



## **The science of the mind: investigating mental health**

*Talking about Blackthorn: the chief executive*

### **Narrator**

Jan Prior's background is in clinical psychology. Now she's Chief Executive of the Blackthorn Trust.

### **Jan Prior**

Blackthorn Garden is a social enterprise which provides work placements for people who have either mental health problems or physical health problems but mostly those with mental health problems, a whole variety of mental health problems, and the idea is that people come to us and work alongside our staff and our volunteers to run the café and to cook in the kitchen, to serve in the café, to then work in our other workshops – the bakery, within the garden obviously growing food, and our plant nursery, craft workshop, wood workshop – and that allows them to learn new skills technically, but it also allows them to integrate with a group of people through the community here. And also then to connect with the wider community through the sale of our goods which is often through farmers' markets or other through other outlets.

Most of the staff at Blackthorn Garden are not trained professionally in mental health. We do have one member of staff who's an ex-social worker and has counselling training and I, myself as Chief Executive, I'm a clinical psychologist by training, but other than that all the other staff are trained in their particular area of skill, be that gardening or baking or cooking, or whatever it might be

We are a very close knit team and it's really very important that we do work closely together. We meet once a week as a team, entire team on a Thursday and that meeting is to plan business and deal with the running of the place in a way, from a business point of view, but we spend a chunk of that meeting talking about the individuals we're working with in order that there's an integrated approach to each individual who's working with us as a co-worker, and that we make sure there's a consistent approach to their care and their support, and encouragement so we do I think work very closely and have to do that in order to provide the best service to the client.

We take referrals mostly from community mental health teams locally. and we also take from local GPs. When those referrals are made they're made to our Workways team who then bring the individual in to see around the garden in a very informal way because people are very often not sure whether they want to come and they need to just see, have a gentle introduction, so they will be walked round the garden and shown the different workshops, introduced to anybody who's here so they get to do that before they then are offered, if they're interested, they'll be offered three taster days, and the taster days will be one in the kitchen, one in the craft studio and one in the garden, maybe in the greenhouse as well. And on the basis of that then there'll be an agreement as to whether or not they would like to come and become a co-worker, in a formal way. And that process is that they, they then say whether they would like to come, and the team discuss the feedback from those three days, and we decide whether or not it's worked well, whether we think we could actually offer anything to this person. We also will look at their motivation and, and sense of motivation to do, to engage in a way, to make sure they're ready to engage in, in the work we do, and they're then a offered a placement as a co-worker, and normally would come either two or three days a week. Two days a week minimum because we believe they would need to come for that long in order to engage in the community and feel part of what we're doing here, no more than three days a week normally because we don't want Blackthorn to become their life and we're in a way working to help people use this as a stepping stone to their next step, and so we're not looking at this as the end point, but as a stepping stone to another point in life beyond Blackthorn.

The goals that we're working towards with different individuals obviously vary and we're very keen to make sure that we are tailoring our activities with an individual to their specific needs, so each individual will have a review every four months with a mentor that's allocated when they become a formal co-worker, and with Workways, so there are goals set at the outset and they are monitored, and altered and adjusted as, as the individual moves through the programme.

What we're aiming to do with the individual is to move them to the next step in life and that varies. Many people with mental health problems wish to return to work or even begin to work. Many have not ever worked and despite a wish to work, may feel that they don't have the ability or confidence to do so, or the resilience to do so. And our job then is to help them to build those skills and the confidence, and develop a CV and interview technique, and help them to find the opportunities that may be out there for work. That's one aspect, it's not by any means our entire raison d'être. The other avenues that people may pursue may be voluntary work if they don't wish to go into paid work we have links with other voluntary organisations that offer voluntary work and so we will work in partnership with them, and also further training and education. So many people maybe have missed out on education earlier in their lives or maybe have not had the confidence to pursue that, and so many of our people will go on to embark on a degree course or a technical training or an apprenticeship, or something like that, that they maybe have become interested in through the work they've done here.

Individuals, may well just leave feeling better than when they arrived at Blackthorn - those soft outcomes that may come from improved self esteem and a greater sense of community. Linkage with the community and integration into the community are really important and sustainable for the future are equally as important as whether somebody moves on into a tangible outcome like work or, or education.