

Walking the Way to Health - Training and Advice Service

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Abstract

The Countryside Agency and the British Heart Foundation (BHF) have joined forces to increase the health and well-being of sedentary people, by promoting regular and brisk walking within local communities. The core components are provision of self-help information to encourage independent walking and organised walks led mainly by volunteers.

The training service provides a two-day course for professionals who want to initiate a walking scheme in their local area. The aim of the training course is to introduce participants to the underlying principles required to set up a walking project within the community. 70 professionals from leisure, health and countryside backgrounds have currently undertaken this training.

A one-day training course is also provided; this is aimed principally at volunteers to enable them to lead walks which will attract people who do little or no exercise, perhaps some with known but stable medical conditions for whom moderate exercise can be a bonus. The course has been developed with the technical support of the BHF National Centre for Physical Activity and Health, based at Loughborough University. The initiative has trained 330 volunteers from 25 different community groups across the UK (this is set to reach a figure of 500 by December 2000). A newsletter is produced on a regular basis to ensure that the volunteers are kept up-to-date. An evaluation is being planned for October 2000 to assess the impact of the training.

Professionals across the UK are also able to access twice-yearly Regional (8 regions) Network meetings, which provide them with an opportunity to meet with other colleagues to exchange ideas and good practice.

This comprehensive training programme is a vital component of a national initiative, which aims to get people walking in the UK in the 21st century.

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Dawn Vernon was employed in Wiltshire as a Senior Health Promotion Specialist from 1991 to 1999. Her main responsibility was Coronary Heart Disease Prevention specialising in promoting physical activity. In 1994 she obtained a MSc in Exercise and Health Science at Bristol University. She set up the Swindon GP Exercise Referral Scheme in 1993, and the Salisbury Scheme in 1996. In 1997 she launched the Salisbury 'Doorstep Walks' initiative, promoting independent walking; the success of this scheme prompted the development of a further nine schemes across the country. In 1998 she joined the 'Walking the Way to Health' initiative and currently manages the national training and advice service.

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Introduction

'Walking the Way to Health', a national initiative managed by the British Heart Foundation and the Countryside Agency, set up a training and advice service in June 1999. The training service is designed to support local partnerships of health, leisure and the community who want to develop and implement local schemes to promote walking for health. This initiative aims to encourage more people to walk in their local community, especially sedentary people and those living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The common core of a local scheme is the provision of self-help information to motivate people to walk either on their own or with family and friends and a regular programme of short led walks led mainly by volunteers.

The training and advice service have developed and currently provide two courses which can be accessed at no cost; both courses are 'recognised' by the British Heart Foundation National Centre for Physical Activity and Health. Training for scheme co-ordinators is a two-day event provided at regional venues. Volunteer walk leaders training is a one day event provided on the 'doorstep' of a potential 'walking for health' scheme. In addition the service hosts regional half-day network meetings twice a year in each of the eight regions in England. The Service currently operates in England but there are plans to provide similar support to local schemes in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Scheme Co-ordinators training

The aim of the two-day training course is to introduce participants to the underlying principles required to set up a walking project within the community. The course is only open to individuals currently not operating a scheme. Priority, in the first instance, is given to professionals working in Health Action Zones, in local authority districts falling within the 25% most disadvantaged as defined in the Index of Local Deprivation and Rural Development Areas. The course is free of charge however, participants are responsible for their own accommodation and transport arrangements.

By the end of the course participants will have:

- An understanding of the link between walking and health.
- Increased their understanding of the different statutory and voluntary organisations, and individuals within these, who could be involved in the development and the delivery of health walk projects.
- Insights into working partnerships and with the local community.
- An understanding of all the stages involved in planning, fund-raising, implementing, marketing and evaluating health walk programmes.
- The opportunity to discuss good practice from around the country and share experiences with colleagues.

A pre-course task has been developed to ensure that participants have started to think about some of the issues and how they may relate to the locality in which they are planning to set up a walking scheme. The course employs a variety of teaching methods including whole group discussions, syndicate group tasks, case studies and presentations from volunteers working in established schemes. The range and scope of the subject matter which needs to be covered during the two-day course has led to the development of a considerable amount of supporting information and hand-outs. Only the basic principles of evaluation and marketing can be introduced during the two day course; as a result a 'tool-kit' of resources has been developed to help participants implement a marketing strategy and evaluation plan.

