

Knitting and Well-being



Abstract

More encompassing than just the facts and figures of physical health, well-being is often used to acknowledge how we feel. The World Health Organization has defined well-being as “an ability to realize personal potential, cope with daily stresses, and contribute productively to society.” This article explores the varied ways knitting can contribute to our well-being. It brings together the authors’ individual presentations from the well-being panel at the 2012 conference “In the Loop 3: The Voices of Knitting,” now reconfigured and reordered as a coauthored paper. Opening the paper are facts and figures—the very evidence of what many of us

have felt or intuited—established by Betsan Corkhill and Jill Riley in their joint contribution on the therapeutic benefits of knitting. Angela Maddock then follows, not with the stuff of scientific reason, but with its exact opposite: the symbolic contribution which knitting that is disrupted or troubled can signal in a narrative. My interest in the difficult identity of solitary knitting in literature, and the need to take stock of the current infatuation academic research holds for collaboration, now acts as the final contribution to this dialogue. The outcome is eclectic, the voices varied; but so too are the many ways to consider the contribution knitting can make to our well-being today.

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Keywords: knitting, well-being, therapeutic knitting, *Wool 100%*, mothering, red, solitary production, introversion

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Knitting for Well-being: The Psychological and Social Benefits of Hand Knitting

Betsan Corkhill and Jill Riley

As a creative art and craft, hand knitting has the advantage of being both versatile and portable. Knitting's apparent simplicity, needing only a length of yarn and needles, and the fact it can be done almost anywhere at any time, makes it a widely accessible craft that has enjoyed a recent resurgence (Turney 2009; Stanley 2002; Gillow and Sentance 1999; Harris 2004).

Knitting is both process and product oriented (Blanche 2007). As a process, knitting encompasses repetitive tasks that require physical and cognitive skills (Hosegood 2009). These are relatively easy to learn in the first instance but can be developed incrementally, initially within a safe structure, but as skills and confidence improve include more creative experimentation. In terms of skills, knitting can be fairly simple, the continuous looping of yarn over a needle to make a stitch, or incredibly complex, through the use of multiple needles, stitch combinations, and different yarns to create intricate patterns (Turney 2009, Gillow and Sentance 1999). The process of knitting also has psychological benefits. Turney (2009) refers to knitting's rhythmic and sensory nature, which can be calming, with potential meditative and therapeutic

qualities (Katz-Freiman 2010). The knitting process generally leads to the creation of an end product, a knitted object as either the result of following a defined pattern or an outcome designed by an individual.

Whereas knitting is often a solitary activity, it is also a vehicle for making social connections both virtually, through the rise of Internet knitting sites, and in real time through local knitting groups (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 2007). Indeed, knitting as a social activity is not new. Black (2012) documents the historical importance of social knitting in rural communities where groups of knitters gathered to knit and talk after a day's work. The inherent psychological and social benefits that are known to come from knitting practice, together with the satisfaction that comes from creating an end product (Hosegood 2009), are an indication of its potential to contribute to personal and social well-being.

Well-being is defined as "a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively" (Huppert 2009: 137). It arises from an ability to realize personal potential, cope with daily stresses and contribute productively to society (World Health Organization 2009). The relationship between engaging in creative activities and well-being has been explored in general terms and there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that such engagement or participation can positively impact on both health and well-being (Department of

Health and Arts Council for England 2007; Staricoff 2004; Leckey 2011). However, the literature referring to creative activity and well-being tends to concentrate more on the visual and performing arts (Staricoff 2004) rather than on specific craft activities such as knitting. In this article we concentrate on the psychological and social benefits of knitting for well-being specifically. First we outline the key findings from an international online survey of knitters conducted in 2010. Second, by drawing on Betsan Corkhill's experience of using knitting as a therapeutic medium, we consider the components of therapeutic knitting, its practical application, and benefits for people with long-term medical conditions.

The Survey

The purpose of the survey was to identify the impact of engaging in knitting on individuals' perceptions of their mental and social well-being as a prerequisite for further research into knitting's therapeutic potential. The survey was conducted using an online questionnaire, which was piloted with a group of 40 knitters to improve its reliability and validity and then launched on an Internet knitting site in July 2010. The questionnaire included a mix of multiple choice and free-text questions relating to demographics, mood, cognition, and the social aspects of knitting. Questions were designed to yield quantitative and qualitative data and were based on information gathered over time from the Stitchlinks website and from our background knowledge. The maximum number of responses was

set at 5,000 and a total response of 3,545 (of which 3,514 were valid) was received within two weeks.

Quantitative data was analyzed for descriptive statistics and correlations and to establish differences among variables. Qualitative data was analyzed to establish patterns and themes through coding and developing categories. The key findings relating to demographics, reasons for knitting, knitting and mood, the impact of color and texture, cognitive ability, the social aspects of knitting, transferable skills, and knitting as a coping strategy are summarized in the following sections. Further detail on the analysis and findings can be found in Riley et al. (2013).

Respondents were predominantly female (98.8%) and classified themselves as "white" (31.0% as "white British" and 59.3% "other white"). In terms of age, over half (54%) reported being between 21 and 40 (2% were under 20, 18% were 41–50, 15% between 51 and 60, 8% were over 60). Thirty-one countries worldwide were represented in the survey, although the majority of respondents lived in the Western hemisphere (59% in the USA and Canada, and 31% in the UK). Of the respondents, 33% reported having a medical condition. These consisted of a wide range of physical, psychological, and neurological problems such as anxiety, depression, arthritis, or fibromyalgia, some of which were chronic, long-term problems. Respondents reported a wide range of knitting experience, lasting from a few weeks to over 35 years, with the majority having knitted for over

five years. A total of 72% reported knitting more than three times per week.

Respondents were asked to list their four main reasons for knitting. Among the most common reasons were the perceived psychological benefits that came from the process of knitting, such as relaxation, stress relief, and its therapeutic and meditative qualities. In addition, respondents found that knitting helped them feel productive at times when they were engaged in passive activities such as watching television, listening to music, waiting for appointments, or traveling. Knitting was described as an outlet for creativity offering a sense of accomplishment and a connection to tradition. Knitting was also considered a social activity, a vehicle for connecting with others both virtually and in real time.

