

So What's Your Problem?

by Pam Nelson

My problem is usually where to start. What can you do when you feel stress or anxiety taking over, and can't concentrate on one job at a time? I have a handy wooden dice on my desk that I can throw, to put me back in control. Each face has an option (play loud music, phone a friend) and I can always cheat and have another throw.

The point is to get moving, preferably outdoors, to take my mind off what's bothering me. At its best, it can be a quick-fix equivalent of going back to bed and getting up again and having a totally different, more positive kind of day. With any luck, I can overcome the lack of concentration and that feeling of inadequacy in not getting today's important task started, let alone finished.

Most of us recognise that a bit of physical activity will make us feel better – but being outdoors in nature has proven benefits too. Not to mention eating a healthy diet, and being with other people.

When I started working from home, I soon realised that as well as getting away from difficult people in the office, I had also lost a lot of simple human contact in walking to work and chatting round the photocopier. And I was spending too much time glued to my computer screen, with no-one to remind me it was time for lunch. My GP suggested an exercise referral scheme but going to a gym just didn't appeal, and the healthy walks weren't very local, so I soon gave up.

But in fact, I already had all the right solutions to hand – in my case a bike, a dog, a bit of volunteering and some friends who understand (or at least tolerate) my moods.

The Bike

I've grown to love cycling for all

sorts of reasons. I don't actually cover a lot of distance on my bike, just a few miles a day to work and back, and I have a fold up bike so I can travel by train and bus to meetings and make connections easily.

Cycling is the ideal antidote to a bout of lethargy. It can be just a quick trip to the town centre to do something useful, like post a letter or get some food. It can be a visit to a friend's for a calming coffee or a lively argument. And if the need arises, it can be an anger-busting solo ride into the nearby countryside, finishing with an exhilarating zoom downhill and back home. When Colchester MIND asked about setting up some cycling activities for their members, we agreed to do the obvious – just support people to get in touch with local cycling groups, and offer a bit of mentoring or professional support for those who need extra help.

The Dog

Pets are important to me too. Our family always had dogs, and I used to work for a pet-food company, so I picked up quite a bit of information about companion animal studies. For instance, I know that stroking a dog (or cat) reduces your blood pressure – and stroking your own dog reduces it even more! A well-behaved dog gives you endless opportunities to make contact with people, as you're far more likely to strike up a conversation with someone in the park if you have a dog with you. Owning my first dog prompted me to join Pets As Therapy (PAT) and do a bit of hospital visiting - which, incidentally, gave me as much benefit as those I visited.

Through PAT, I met a mental health worker who set up a pet-based therapy scheme for people experiencing poor mental and emotional health. I remember her

saying that taking her dog to an important case review meeting had a kind of equalising effect on staff and service users. Most people relaxed in the dog's company, and discussion of even the most difficult problems became more manageable.

The Volunteering

Most of the time I actively seek the company of others, although I do have occasions when I just can't raise the energy to go out, even though I know it will probably raise my mood. So perhaps I'm lucky that volunteering comes naturally, and going to meetings in my spare time isn't a chore. Yes, there are times when it would be easier to stay at home, but meeting people to discuss the environment, or set up cycling projects always gives me a buzz.

The Friends

A more recent bonus has been discovering a local group called Revive who meet once a month, to share our ups and downs, and to bolster our self-esteem by acknowledging each other's skills. None of us had liked the idea of going to a drop-in centre - on the one occasion when I felt low enough to give it a try, I remember putting on a smart suit, and hoping people would think I was there in a professional capacity.

Meeting in town for a coffee seems so much more "normal". And why stop at the local café? Why not have Revive groups that meet in other public spaces, like the library or museum? In fact anywhere that people meet for a chat about making changes for the better.