Four courses have been run since November 1999 and 70 people have attended. The participants come from a variety of different backgrounds; the majority work in health promotion departments, leisure and recreation services, countryside and park ranger services and community education. A smaller number of health professionals, including a practice nurse and health visitor have attended. Two participants were dedicated 'Health Walk' co-ordinators, responsible for developing walking programmes in a particular geographic area. It is anticipated that there will be more dedicated workers as the 'Walking the Way to Health' initiative expands. The diversity of backgrounds on the course ensures a wide range of views and experience and this certainly contributes to the learning experience.

A follow-up evaluation of the four courses is planned for October 2000; the aim is to find out what impact the training has had in the development and design of local walking schemes. A further four courses have been organised between September 2000 and January 2001; all are fully booked.

Volunteer Walk Leader Training

Organisations are invited to formally apply for a training course to be run in their local area. They are advised that they need to be well advanced in planning a walking scheme before they would be in a position to train and then use volunteers to lead walks. Priority in the first instance is given to organisations in Health Action Zones, in local authority districts falling within the 25% most disadvantaged as defined in the Index of Local Deprivation (produced by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions) and Rural Development Areas.

Before a training day is provided for a local organisation a representative of that organisation needs to attend a two-hour 'briefing session' provided regionally. The briefing covers the co-ordinator's responsibilities prior to the training day; advice is given on the recruitment of suitable volunteers. The co-ordinator is also advised that they need to ensure that they have arranged for participants to receive basic resuscitation training prior to or immediately after the training event. The concept of 'Health Walks' is discussed in detail; organised walks are designed to attract people who do little or no exercise, perhaps some with known but stable medical conditions for whom moderate exercise can be a bonus. The co-ordinator is also responsible for finding a suitable venue, researching a short walk and sending out joining instructions for the training day. The briefing includes a detailed discussion on the programme for the training day so that the co-ordinators can ensure that their volunteers are fully informed and have accurate expectations of the day. Co-ordinators are also reminded

that they are responsible for the management of the volunteers once they have completed the training day and that they need to arrange follow-up meetings and ensure their volunteers are fully involved in the development of the local scheme. Having attended a 'briefing session' the co-ordinator is then able to book a training day in their area at a date convenient to them.

The 'Walking the Way to Health' initiative offers the one-day training free of charge, for normally a minimum of 12 and maximum of 20 participants. A training manual is provided for all participants and they also receive a certificate of attendance; the course is 'recognised' by the British Heart Foundation National Centre for Physical Activity and Health.

By the end of the training day participants will be able to:

- Outline the main benefits to be derived from a programme of regular walking.
- Plan, organise and review a walking session.
- Lead health walks for people of a variety fitness levels.
- Advise on practical issues such as intensity, frequency, posture and clothing
- Recognise potential safety hazards
- Identify the skills needed to motivate and encourage a wide range of walking needs.

Interactive teaching methods are used and participants are encouraged to 'have a go' in a safe environment.

Between March 1999 and August 2000 the initiative has run 25 training days for a variety of community groups across England. Four of the courses have been held in areas where the population is predominantly Asian. The total number of volunteers who have been trained is 330 and it is anticipated that this figure will reach 500 by the end of 2000.

A follow-up evaluation is planned for October 2000 to assess the impact of the courses and the level of activity of the volunteers.

All volunteers are entered onto a central database and are sent a newsletter every six months. The aim of the newsletter is to provide a forum to update the volunteers, share news and views and examples of good practice. As the number of volunteers expands it is envisaged that update days and workshops could be provided at a regional level.

Regional Network Meeting

The Training and Advice service hosts regional network meetings twice a year in each of the eight regions. The aim of the meeting is to provide an opportunity to find out how the national initiative can help organisations who may be planning to set up a walking scheme or who are currently operating one. Invited speakers have covered topics such as evaluation, fund-raising and how to manage volunteers. The meetings also provide an opportunity to find out about schemes currently operating in the region and provide time to network at a local level.

An average of 30 people have attended each meeting. In the future these meetings will be hosted by the regional case officer who will be in a position to support local organisations in the development of health walk programmes.

Conclusion

Health walks are a vital component of a strategy to make physical activity more accessible to the general public. In order to achieve this we need to provide informative and motivating training courses for volunteers and professionals to ensure that we can reach as wide an audience as possible. The Countryside Agency and British Heart Foundation Walking the Way to Health initiative provides the structure for a comprehensive training programme to promote safe and effective practice.