A cross-tabulation of the results from the survey revealed a strong relationship between knitting frequency and other variables such as mood. Further statistical analysis showed that knitting more than three times per week significantly increased respondents' perception of feeling calm after knitting. The process of knitting was described by respondents as "soothing," "restful," or "spiritual," with the "rhythm of the repetitive motion" being "hypnotic" and "calming."

Of those respondents who suffered from depression, 81% perceived that knitting made them feel happier, with 54% claiming to feel happy or very happy after knitting. While the majority of respondents felt that knitting helped improve their mood, others felt it depended on circumstances

and time. As one respondent put it, “As I knit often, I find that I have no one particular mood prior to knitting; knitting is many different things to me at many different times, from a mood raiser to a mood calmer to a mood enhancer.” However, for the few respondents who reported having very low mood, this was perceived to impact on their ability to engage in knitting in the first place: “I think the only time when I really don’t feel like knitting is when I am very sad.”

The extent to which mood improved after knitting was also associated by some with the complexity of the project and difficulties encountered. Comments included: “It depends on how hard the project is. Sometimes I’m sad that it’s over, other times I’m really happy it’s over!” and “If I am designing a pattern and it all goes horribly wrong—angry!”

Color and texture were also found to impact on mood. Whereas 24% of respondents felt that color usually or definitely affected their mood, more (46%) felt that texture did. The majority of respondents also felt that knitting improved their clarity of thinking. There was also a significant relationship between more frequent knitting and perceived improvements in cognitive ability, specifically in relation to organizing and clarifying thoughts, forgetting problems, memory, and concentration. As one respondent put it, “I knit because it helps me to think more clearly. I feel like it connects both sides of my brain and suddenly my mind is clearer.” Another respondent described how knitting helped her to concentrate: “In meetings, for example, knitting helps me

focus on what is being said or discussed and keeps me from having wandering thoughts.” Indeed, 73% of respondents who knitted three times a week or more felt that knitting helped them forget their problems and improved their memory compared to 19% who knitted less than three times per week. Similar results were found for the other categories (see Table 1).

Half of the respondents said they belonged to a knitting group and 90% of this group said that they had made several or more friends through knitting. Knitting in a group was also reported to improve social confidence and feelings of belonging. For the people with depression, there was a significant association between membership of a knitting group and feeling happier and better about themselves: “I feel more calm in social situations if I have my knitting. I don’t need to feel paranoid about not having something to say”; “When I knit during situations where I would normally feel incredibly uncomfortable and anxious, I feel less so. I’m able to enjoy the fact that I am around people and it is always a nice icebreaker.” Knitting was also perceived as encouraging further skill acquisition, both knitting skills and other transferable skills.

Over half of the respondents (57%) said that knitting “usually” or “definitely” encouraged them to learn new skills. These included practical skills such as other crafts, DIY, cooking, gardening, or computer skills. Typically, respondents reported feeling more confident about trying new activities, for example: “I find in

Table 1: The Relationship between Knitting Frequency and Cognitive Ability

	Knitting frequency	N	Mean
Organize thoughts	3 or more times per week	2,540 (72%)*	3.43
	Less than 3 times per week	656 (18%)	3.17
Forget problems	3 or more times per week	2,562 (73%)	3.33
	Less than 3 times per week	666 (19%)	3.16
Memory	3 or more times per week	2,548 (73%)	3.89
	Less than 3 times per week	659 (19%)	3.37
Concentration	3 times per week or more	2,531 (72%)	3.87
	Less than 3 times per week	658 (19%)	3.57

*Percentages are rounded to nearest %

general I am more apt to try things I wouldn't have before, like make my own beer, retille my kitchen myself, build outdoor furniture, redecorate. I am more eager to try do-it-yourself projects with confidence."

The constructive nature of knitting and its symbolic patterns, together with the calculations required led to a perception of improved mathematical and design skills. The ability to plan and organize a knitting project also enabled respondents to organize other aspects of everyday life, for example household budgeting. Additionally, interacting with others in virtual or real-time groups also improved respondents' social and communication skills in terms of everyday conversation and Internet skills.

Knitting was also felt to be an effective means of coping with difficult situations and problems. For example strong emotions: one respondent described how "Knitting angry' usually just makes things worse, so I am less likely to approach other tasks angrily as

well." Of those respondents who said they suffered chronic pain, 88% felt that knitting gave them a sense of accomplishment and a means of coping with their pain. Others described how knitting helped them cope with emotional stress, for example when caring for a seriously ill relative.

The findings from the survey highlight the gendered nature of knitting and its identity as a widely accessible art and craft. The survey concentrated on committed and motivated knitters who belonged to an online community. Nevertheless, it evidences the psychological and social benefits of hand knitting for those who choose to engage in it. By enhancing mood, providing a means of distraction from chronic problems such as pain, inducing feelings of calmness, relaxation, and a sense of belonging through social engagement, knitting contributes to perceptions of well-being. The following section considers the practical applications of these benefits through an analysis of therapeutic knitting.

Therapeutic Knitting

Knitting creates strong, resilient, flexible fabric. Therapeutic knitting seeks to create strong, resilient, flexible minds in the process. Therapeutic knitting takes the benefits of knitting and enhances them to improve well-being or to treat certain medical conditions. The psychological benefits of knitting alone or within a group range from distraction, refocusing of attention, and enabling feelings of control to providing rewarding occupation and enabling relaxation and contribution. It enables people to feel and "be" successful at a task from their armchair. This acts as a springboard to involvement in other activities. Being successful is pivotal to motivation and a lack of motivation to self-manage long-term medical conditions is a big problem faced by clinicians.

Through knitting, lost emotions associated with anticipation, pride, excitement, and happiness are reawakened. The survey identified that the majority of respondents who suffered from depression said

knitting helped them to feel happier and over half of this group said they felt happy or very happy after knitting. This has many practical applications in the treatment of long-term medical conditions that have a tendency to dull positive feelings and emotions, and lower mood and motivation.

The transferable life skills such as patience, perseverance, pacing, and planning that knitters report can aid a “self-management plus support” approach to healthcare. Success in managing ill-health and maximizing well-being requires these attributes. Knitters also tell of how they learn that mistakes can be undone, that they are not catastrophic and of how the end goal is not only attainable but can be richer because of the detours made along the way and the lessons learned. These are valuable life skills.

