

Sprouting new directions



Lucy Mott shares her experience of designing a new therapeutic cycle while on student practice placement at St Mary's Secret Garden

When I discovered that my final placement would be at St Mary's Secret Garden in Hackney, East London, which provides therapeutic gardening sessions for people with learning difficulties, mental health problems and physical impairments, I was excited by the challenge of using occupational therapy in a non-traditional setting, with no occupational therapists on site.

As winter warmed to spring, I spent my days outside supporting a wide variety of wonderful people in tasks as diverse as picking nettles to make soup (gloves were a necessity) and planting up flowers in an abandoned toilet, kindly left on our doorstep.

OTs have long recognised the therapeutic benefits of using gardening with their clients, and more recently social and therapeutic horticulture has emerged as its own approach (Hagedorn 1987; Fieldhouse and Sempik 2007). Therapeutic horticulture can benefit occupational performance, health, wellbeing and social connectedness and promote independence and confidence (Sempik 2005).

I was lucky enough to observe these benefits first-hand at St Mary's, watching friendships blossom and seeing the satisfaction and confidence inspired by a hard day's work in the garden.

Horticultural therapists specialised in matching and adapting gardening activities to clients' preferences and abilities, working towards individual aims such as increasing physical activity, improving communication skills or working more independently.

Providing therapy in a natural, rather than clinical, setting enabled a relaxed and fun atmosphere full of laughter and endless cups of tea and biscuits. These social benefits were often as important as those gained from gardening itself, as attendees included some of the most vulnerable and excluded groups in society.

OTs will instantly recognise, in this brief description of St Mary's secret garden, some

core elements of our profession that are implicitly present, such as use of meaningful occupation, activity analysis and activity adaptation. As my supervisor was not an OT, it was up to me to make explicit these links between our work at the garden and occupational therapy.

To help with this, I went back to the basic occupational therapy process of assessment-planning-intervention-evaluation. I then sketched out a model of how this process tallied with our work with clients in the garden, both on a daily basis and over a longer cycle (see diagram opposite).

My placement educator and university tutor liked the model and suggested I develop it into a user-friendly tool for the St Mary's website. The therapeutic cycle now allows referrers, potential clients and their

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families and others to understand at a glance how the garden project provides therapeutic benefits.

In this time of government cuts, a clear articulation of this therapeutic value is vital

to ensure that referrals (and therefore funding) from bodies such as social services continue, ensuring the project is able to thrive.

In addition, the model could also have practical relevance to other OTs using, or planning to use, gardening in their practice, whether in a large country garden or inner city window box. The therapeutic cycle shows how OTs can use their core skills and training to facilitate meaningful occupation through gardening, thus making the case for more OTs to be involved in community horticultural projects.

As in all settings, being able to demonstrate clearly the role and value of occupational therapy is vital for the continuing development of our profession in both emerging and existing areas.

