintertime, it's great skiing here. But I've come across a lot more people who attend our service, our participants, who are far more outdoorsy than me, and they teach me a lot about, not only about the flora and the fauna, but also about mountaineering, about different great walks that there are around here. Because people who attend our service have got a great knowledge of the outdoors and got a lot of experience of it.

I'd say the building blocks of health and wellbeing are connecting with nature. You know, it's something that's really primal in the human experience is our relationship and our connection with nature... It's so important to our wellbeing, having enough time in nature, understanding it, conserving it and throughout your life learning more about it and exploring different aspects of nature. One thing we're really keen on doing is creating a community of practice, spreading the green health message as far and as wide as we can.

Scotland is blessed with great, beautiful natural areas. It's not just Scotland. You know, all over the world, you know, you have – everywhere has great green space... Inner cities. You know, there's always a way of connecting to nature. And it's really the main job of – one of the main jobs of this space is to promote that message. As well as providing a... centre of activities and a place to come to for people living in this area, our other mission is to spread the message as far and as wide as we can... And yeah, that applies to rural areas and inner cities – and actually some of the best green health work is going on in inner cities... In allotments, in inner city parks, in the gardens of care homes. Lots of things are going on which are promoting green health.

People who have been newly diagnosed with dementia often, at some point further down the line, will require care and support which is really lacking in this area... And it's really just something to be mindful of, you know. I'm careful not to point blame. There's lots of complex reasons for a lack of carers. It's something which is felt across Scotland and UK... It's got very complicated reasons behind that... But it has a huge impact on people. Especially, if

you're a carer when your husband or wife is living with dementia. It's a huge emotional burden for someone... And when they can't find the person to give them any respite, a carer for example – a paid carer – then that person whose husband or wife is living with dementia, they have to care for them 24/7 at some point, you know, perhaps. A huge strain physically, emotionally, financially.

Also, there are people who perhaps live on their own and they don't have a husband or wife to take them along or transport them or support them to attend places like this. There's a real lack of carers and support workers which can really make people's lives so much better. Enable them to do things that they – wouldn't be able to do and also support, provide that support to people who are really struggling. So, I think if there's anything I was to suggest to those in political power is to, is to really focus that and give that some – some thought and some time.

There really is not any typical client... No person, you know, living with dementia is sharing the same experience as somebody else who's even got that same type of dementia, is the same age, is from the same place. Everybody's experience is slightly different. Not only in terms of their dementia but in terms of their – they may have other things going on in their life such as, you know, a sensory impairment or frailty which is quite common. Or not, you know, you perhaps get a younger person who has, who's living with dementia from a different generation to some of the more, people who are typically getting a diagnosis of dementia, people in their seventies and their eighties. You know, there are people who get diagnosis of dementia in their fifties, their forties. It varies wildly. And now, that's a challenge. Bringing people together who are on different levels or perhaps got different cognitive abilities, different cognitive impairments, they've got different interests. They're different people. So yeah, it can be difficult to bring everyone together and keep everybody engaged and involved and interested.

There are certain activities which... inspire emotional responses. Especially things or activities which are... things that people have maybe done in the past and they're now doing again for the first time in a very long time. Such an example of that is cycling. Our all-abilities cycling which we do once a month, involving these very high-tech machines which allow almost anyone to get on a bike and have that experience... And this was a, this was a blind man, a blind gentleman who's living with dementia who attends our group. And he was just bowled over by the fact that he was on a bicycle again which he thought he'd never, ever do. You know, and he was like, 'This is brilliant, I'm on a bike again!' He couldn't believe it. And you know, with his visual impairment, and a diagnosis of dementia – he was, you know, the likelihood of it was he probably wouldn't have got on a bike again were it not for this experience. So that felt really special.

Our participants, when they, when they attend our service and they take part in our activities, they're getting various different things... And different benefits from coming along. I think first and foremost is reducing that social isolation, getting together with people that are familiar. Having a laugh, you know, just the simple things. You know, the activities that we compose and that we bring in people to carry out on our behalf... are designed to sort of be cognitively stimulating as well as fun. The idea is that our participants are gonna enjoy it,

have a great time, feel as though they've been involved in something, and they've really taken part in something and have contributed to something. Whether that's a conversation, a work of art – you know, anything, anything connected with that activity, gone for a cycle – they've done something that day. With the added benefit of involving nature and nature-connectedness and this idea of green health, which has been shown to be so beneficial.

You see that straight away when people come to Badaguish, come along to the Outdoor Dementia Resource Centre. They look around them, it's the first thing that they do when they arrive. They look at the surrounding hills, of Meall a' Bhuachaille, and the surrounding pine forest. They can see the birds in the bird feeder, and it instantly elevates their mood. And that's kind of the aim. Our aim is to reduce anxiety, reduce stress, heighten those feelings, those good feelings, positive feelings, bring people together, bring them closer to nature.

Recently we had a group of people living with dementia come along to one of our activities. And we have lots of climbing gear, we've got lots of climbing ropes, and all of the equipment associated with climbing. My colleague Kenny has climbed many a, many a mountain in his, in his past. Me not so much. However, the people that came along were ex-climbers. They did a lot of climbing in the past – not so much now. They're now in the mid-stages of living with dementia, still very much able to – enjoy a day out, enjoy coming along to Badaguish and the natural surroundings. But a long time since they've been climbing, a long time since they've looked at a rope or any other equipment associated with mountain climbing.

So, we decided to get this equipment out. And just have a look at it, see what thoughts and memories or experiences that came to mind, inspired by this equipment. And it was amazing. One of the gentlemen – all of his knots, all of the experience he had with tying different knots, fine motor skills they all seemed to come back. And there was a kind of sense of recognition in his face. And he would say, 'Oh, oh yes, oh I remember this!' And you know, it came back. And it's amazing what can come back with the right inspiration. You know, the right object just to inspire that memory, just to find – that experiences working, working in the back of your mind, you know. And the pleasure that brings, rediscovering that thing which means, meant so much to you at one point.