Life circumstances such as illness, retirement, or redundancy can change identity and perceptions of self. Knitting can enable the knitter to build a new positive identity through, for example, knitting for charity. Knitting for those who are more vulnerable and in more need than oneself can change a knitter’s perspective on the world. Wrapping someone else up in something warm and cozy is symbolic of caring for others.

The main issues which raise hand knitting above other crafts center on the nature of movements, the development of creative ability, and its portability and the way it enables group participation. The movements involved in knitting are bilateral, rhythmic, repetitive, and automatic. Bilateral, coordinated

movements engage more brain capacity than unilateral ones and appear to facilitate a meditative-like state more readily than unilateral movements. Anecdotal evidence from patients suggests that knitting may also contribute to spatial awareness, the awareness of the space their body occupies.

There is evidence that repetitive movements in animals enhance the release of serotonin (Jacobs and Fornal 1999, Jacobs et al. 2002). Serotonin is calming, an analgesic and a mood enhancer. Our work with knitters suggests that it is the rhythm of these repetitive movements that is important. Knitters control the rhythm of their craft and may change it according to their mood. This rhythm is instantaneously calming. It facilitates a meditative-like state, which enables the benefits of meditation to be experienced by a much wider population. When combined with knitting’s portability, this deep sense of relaxation and instantaneous calm gives people an effective tool to manage pain spasms, panic, and anxiety at any time, anywhere.

The benefits of meditation for health and well-being are widely recognized but clinicians report that it is difficult to teach to those who need it the most: the highly stressed, depressed, or those in pain. The concept of meditation needs a level of cognitive engagement and understanding that may also be beyond certain groups of people such as the very young, elderly, or those with learning disabilities. A meditative-like state appears to happen as a natural side effect of knitting and requires no conventional

understanding or learning of the meditative process.

Automatic patterns of movement could play a significant role in encouraging movement without triggering the pain system. We have also observed that when the brain is occupied with a background automatic task, conversations become easier, deeper, and more intimate. It is as if self-monitoring is switched off. The automatic nature of knitting often means the pattern of movements is remembered by those suffering from dementia who were previously able to knit. Automatic movement may also facilitate access to the subconscious and could aid treatments such as cognitive behavioral therapy, for example. Performing a repetitive visual-spatial task during or shortly after a traumatic event significantly cuts down the incidence of flashbacks (Holmes et al. 2004; Holmes et al. 2009). Narratives collected from knitters, and experiences of some patients, suggest that symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can subside significantly with knitting, even several years after the original trauma. We know, for example, that soldiers suffering shell shock after the First World War were treated with knitting, suggesting a potential to use knitting with those suffering from PTSD. There may also be a link with the mechanism by which EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy) functions. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommends EMDR for the treatment of PTSD.

Research has highlighted the importance of creative ability and engagement for well-being

(Staricoff 2004). There is also a potential link between creative ability and psychological flexibility and the ability to self-manage. There is something important about being actively creative as opposed to being a passive recipient of a destructive force such as an illness or traumatic event. Creative thought may also be an effective, ongoing means of distraction.

Many of the patients we encounter have low feelings of self-worth and low self-confidence. Knitting is a curious mix of creativity and structure. Structure and creativity are opposing statements, so it is difficult to introduce and develop creativity within those who need “structure” to feel “safe.” Knitting, however, is a creative activity that is executed within the “safe” structure of a pattern. Although constructed according to given patterns, participants are free to choose the style of pattern, type and texture of yarn, colors, length of time spent knitting, and the level of challenge or complexity of the project. Knitters can choose to follow established knitting patterns until they feel safe to progress. By beginning with easy, structured projects, where the reward is attainable with a little effort, followed by gradual encouragement of exploration and experimentation, knitters can often learn to enjoy designing their own projects.

Knitting promotes purpose, creativity, success, reward, and enjoyment that is particularly important in groups who have no experience of these in other aspects of life. Knitting requires no innate artistic ability, making the reward attainable by all. It also provides visual and tactile

stimulation. Our survey showed that texture is significantly more important than color for raising mood. Practically, we have found that touching something comforting tends to make people feel good and many knitters reported stroking their yarn in periods of low mood or depression. This highlights the importance of the hands and the tactile information received from them.

Knitting’s easy portability is significant in its success as a health and social tool. A small “bag kit” can be carried around to deal with problems out and about. Being deliverable in kit form to the armchair or bed encourages early intervention and involvement in an activity that can maintain and enhance social involvement in people who may be at risk of becoming isolated. In a sense, the knitting group could also be considered “portable.” It can fit easily into the busy life of a hospital or doctor’s office. It is easy to set up and has no time-consuming mess to clear. From a financial perspective, the learning process involves no wasted materials—mistakes can be undone and yarn can be reused.

Knitting “works” as an individual activity that is enhanced by attending a group. The benefits of attending supportive social groups are well documented (Staricoff 2004, Arai and Pedlar 2003). These include enabling communication, mutual learning, exploration, and discovery. However they can also have drawbacks. Introverts and those with low social confidence may find them intimidating and difficult to join. The relationship between knitting and the group appears

to be synergistic. Knitting makes the group work. The introduction of a self-soothing activity such as knitting appears to enable knitters to manage their emotions, which in turn enables group participation. In addition, the position of the knitter's hands increases personal space, which acts as a buffer to the outside world, enabling the knitter to go to places she or he would normally feel unable to attend. A common purpose makes it easier for participants to attend alone, thus providing a means of safely expanding their social network, building social capital and discovering new, supportive friendships.

This sense of ease is enhanced by the personal control group members have over the level of their participation in the group. Knitting is one of the few activities which enables eye contact during conversation ... or not. It is completely acceptable for a group member to sit and knit quietly within the group. This puts her in control. The knowledge that she can come to a group and sit and knit quietly and not have to fully participate all of the time is extremely important. It encourages her to come to the group even on days when she doesn't feel great. It is important for people to spend time in the company of others without feeling pressurized to contribute. As Jessica Hemmings discusses in the final section of this article, knitting enables the introvert to feel more comfortable in a group setting.

The knitting group provides a level playing field where the disadvantaged and advantaged in life can meet as equals. Indeed,

those disadvantaged in life may become teachers in the knitting group, so often roles are reversed. A noticeable effect of coming together to knit is the amount and volume of laughter and easy, relaxed banter. This could also be a result of the calming movements that quickly put people at ease. Laughter and conversation with supportive friends in a safe social environment is the opposite of the stress "fight or flight" response. The more people can engage in these sorts of social contact, the more the body's natural healing system is stimulated.

