

## **Blackdog Outdoors**

We, at Black Dog Outdoors, are all keen on the promotion of improved mental health and wellbeing. We're also passionate about outdoor activities, predominantly climbing, paddle sports and hill-walking / mountaineering. Recent studies have shown that there is a positive link between outdoor exercise and improved mental health and well-being, which is now being promoted (and socially prescribed) by the National Health Service. This is a positive step forward however, for many people, their poor mental health may actually prevent them from getting outdoors.

We've established our organisation to support those affected by poor mental health into accessing outdoor activities. In addition to our website ([www.blackdogoutdoors.co.uk](http://www.blackdogoutdoors.co.uk)) we organise walking, climbing and paddle sport events throughout the UK that are free to attend for those affected by poor mental health. These events are managed by qualified outdoor professionals and supported by Mental Health First Aiders to ensure that the attendees are safeguarded and can fully enjoy the experience, meet like-minded people (without fear of being judged), and gain some confidence in their own abilities.

We are also active on social media through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram where we promote the benefits of outdoor activity.

## **Going above and beyond**

The Blackdog Outdoors team all have full-time jobs but give up their time voluntarily to support those affected by poor mental health. Often this means us driving across, down, or up the country to one of our many national parks to host an event. We receive no income from this and operate on a non-profit basis; i.e. any money received through donations goes back into providing safe and fun experiences for the attendees. Our event leaders have all completed Mental Health First Aid training, again in their own time, to ensure that our attendees feel fully supported during our events.

Some of our team members sit on the British Mountaineering Council's (BMC) Equity Steering Group, which is a committee of BMC members that focusses on supporting under-represented groups into the outdoors. Through this forum we have linked up with other similar mental health support organisations, such as Climbing Alongside Mental Health (C/A/M), to support their work and hold joint events.

We have given several online presentations during the recent COVID pandemic, as well as producing articles for outdoor magazines, to promote the mental health benefits of getting outdoor exercise during local and national lockdowns. Again, these have been produced and presented in our own time outside of work.

We organise walking events for Trail Magazines online community, Mountains for the Mind, which is a forum for those with poor mental health to inspire each other into getting outside. We also work with various local authorities to

provide outdoor events for people that are referred through social and green prescribing.

## **Innovation**

We ensure that our events are free to attend for those affected by poor mental health. Rather than charging a 'booking fee' we provide an opportunity for attendees to donate to the charity where they can. This approach removes any financial barriers that may exist for some of the attendees and means that we are not reliant on booking numbers to make an event viable.

We ensure that all our events are run by qualified outdoor professionals and supported by mental health first aiders – all volunteers giving up their time to provide a fun, supportive and safe experience for the attendees.

We provide opportunities for trainee leaders / instructors to join events and gain experience of group management, which is difficult to attain when working towards outdoor qualifications. This experience also provides them with an insight into how the attendees can benefit, mentally, and how they can help to make a difference for people's wellbeing when qualified.

We work with, and promote, other charities to provide access to the outdoors for under-represented groups.

We provide subsidised navigation training to help upskill and empower people to get out on their own – confidence through competence.

We work with governing member organisations (British Mountaineering Council, Mountain Training Association, Scottish Mountaineering, British Canoeing) to promote mental health issues to their members and the outdoor community in general – some links to this work are below:

<https://www.thebmc.co.uk/mental-health-and-the-outdoors>

<https://www.mountainsforthemind.co.uk/latest-news/2019/3/12/join-the-black-dog-outdoors-big-day-out>

<https://www.mountain-training.org/membership/mountain-training-association/news/green-exercise-for-mental-health>

<https://www.britishcanoeing.org.uk/news/2020/2020-virtual-award-winners>

<https://www.apm.org.uk/blog/how-project-managers-can-look-after-their-mental-health-in-trying-times/>

We believe that this holistic and sustainable approach to our work sets us apart from other organisations.

## **Sustained impact**

We launched our website in November 2018 and held our first group event in April 2019, which was an organised walk in the Peak District. Since that inaugural event we have held a further 34 throughout the UK, engaging with

more than 400 attendees as far South as the New Forest, and as far North as Fort William.

We issue a feedback survey to our attendees and a screenshot of some of the data is included below. Testimonials from attendees and supporters of our work can also be found at [www.blackdogoutdoors.co.uk/testimonials](http://www.blackdogoutdoors.co.uk/testimonials)

Included with this entry form is a short video testimonial from one of our event attendees, Mark Hunter, which he has given us permission to use for promotion of our work.

Extract of survey feedback:

*Did attending the event help improve any of the following:*

	<i>RESPONSES</i>	<i>NUMBER</i>
<i>Feelings of achievement / accomplishment?</i>	<i>96%</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Self confidence / self belief?</i>	<i>76%</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Connecting with others?</i>	<i>84%</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Connecting with the outdoors?</i>	<i>76%</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Being present / mindfulness?</i>	<i>64%</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Providing an escape from 'every day worries'?</i>	<i>88%</i>	<i>22</i>