

Mood Walks for Older Adults

Mood Walks for Older Adults: An Ontario pilot project

In 2014, the Mood Walks pilot project focused on older adults (50+). During the inaugural 2014 hiking season, new walking groups were launched in 22 communities across Ontario. Mood Walks generated at least 140 hours of group walking time, or 896 hours of walking by participants. All walks took place on trails or in greenspace, including almost half of them in conservation areas. More than 250 participants received Safe Hiker training from Hike Ontario. In addition, Hike Ontario trained 51 new certified hike leaders, 21 new Safe Hiker Instructors, and two new certified hike leader instructors.

The Mood Walks model relies on the development of community partnerships between the mental health agency that hosts the walking group and the local hiking club or trail association, conservation authority, and other organizations, including colleges and universities. Our 2014 pilot project saw 37 such partnerships, including 29 that were new collaborations. Individual partners each contributed nearly 30 hours of support for the project. Hiking club members were particularly devoted volunteers, each contributing nearly 40 hours. In our follow-up survey, more than 90 per cent of respondents described their partnerships as successful, and almost three quarters said they would “definitely” continue those partnerships in future.

Our evaluation also measured the impact on individuals who participated in Mood Walks groups. The Mood Walks manual includes a complete set of evaluation tools to help participants determine their level of readiness to be more physically active, set personal goals, track their mood, anxiety and energy levels pre- and post-walk, measure functional health and well-being, and assess their sense of connection with the natural world. Participants reported meaningful improvements in mental well-being, greater knowledge of local parks and trails, increased confidence, and demonstrable positive changes in post-walk mood, anxiety and energy scores.

Of nearly 100 participants who completed both a pre- and post-program questionnaire, almost 80 per cent said they had achieved their personal goals. The three most prominent things that participants enjoyed about Mood Walks were

connecting with nature, being social and learning new skills. One participant summed up their accomplishments this way: “I lost some weight, saw some new places, had fun with friends. I feel better about things. I can do things that I thought I couldn’t.”

When the participating mental health agencies were asked if they anticipated continuing their Mood Walks group, all 16 who responded said they had a plan to do so.

For more information, contact moodwalks@ontario.cmha.ca.