Touch and personal contact is missing from the lives of many. The knitting group encourages acceptable touch and close contact between individuals. There is encouragement from group members to learn new skills with the support of others, so introducing regular novelty and skill acquisition is not a problem. Within the setting of a health clinic, the knitting group run by a clinician enables patients to absorb information and ask questions about their medical conditions. From the clinician's viewpoint it enables her to monitor, motivate, and support patients over the longer term at low cost, in an unintrusive way which doesn't necessitate focus on negative issues or problems. It also provides an excellent opportunity for education or group therapy and can be an important aspect of a "self-management + support," in other words, a "helping people to help themselves" approach to long-term health problems.

In terms of enabling socialization, knitting opens

up the world and encourages a sense of belonging to a knitting community. If the knitter attends a community group, this can extend to belonging to their local community once more. Importantly, knitting introduces an element of fun, play, and laughter. These are often missing from the lives of those living with stress and other long-term illnesses but they are vital aspects of a healthy lifestyle. Loneliness and social isolation are growing problems that are hugely detrimental to health and well-being. Our work has identified the importance of the “right type” of social contact in order to benefit health and well-being. Issues of social and emotional loneliness need to be addressed. The knitting group fulfills these requirements. Therapeutic knitting groups are nurturing, healing places that enable people to “just be” in the relaxed company of others.

However, our work has also identified the importance of knitting alone; taking time out to switch off from the pressures of everyday living, worrying thoughts, and symptoms of illness. Having a “take-home” tool linked to the group continues the positive reinforcement within the home environment and provides an activity that can be developed in anticipation of recognition at the next group meeting. This encourages continued group attendance, inclusion, participation, and creative experimentation. Research has identified that those who are mentally active and socially engaged are 40% less likely to develop symptoms of dementia (Valenzuela et al. 2012). Health

services around the world could save large amounts of money by encouraging and supporting people to remain socially and mentally active. Knitting groups provide the potential to do this at low cost.

The findings from our international survey of knitters confirmed the significant contribution that knitting, as both a creative process and product, can make to individuals’ perceptions of their personal and social well-being. Current and ongoing work using knitting as a therapeutic medium shows that as part of a holistic approach, knitting can complement medical treatments and enable us to treat body, mind, and spirit. It can change the context within which ill-health is experienced, provide a means of making safe, supportive social contact and can offer a positive reinforcement within the home environment. As a consequence, therapeutic knitting and therapeutic knitting groups have the potential to improve general well-being and enhance medical treatments at low cost.

Re(a)d Knit: Body/Mother/Home

Angela Maddock

Therapeutic knitting, as Corkhill and Reilly establish, offers a multitude of ways in which knitting can contribute to real world well-being. Turning to the fictional worlds of film and literature, we are shown alternative functions for knitting in life. Here, using the film *Wool 100%* as allegory, I explore conspicuously troubled knitting, offering insights into the well-being of fictional characters and

suggesting what might lie beneath the presence of red yarn in so much contemporary textile practice.

The Japanese film *Wool 100%* (director Mai Tominaga, 2006) is a fantastical tale driven by three women: Ume Sam, Kame Sam, and Knit Again. The sisters Ume and Kame—older women with silver bobbed heads, who in their slender silveriness look just like knitting needles—live in a house that amplifies the secret chaos of the hidden and sometimes shameful spaces of our homes: the accumulated trash of under-stair cupboards, the teenage “under the bed dishwasher waiting room,” and the kitchen drawer archive. Sited on the borderlands of childhood play, a dream space on the edge of the world, their home exists as a remarkable and endearing patchwork of all that society has discarded. Each day brings more: like rhyming knitting needles, they loop through the suburbs accumulating spoils, gathering discarded treasures and returning home. Two nesting magpies, they are content in their isolation, their gatherings neither hidden nor kept from sight.

Ume Sam and Kame Sam’s strange mansion “nest house” is an odd place, but as strange as it is—and it is strange—it is homely. In all its layers and depths it seems that what is normally worn on the inside is also worn on the outside “on the surface”: unfolded folds and multiple gatherings, turning the inside out.

Yet in all these folds there is still order: a calculated arrangement of stuff that is sorted, categorized, and negotiated—communities of clocks, books, telephones and

shoes. They have not outgrown their home because it has no end, like the minor architecture described by Jill Stoner (Stoner 2012), an architecture celebrating the small and the evolving over the monumental, it is fluid, always in the act of becoming—uncontained and uncontainable—a troubling state for some. Certainly, the late Mary Douglas, empress of the domain of liminalities and domestic disorder, would have been intrigued by this, as there is so much matter “out of place” and simultaneously “in place.” Two women share rituals and habits of their own making—silent breakfasts, the tea that follows their collecting and archiving. Lives lived according to a certain rhythm—the gentle rhythm of the contented.

This peaceful existence is disturbed by the chance discovery of a basket crammed with carefully balled red yarn by the river. It is hard, here, to escape associations with the biblical tale of Moses, a trail that leads *Knit Again* into their lives. The sisters’ ankles, caught in the looping red yarn that draws them to the basket, reminds us that they are gatherers gathered, a duplication of sorts, and a sign that they too have been chosen—that the yarn has its own life. As the sisters weave their way home, a telltale trail snakes behind them ... creeping along pavements, turning corners ... our foundling is drawn to the nest and bliss is undone.

Here, Donald Winnicott’s ideas on the transitional phenomena are relevant. Our wool gatherers—and Winnicott talks of the emergent child subject as a wool gatherer (Winnicott 1953: 90)—seem to

conduct a dance that resonates with all the complex qualities of the space/place that exists between mother and child. In what follows, it becomes clear that knitting and the knitted garment, like mothering itself, have the potential to comfort and nurture, but also to stifle and smother—neither role is without tension.

It is painful to watch the torment *Knit Again* inflicts upon these gentle creatures in her compulsive knitting, ripping out and reknitting of the perfect sweater and how they struggle to ease her pain, but what struck me initially was the necessity of the red yarn in this film. Could it have been any other color? This resonated with me personally as I was knitting with my mum, knitting a line of perfect blood red, a work that I have come to name as *Bloodline*; an ongoing document that testifies to our closeness, our physical distance, and the enduring connection/tension between mother and daughter and, I suspect, the tension between all mothers and daughters. Does this red spin a similar story?

