Knitting with Heart and Soul

BY CLARE COBURN

We didn’t need confirmation from the British Journal of Occupational Therapy¹. We knitters know it. A few rows of knitting can reduce stress, create a sense of calm and help us live more peacefully. Yet, it’s good to be reassured that researchers have uncovered our secret and want to share it with the world. There has to be a reason for the resurgence in popularity of yarn crafts in this age of technological overkill. Moving away from a computer, putting down our mobile phones and other devices, turning away from television and video or accompanying our viewing with some yarn work, we know that our favourite craft makes us feel better. That’s why we love to unwind with knitting.

I started to ponder this topic when I was listening to some recommendations about good mental health practices emphasising the proven benefits of walking. I’m a keen walker but I suddenly realised I hadn’t walked so regularly over the previous couple of weeks. As a consequence my thighs were a little flabbier, but I don’t just walk to maintain fitness. Normally I feel compelled to take a walk to keep myself sane. As writer Brenda Ueland puts it, a regular walk keeps away ‘meagreness’. But I was curious—why hadn’t I needed to walk so much?

Then I realised. I had been knitting a fiendishly difficult textured pattern that had kept me so occupied—my fingers flashing and my mind counting stitches—that I hadn’t needed the stress release of strolling a few kilometres around my local streets and reserves. Well, my thighs might have benefited more from those outings, but I had been using my other sanity preserver: a few rows of knitting every day. Well, more than a few rows actually, as my usual inability to read instructions all the way through means that I also have to unpick regularly to prevent too many errors. (Perhaps I just want to extend the therapeutic experience.)

What exactly did a survey of over 3,000 international knitters by Jill Riley, Betsan Corkhill and Clare Morris reveal? Knitters reported that they indulged in their favourite craft for relaxation and stress relief. They loved its therapeutic and meditative qualities. Most knitters, a whopping 81%, revealed they felt happier after knitting. Almost half of these knitters described knitting as a way to help them think more clearly, to organise their thoughts and to mull over, or even forget problems. As a large number of these knitters also belonged to knitting groups and classes, there were also social benefits. People who knitted in a group were more likely to feel calmer, happier, excited, useful and better about themselves than those who didn’t. Knitters also reported on the effect of knitting on coping skills. An anecdote from one knitter describes it perfectly: ‘a sweater or shawl is made one stitch at a time, and eventually you get a finished product. In life—when things are hard, you take it a few minutes at a time, and eventually you make it through.’

The report did not explore the reasons for these positive effects. Psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, might have one of the keys. He described the state of ‘flow’ where you feel totally at one with your activity and consumed by your concentration in it. Many of us know that feeling of being lost to the world as we begin to knit and then simply cannot stop. That’s when we are in flow.

Those rapid movements of our fingers are also said to stimulate neural activity, so we may be limbering parts of our brain and lighting up the cells as we create that flow of fabric beneath our needles.

We might also observe that we knit at the heart level. We hold our needles and yarn almost in front of our hearts making a circle that moves through our heart, down our arms and fingers, and into the knitted garment itself. Like knitting itself, our whole rhythmic system, the heart and lungs, are attuned to rhythm and repetition, those steady pulsing movements. The heart is also traditionally understood as the centre of our feeling lives, a finding that some contemporary researchers are exploring as well. Cultivating activities that allow us to be centred in our hearts is one way to strengthen the realm of feeling, to soothe and calm us.

As well as all those stocking fillers, Christmas presents, and summer and winter garments, we stay healthy in body and soul as we keep knitting.

Endnotes