

# Green Scripts: prescribing nature as therapy

A group of committed local dementia advocates in Ballarat, Victoria, has developed a program to help people living with dementia to better connect with nature in all its goodness.

**Caroline Gibson** and **Mark Yates** tell the story.

**A** growing body of evidence in recent years confirms what many of us already knew: that spending time in nature has many benefits for physical, mental and cognitive health and wellbeing. It's the impetus behind the Green Scripts 'social prescribing' program which supports primary health care practitioners to recommend or 'prescribe' time spent in nature as part of the care plan for people living with or impacted by dementia.

Green Scripts was developed by the Bigger Hearts Dementia Alliance, based in greater Ballarat in Victoria, with the support of a Dementia Friendly Community grant from Dementia Australia. Like other dementia alliances, Bigger Hearts is a coalition of local people living with dementia,



The award-winning Dementia Friendly Forest and Sensory Trail, near Ballarat, Victoria.

family carers, local businesses, health professionals, and other organisations and individuals who are striving to promote understanding and awareness of dementia and improve the quality of life of people with dementia and their families.

## A resource for primary care practitioners

The Green Scripts project has created a freely available online resource for primary care practitioners that illustrates how being in nature, and participating in various ways, is valuable for positive health and wellbeing outcomes for people living with dementia. It builds on, and is closely connected to, a previous project funded by a Dementia Friendly Community project grant, the Dementia Friendly

Forest and Sensory Trail.

The Dementia Friendly Forest and Sensory Trail, located in Woowookarung\* Regional Park, in Ballarat, Victoria, is an award-winning dementia-inclusive landscaped trail, designed to provide multiple opportunities for people living with dementia and others to engage with nature. You can walk the track, picnic with family at the Stone Circle, rest at Lizard Lounge, look for wildflowers, or fairy furniture, smell the eucalypts, spot the native animal sculptures, reflect at Wren's Rest and listen to bird song. Everyone is welcome and currently around 400 people are accessing the trail weekly.

The new Green Scripts tool encourages the primary care practitioner to write a prescription or 'script' for people living with dementia and their families to visit and interact with the Dementia Friendly Forest and Sensory Trail. The types of activities and interactions with the trail are organised according to four primary areas of benefit: move, connect, feel and think. These headings reflect the three levels of engaging with nature described by Pretty *et al* (2005): 'viewing', 'being' and 'participating'<sup>1</sup>, each of which can be used as a social prescription. Depending on the capacity and needs of the person with dementia, the practitioner might prescribe one or more of the activities (see case study in the box on p18).

\* Woowookarung means 'place of plenty' and the Dementia Friendly and Sensory Trail is part of the traditional lands of the Wadawurrung Aboriginal people.



Left and inset: enjoying the trees and sky from the Lizard Lounge





## Nature is good for you

There is mounting evidence for the health value of interacting with nature. A view of nature can help improve mood, lower anxiety and promote wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> The green and blue colours of nature are known to have a calming effect and to lower anxiety.<sup>3</sup> Being in nature, amongst the eucalypts, can also decrease stress as the trees emit phytoncides, a volatile substance which, when smelt, increases levels of serotonin.<sup>4</sup> Listening to bird song has been shown to be restorative, enhancing mental wellbeing.<sup>5</sup>

Participating in nature, such as walking in the forest, alters physiological function, improving cognition, mental health and self-esteem<sup>6</sup> and can build a sense of belonging.<sup>7</sup> People living with dementia are likely to share many of the benefits of engaging with nature described above and there is evidence of further benefits that are specific to the condition of dementia. These include reduced agitation,

improved sleep, reduction in use of psychotropic drugs, reduction in falls, improved communication and higher levels of social interaction.<sup>8</sup>

While people in the community don't need a Green Script to enjoy the Dementia Friendly Forest and Sensory Trail, Green Scripts provides a tool within a framework of community support, for 'social prescribing' by primary care practitioners in the greater Ballarat area.

## Recognition of social prescribing

Social prescribing – where a primary health care practitioner recommends community-based activities to improve the health and wellbeing of community members – is a growing area of focus for primary care; and Green Scripts is a good example of a social prescribing tool.

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) recommends that social prescribing be incorporated into routine



In addition to spotting birds, visitors can look out for fairy furniture along the trail.

healthcare in Australia. It reports that 70% of GPs believe referring patients to community activities, groups or services helps to improve health outcomes, but most do not have knowledge of available options or links with such services.<sup>9</sup>

Also, while a primary health care practitioner can make the social prescription, appropriate community structures to refer to need to be in place.<sup>7</sup>

Green Scripts, with its central link to the Dementia Friendly Forest and Sensory Trail, facilitates that community structure, providing an important link to an accessible, supportive and inclusive green space for all.

Green Scripts is a practical and healthy demonstration of a dementia-friendly community in action. The program is being promoted to primary care practitioners as a social prescribing tool to address physical, mental health and social care needs of people living with dementia and their support person(s). ■

## More information

Green Scripts:  
<https://www.greenscripts.org.au/>  
Bigger Hearts Dementia Alliance  
<https://www.biggerhearts.com.au/>  
'Join Me on a Nature Walk Through the Dementia Friendly Forest and Sensory Trail, Ballarat Australia' takes you on a virtual walk along the trail. Source: Rob, The Magic Forest:  
<https://youtu.be/STEsGslHCXU>

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The stone circle is one of six places along the trail designed for rest and reflection.

## Case study: How a 'Green Script' might work for the primary care practitioner

Barrie is in the clinic for his 75+ health assessment. He has mild dementia with an MMSE score of 23/30. Barrie's wife, Dianne, has noticed Barrie's mood is getting low and he is anxious especially in the afternoons. Barrie usually enjoys walking, his garden and the birds visiting his bird bath, but is spending more time sitting indoors. This has worsened with COVID-19 restrictions.

You understand the frustration Barrie is feeling and encourage him to engage in the activities he

enjoys. You explain that physical activity and being outdoors could help his mood and be good for his brain health. You decide a 'Green Script' could be beneficial and provide information on the local Woowookarung Dementia Friendly and Sensory Trail.

You recommend that Barrie walk for 30 minutes along the trail three times a week and suggest the challenge of locating the indigenous animal sculptures and identifying the local birds.



The reference list for this article is on the AJDC website at <https://bit.ly/julaugsept-2022-article-references>, or scan this QR code to access.