What is clear is that red is so universally understood as the most loaded of colors: it marks us. In her work, the late Louise Bourgeois claimed red as the color of violence, of grudges, of shame and blame. We recognize the power of red in her drawings, paintings, and installations, such as the tightly wound cones of red thread in *The Red Room Child*. Anyone who has watched the film *Don’t Look Now*, with its spill of red ink and the spectral presence/absence of the red raincoat, cannot fail to be haunted. Remember also, the red coat of the film *Schindler’s List*.

Quite simply, would any other color do?

Red is the color of fairy tales, the seductive apple of *Snow White*, the prophetic cape of *Little Red Riding Hood*. Perhaps our Knit Again, clothed in red and seduced by the snaking red yarn to the nest house, serves as a contemporary Red Riding Hood. That red is of us is indisputable, just under the skin, held in place, hidden. We know that its revelation is mostly unwelcome. Women still menstruate blue on our television screens. Blood remains abject, particularly that of menstruation. Most especially, red is the color of wounded flesh, of pain.

Julia Kristeva suggests that a lack of fixed state is fearful and gives rise to feelings of abjection within us (Kristeva 1984: 4)—an encounter with something beyond meaning that is instinctively repulsive and the reason certain reds become blue. This is the not knowing and the not understanding of that which is beyond language, that which Lacan claims as the *Real*. Somehow, red fits here. In its “bodiliness,” hidden beneath the

surface and threat of exposure, it has the power to repulse. In Knit Again we have a young woman in a perpetual state of “in between,” whose arrival tips order on its head and whose growling stomach is a signal of the monster within. In her red yarn we have a constant reminder of the connection with the body—a tense and worried thread that reaches back to the site of anxiety.

This visceral connection is important wherever red yarn spills. It also matters in our understanding of the presence of red yarn that practices like knitting are constructed as domestic and gendered feminine. That the domestic continues to be conflated with women is no easy cohabitation, politically or personally. Again, if we look to Bourgeois, we see signposts to this tension in her many iterations of *Femme Maison*. The chimerical woman/house reveals an ambivalent housewife/mother; is she waving or drowning?

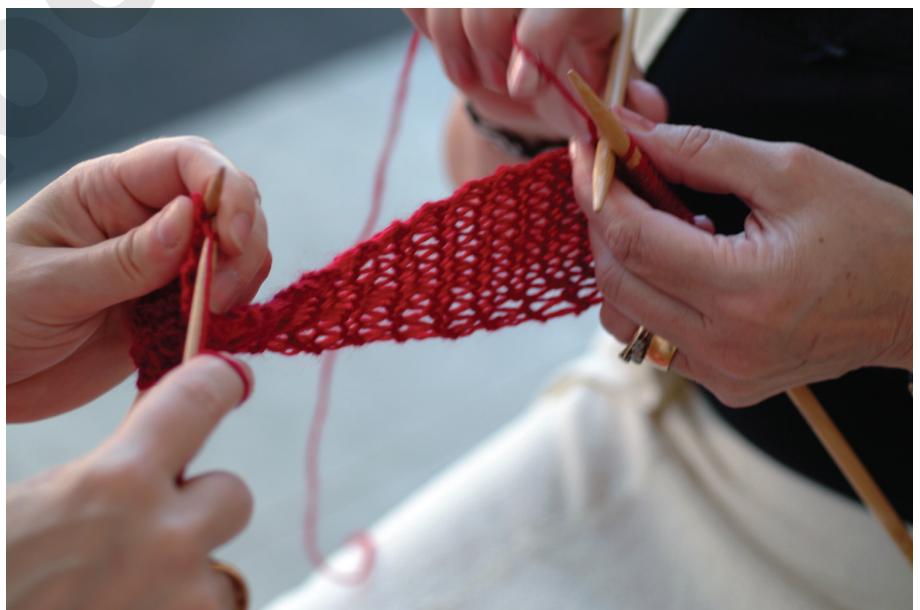
In all these matters there is a sense of disrupted order or turmoil,

a resistance to boundaries and walls that limit. This particular disruption of the feminine is available to us in Tatiana Blass's *Penelope* (2012), a giant installation of tangled and woven red threads. Here, the tension is not of the spill of the feminine and the desire to resist constructions, but a suggestion of its monstrous possibilities. This yarn is no gentle thing, it does not leak through skin or shell. Instead, Blass's *Penelope* seems to possess a voracious appetite to draw all into the weave of her cloth, to bring everything to her core, at which point all is consumed, digested, and spewed out—transformed into some other thing. Here is the other red, an innocent-seeming loom as all-consuming Arachne, a transformation made possible through the breach of boundaries, the smothering mother at the center of all things.

A similar maternal ambivalence is evident in *Wool 100%*, where we witness nurturing and frustration in equal measure. The sisters bathe, feed, and soothe Knit

Figure 1

Angela Maddock, *Bloodline*, 2006.
Photo: Edith Maybin.



Again and yet their lives are changed forever. No more shared gathering, no gentle-mannered eating. One journeys alone, the other remains at home; this reveals the love, the compromise, and ultimately the truth of parenting. And yet despite—or maybe in spite of—all this care, Knit Again reaps destruction. In a painful rejection of their mothering, the dining room, the “hearth of their home,” is destroyed. Echoing the bewilderment of so many wronged parents, Ume Sam cries: “How cruel! How could you?” Again, Bourgeois’s red works come to mind. Particularly the giant red breast of *The Feeding*, its huge red nipple hovering above the prone and mewling child, poised to overwhelm, reminding us of the power of the breast and the tautly drawn red thread of mothering, a reminder of how difficult it is to be the “good” mother.

The red of Sophie Horton’s intervention *Cordon* marks a particular boundary, but it also

brings the body into play. This soft red knitted yarn, so at odds with the materiality of its host, snakes a trail and that word “intervention,” an interruption. What is intervening here? I’m reminded of James Elkins’s idea that: “Every work of visual art is a representation of the body” (Elkins 1999: 1). Horton’s signposting simplifies our search for ourselves. Her boundary of blood red yarn and its soft, undulating presence marks us. This resonates with Winnicott’s “wool gathering,” a nurturing claim to space. This signpost to care in the public arena is problematic. It is difficult for us to negotiate because it seems so “out of place.” Uncanny and marginalized, it references two interiors: the home and the body.