References

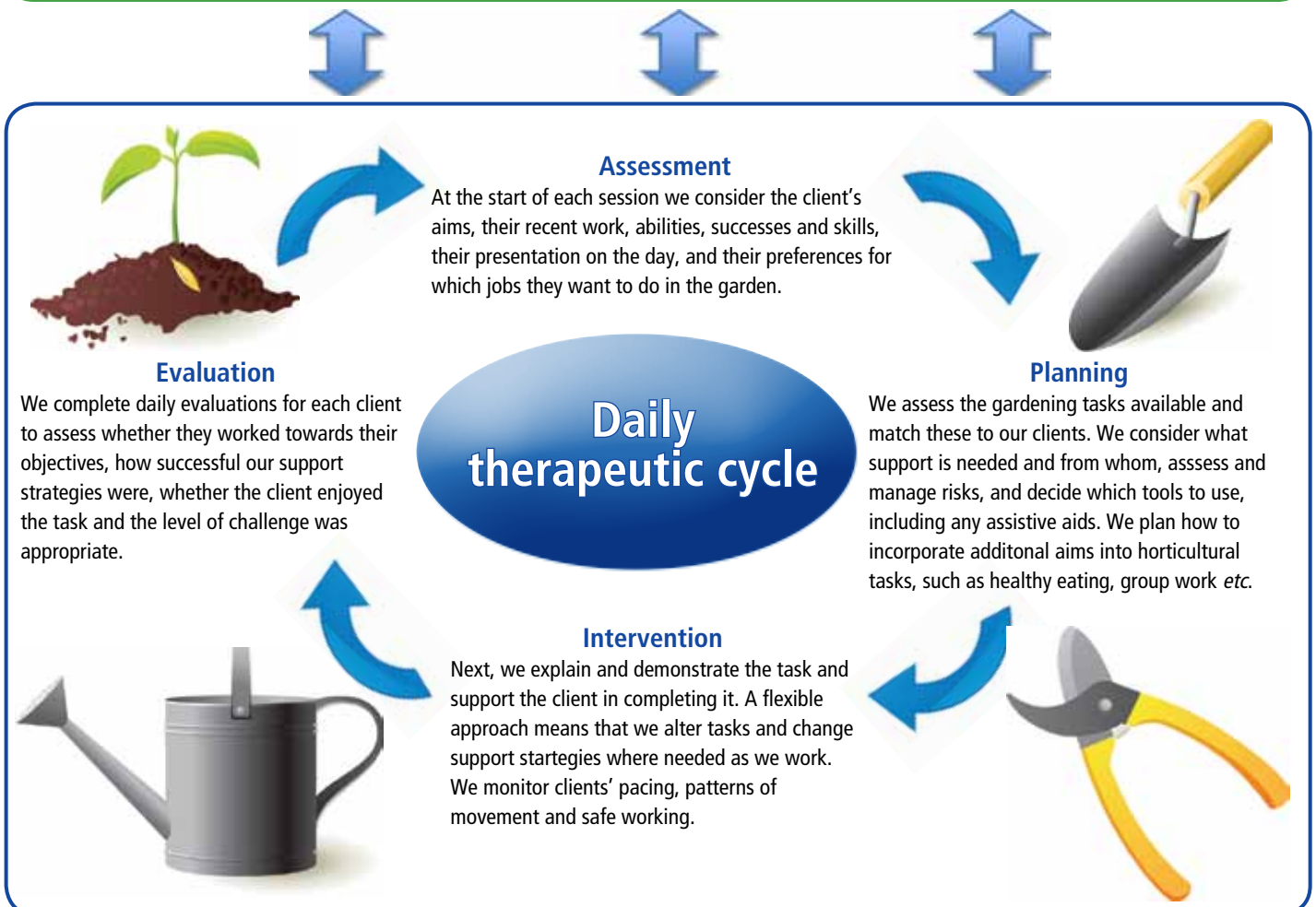
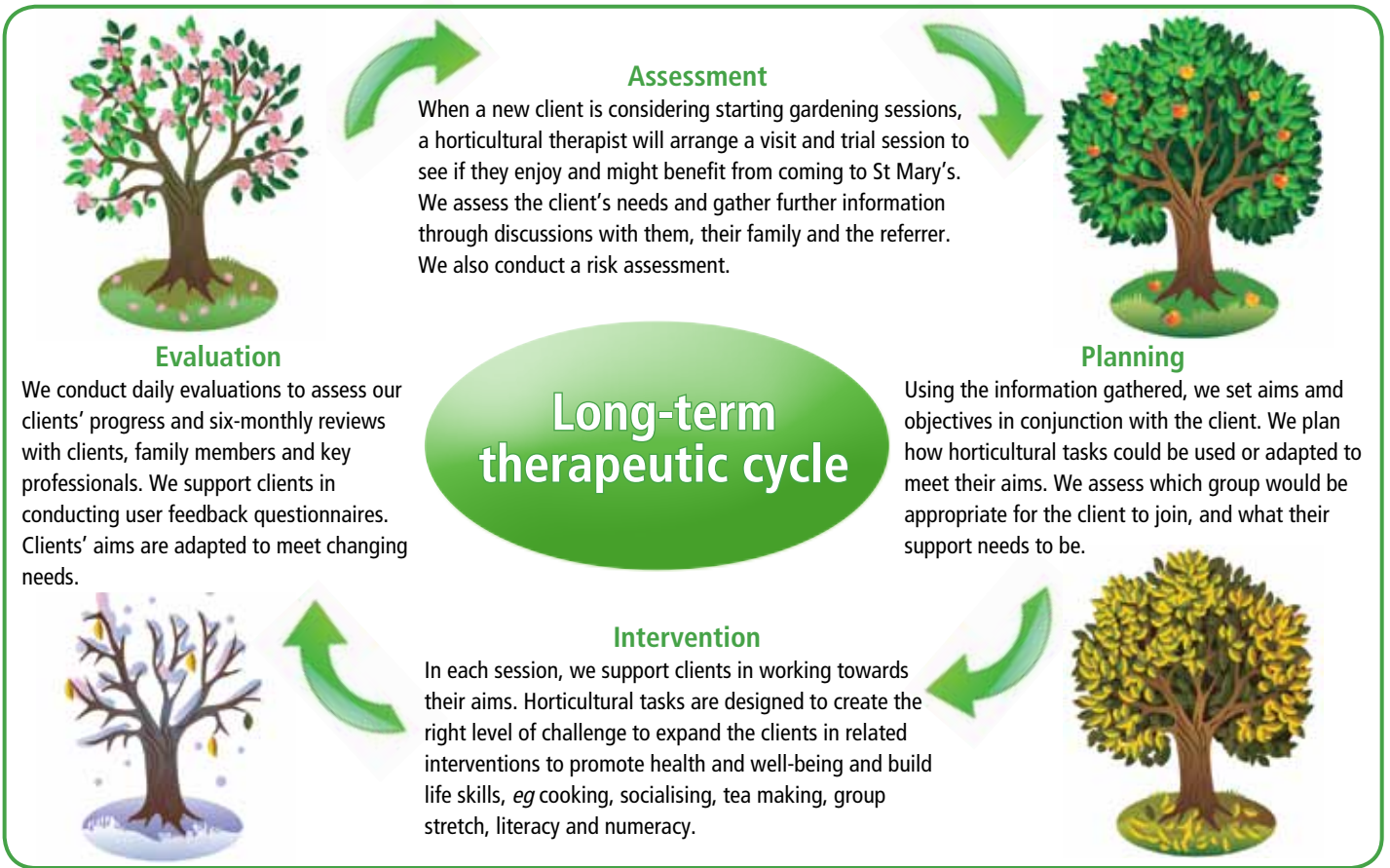
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St Mary's Secret Garden therapeutic cycles*



* Adapted from Lucy Mott's original model