Lise Bjørne Linnert’s remarkable *Fences* project of delicately executed red thread wrappings look, on closer investigation, like the tidying/finishing/protecting edge of blanket stitch. These small-scale interventions appear on more than 110 sites worldwide.

Figure 2

Sophie Horton, *Cordon*, 2004. Wool, acrylic, and Lurex; 25 cm × 450 m. Site: Cove Park, Scotland. Photo: Ruth Clarke.



They mark border territory, wastelands; proper in-between spaces, no man's land and certainly "no woman's." Linnert's tender wrappings signify a profound shift in the materiality of the transitional, the tactile softness of yarn in a space usually characterized by the hard edge of concrete and steel. These considered marks, so like dressings, are signifiers of the home and slowness at a site that denies both. Like Horton's *Cordon*, they are threads "out of place" and because of this, we notice and find them odd, difficult, perplexing. In her winding, Linnert reveals what is not there, what is missing: "filling in" is the task or reward of whoever is lucky enough to stumble across them.

Linnert's tracing suggests a drive toward completeness, a desire to fix things. In contrast, Knit Again's never-ending task reflects her *incompleteness*. Over and over again she knits, rips out and reknits the thick red sweater. Her constant mantra is "Damn: I have to knit it all over again!"

This incompleteness fascinates. I doubt I'm alone in having several half-finished projects stashed away at the back of wardrobes. What is at play here is an engagement with the process of knitting, not the garment itself. As Corkhill and Riley have shown in the previous section, here too we see that to knit without creating anything is often enough; it soothes. I use knitting as a transitional object or process: it enables me to work things out—thoughts/ideas/worries—and to be "at home" when I am anything but. To adopt Winnicott's words, knitting has become my "defence against anxiety" (Winnicott 1953: 91). Somehow, this ought to be Knit Again's place. But where my knitting soothes, Knit Again's does not.

I discussed Knit Again's compulsion with a friend. Recalling how creative practice might be viewed psychoanalytically as sublimation, I wondered if Knit Again's furious knitting might be evidence of failed sublimation. More wisely, she suggested Knit

Again's pain might be beyond sublimation, that knitting enabled her to give voice to her pain. This made sense. I have never witnessed such furious knitting, never considered this kind of therapeutic process. In all this, she is a screaming and temperamental banshee, never the quiet heroine of nineteenth-century literature, the "Angel in the House." Knit Again is much less polite in her practice. Not for her the Victorian drawing room technique described by the priest and knitting historian Richard Rutt—knitting that saw needles held like pens (Rutt 1987: 17); instead, hers are the metal pricks of Elizabethan knitting. Held like spears, she wields them furiously and uses them to gouge the eyes of the toy known as "tilting doll."

It is useful here to see the sweater as metaphor for Knit Again's transition toward individuation. As neither subject nor object, the sweater exists at the margins of her body and in its constant undoing and redoing, is forever in transition. Judith Rugg

Figure 3

Lise Bjørne Linnert, *Fences No. 64*, South Korean Embassy in Oslo, Norway. April 2011.



Figure 4

Lise Bjørne Linnert, *Fences No. 21*,
The Barracks, Dresden, Germany.
 August 2009.



reminds us that clothing exists “as both a fragment of the body and a container for the fragmented self” (Rugg 2005: 121), suggesting a complex, liminal role that simultaneously holds her and yet is her undoing. Following this, it is possible to think of the garment as concomitant with the ego. That Knit Again constantly undergoes deconstruction/reconstruction testifies to a particularly painful process of individuation, of

separation. If Knit Again’s sweater is a reflection of herself, a self-portrait of sorts, then in its making/unmaking/remaking it is possible that she too is in an in-between or transitional state, a state Douglas characterized as dangerous (Douglas 1999: 96).

What is it that holds Knit Again? That ties her to this endless work? It would be unfair to reveal all the film’s secrets, but I think it is safe to say that there is a mother—indeed

a lost mother—at the very heart of this matter. A shift occurs after Knit Again's final act of frantic knitting, which leads to an unraveling of stories and an illumination of the sisters' past. The nest house is tidied, their obsessive gathering comes to an end and Knit Again seems subdued. Cutting her hair symbolically shifts Knit Again from the position of returning mother (I am trying to resist here my earlier interpretation of Knit Again as lost child, for we have witnessed the sisters tidying their room under Knit Again's gaze), a shift that fully enacts the sisters' own mothering. In all this, the narrative slips between past and present and between film and animation. What I take from this is the magical, transformative quality of both red yarn and the practice of knitting as mutative process. That it should end with the completion of the red sweater by the sisters, and not Knit Again, who together pull it over her head and naked body, is especially poignant.

This act of tenderness emphasizes the connective quality of red yarn, its restorative character. Lindsay Obermeyer invokes the Chinese proverb of the red thread in her collaborative work—especially her ongoing *Attachment Project*. Here the yarn speaks of a nurturing red, the red of bonding. This bonding seems “without edge” and yet we know that all bonds have their dark side, that “touching” and being “in touch” is never without risk. Nevertheless, this optimistic position appeals to the part of us that recognizes the need to be connected with another. For some, even the suggestion of this is troubling.

We know that there are no innocent choices in our making, but red should be chosen particularly carefully. It speaks of a complicated set of relational values that remind us that red “stuff” is of us, of the people and places that matter to us and, that like knitting, red is never without tension.

Introversion and Knitting: Rethinking Solitary Production

Jessica Hemmings

As seen in the previous two sections of this article, knitting is often celebrated for its social potential. Knitting can provide significant therapeutic benefits, as well as commanding a powerful symbolic role in contemporary art practice. Perhaps because we can sense intuitively knitting's contribution to our well-being, failed knitting, tangled yarns, and conspicuous acts of mending are all evidence of well-being out of kilter and narratives in need of repair. A familiar contemporary image of knitting is that of individuals gathering together to share time and conversation. This portrayal of knitting is accurate and, as Corkhill and Riley have shown, can bring with it benefits far beyond the production of familiar objects. But I want, for a moment, to move away from this association to instead explore the usefulness of knitting in the formation of meaningful solitary activity.

Depictions of knitting as a solitary pastime are often presented in negative terms: loneliness, isolation—even madness—appear in literature depicting the lone knitter. Maddock, in the previous section,

considers the lone figure of Knit Again, a character engrossed in production who is far from content. Drawing on the recently published *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* by Susan Cain (2012), I want to suggest that such stereotypes are the by-product of attitudes that devalue the creative potential of elected individual activity.

Cain argues that it is more often individual, rather than group, endeavor that results in new ideas (Cain 2012: 74–5). Borrowing from this thinking, I want to revisit the identity and well-being of the lone knitter. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in his classic book on the importance of satisfying work, observes:

Despite the fact that we are now healthier and grow to be older, despite the fact that even the least affluent among us are surrounded by material luxuries undreamed of even a few decades ago ... and regardless of all the stupendous scientific knowledge we can summon at will, people often end up feeling that their lives have been wasted, that instead of being filled with happiness their years were spent in anxiety and boredom. (Csikszentmihalyi 1992:1)

A resurgence of interest in crafts such as knitting can, at least in part, be understood as a reaction to the anxiety and boredom Csikszentmihalyi cites as a common reality of modern life.

The antidote to this dissatisfaction is a type of concentration and satisfaction that often appears in the production of

craft, in particular hand knitting. In fact, as Corkhill and Riley isolate, knitting's demand for manual dexterity combined with the opportunity to add technical complexity provides us with an ideal task for Csikszentmihalyi's definition of optimal experience:

People describe the common characteristics of optimal experience: a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult, or dangerous. (Csikszentmihalyi 1992: 71)

Knitting, perhaps more so than other types of textile production, tends to be associated with social, group activity. The public image that knitting has regained in recent years, in part through the rise of knitting clubs, has helped to renew a positive image of the hobby of knitting. But it is an image that places considerable emphasis on the importance of group activity. Rachel Matthews, the owner of the yarn shop and textile collective Prick Your Finger, and founding member of the Cast Off Knitting Club for Boys and Girls, explains:

My best tip for a successful knitting circle is to always go somewhere public. If you stay in people's houses it becomes clingy and competitive, whereas the whole point is to attract new people in. You will be surprised at how much interest you get. Knitting in public brings strangers together from all walks of life. Everyone has their own knitting story and they are always happy and nostalgic. (Matthews 1997: 194–95).

The contribution that group knitting makes to our well-being is not under question here, but it is striking to note that among all the positive cheer surrounding knitting groups, the lone knitter is often absent. In literature and film, representations of the lone knitter are often connected to negative attributes—even madness. In the previous section of this article, Maddock analyzes the lone figure of Knit Again from the Japanese film *Wool 100%*—hardly the embodiment of peace or happiness. Knit Again's production is alone and it is production that is troubled rather than fulfilling. Maddock shows us that Knit Again's inability to reach the completion of her project to her satisfaction signals a conspicuous absence in the character's life.

Similarly, the late Zimbabwean author, Yvonne Vera, describes the humiliation one of her female characters endures, first by establishing a scene of poverty and abuse:

Zandile turned left into Thandanani Street and walked quickly past No. 62 Thandanani

where she knew a woman whose husband had sold her to another man for the value of a bicycle wheel but she refused to leave and instead, stood on that asbestos roof with no clothes at all to cover her own body and announced loud and clear that she preferred two bicycle wheels to one, and if anyone had two bicycle wheels to give her husband then she would leave not only the roof top but the house and foolishness of her husband. (Vera 1998: 78)

Vera then confirms her character's pain through the excessive output of her hobby. "This No. 62 Thandanani woman could be seen outside her house any time of the day, knitting whatever she could, a full candle burning beside her whether it was morning or night" (Vera 1998: 78). The waste apparent in burning a candle during daylight is one indication that this character, under considerable duress, is no longer making rational decisions. This identity is sealed by her knitted production: compulsive, excessive, beyond material need but necessary for mental, if not physical, survival.

Jumping back in time, Charles Dickens provides us with another example of a now iconic unhappy knitter: Madame Defarge. The character of Defarge is far more sinister than Knit Again or No. 62 Thandanani woman, but here too her knitting is not for good. As the narrator of *A Tale of Two Cities* explains, "It would be easier for the weakest poltroon that lives, to erase himself from existence, than to erase one letter of his name or crimes from the knitted register

of Madame Defarge" (Dickens 1993 [1859]: 147). Defarge exploits the underestimated value of knitting, using it to communicate information that goes largely unseen by the world around her:

He always remembered with fear and trembling, that terrible woman had knitted when he talked with her, and had looked ominously at him as her fingers moved. He had since seen her, in the Section of Saint Antoine, over and over again to produce her knitted registers, and denounce people whose lives the guillotine then surely swallowed up. (Dickens 1993 [1859]: 258–9)

Madame Defarge's knitting is a curiosity not only of literary scholars, but from the perspective of healthcare as well. Corkhill and Riley note that research has questioned if the character of Madame Defarge exhibits symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Holmes et al. 2009). Ironically, the very actions necessary to create her register of names for the guillotine have deemed her a candidate for post-traumatic stress.

In among all this unhappy, solitary knitting, I have to ask where our understanding of *productive* solitary production fits into the identity of knitting. Contemporary culture teaches us that group activity is productive, creative, and efficient, not to mention the social norm. The American author Susan Cain has recently challenged this attitude, pointing out that many more of us may be introverts by nature than exterior appearances may suggest. Cain explains:

Introverts prefer to work independently, and solitude can be a catalyst to innovation ... but the way we organize many of our most important institutions—our schools and our workplaces—tells a different story ... The New Groupthink elevates teamwork above all else. It insists that creativity and intellectual achievement come from a gregarious place. (Cain 2012: 74–75)

Interestingly, Cain even goes so far as to dismiss the creative productivity of the group, suggesting that many of us now inhabit our physical lives based on virtual, online values:

Collaboration became the scared concept—the key multiplier for success. But then we took things a step further than the facts called for. We came to value transparency and to knock down walls—not only online but also in person. We failed to realize that what makes sense for the asynchronous, relatively autonomous interactions of the Internet might not work as well inside the face-to-face, politically charged, acoustically noisy confines of an open-plan office. Even multitasking, that prized feat of modern-day office worker warriors, turns out to be a myth. Scientists now know that the brain is incapable of paying attention to two things at the same time. What looks like multitasking is really switching back and forth between multiple tasks, which reduces productivity and increases mistakes by up to 50 per cent. (Cain 2012: 85)

Taking Cain's warning to heart, examples of solitary activity that do exist may deserve to be acknowledged in a more productive light.

There are, of course, examples of artists who clearly elect to work alone. Interestingly, this decision seems far less driven by the nature of a particular project or the scale of an undertaking, than by a self-awareness of working patterns that are most productive for certain individuals. For example, Shauna Richardson hand-crocheted three giant lions as part of the *Lionheart Project* for London's 2012 Cultural Olympiad. Reflecting on her decision to work alone, she explains:

Undertaking a project like this as a lone artist with no experience, contacts or guidance, was plain bonkers. But perhaps working alone is the reason the project has been so successful to date; I feel responsible for every aspect. When problems do arise I don another hat, find more hours and fix it. (Richardson quoted in Hoggard 2012: 35)

Richardson describes her working pattern with much the same language as Csikszentmihalyi uses to describe optimal experience: "To complete a crochet project of this length it is necessary to zone everything out, and sustain a state of mind driven by rhythm and process" (Hoggard 2012: 36). She is also honest enough to confess to a "daily source of wonder" that an undertaking of this scale was producible by one maker's set of hands (Hoggard 2012: 36).

The American artist Mark Newport also works to a large scale, using knitting to create full-body costumes of superheroes. The content looks to be the stuff of extreme extroversion, the "bam-whap" of printed cartoons and the special-effect-filled animations of their recent reincarnations. But Newport's working methods belie his chosen content. He acknowledges that the location of his studio, and the opportunity to work alone, allow for a more productive practice:

Weaving, knotting, embellishment, knitting—I have used for their social connotations in relation to gender, but more personally they provide the space that I prefer—quiet, controlled, primarily alone to think in a way that I feel is non-linear, slower, and at times more long-term than short-term problem-solving. The costumes and prints also provide a great parallel and contradiction to the hero; knitting's small, quiet action versus the large, dynamic actions of a superhero as the contrast. The solitary nature of the way I prefer to knit is similar to the lone vigilante superhero protecting the world. (Newport: 2012)

Newport's and Richardson's styles of work are not discernible from their finished creations. In fact, quite the opposite: their respective choices of content and scale would suggest a small army of group activity, wielding knitting needles and crochet hooks in the studio. I should also make clear that these examples in no way avoid public reception as part of

Figure 5

Shauna Richardson, *Lionheart Project*, Britain, 2012.



their solitary production methods. Newport makes clear that he often works productively in public, but that he sees this activity as ultimately solitary, even when occurring in a crowd:

I am intrigued by the social large-scale group projects with knitting and other textile

processes, and I have knit with other folks as a way of doing events at museums for openings ... I knit in public when I travel—on the plane or in the lobby or on a bus, but I do not think of that as working with a group. I really prefer to be alone when I knit or do most anything in the studio. (Newport 2012)

One final example of the potential of productive solitary activity is captured poignantly in the collaborative work of American artists Dutes Miller and Stan Shellabarger. The couple's ongoing co-crochet of soft pink yarn maps their marriage in a manner similar to Maddock's co-knitting, *Bloodline*, with her mother. In the



Figure 6
Mark Newport, *Flamer*, 2008.
Hand knit, acrylic, and buttons;
203 × 58 × 15 cm.

first stages of the project, Miller and Shellabarger were forced to work in awkwardly close proximity. With time, the crochet has grown and more recent performances, during which the two create in public, often include considerable space between their bodies. Miller and Shellabarger are hardly the image of the solitary knitter that I first observed in literature, nor do they represent the social conformity of the gregarious craft club. What they do epitomize is the potential of constructing complex objects from a simple, single yarn. The flexible nature of the craft's production means that the contribution knitting, or in this case crochet, can make to our lives and our well-being is equally varied.

Conclusion

Knitting makes contributions both big and small to our daily well-being. Research undertaken by Betsan Corkhill and Jill Riley has been able to confirm what

many who knit may have long felt. Knitting is, for many lives, far more than an innocent pastime. The physical and mental actions of knitting can contribute to our well-being in significant ways. As Corkhill explains:

Therapeutic knitting is being used to manage the experience of pain, mental health, dementia and addiction. Therapeutic knitting groups promote purpose, creativity, success, reward and enjoyment, which is particularly important in individuals who have no experience of these in other aspects of their lives. They are easily tailored to meet the specific needs and challenges of these different specialties at low cost. (Corkhill 2012: 8)

Crucially, knitting is also beginning to enjoy a welcome revival brought about by our lean economic times. While the image

Figure 7
Dutes Miller and Stan Shellabarger
at Western Exhibitions in Chicago,
Illinois, 2007.



of the knitting club at the local coffee shop is often an image of the time-poor setting a diary date to be time-rich, even if only for an hour, there are additional changes that have recently altered the image of knitting. Corkhill explains that, in Britain, "The current model of healthcare is unsustainable, particularly for long-term conditions ... more research is needed to find ways of tapping into the body's own healing mechanisms" (Corkhill 2012: 5). The restrictions of our current economy may be providing just that chink in the medical establishment's armor to allow activities previously acknowledged as no more than a hobby to be understood more fully.

From an attention to the therapeutic potential of knitting, Maddock then takes us into the realm of fiction, where a character unable to find satisfaction in her knitting is clearly a character struggling to find balance in her life. Acts of mending and tangled textile production in contemporary practice all provide signals that all is not well, that self-healing is both necessary and at times dauntingly complex. I pick up on this line of thinking with my own observations that the lone knitter in literature is often an indication of unhappiness. Borrowing from recent writing by Susan Cain about the power of introverted personalities, I question depictions of the lone knitter as troubled. Examples of large-scale knitting and crochet work created alone suggest that, for some at least, working alone is a source of inspiration rather than detriment to creative practice. Borrowing again from Corkhill, I am reminded of her observations that: "Knitting

creates strong, resilient fabric. Therapeutic knitting seeks to create strong, resilient, flexible minds in the process." As our diverse approaches here have shown, the contribution knitting can make to well-being is both varied and real.

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