



Module 3: Benefits of Parks for Persons with Mental Health Conditions

Gretchen Snethen

Learning Objectives:

1. Increase knowledge of the mental health related benefits of park participation
2. Identify park benefits that are associated with the needs of individuals with mental health conditions
3. Describe the meaning of parks to individuals with serious mental illnesses

Introduction

Parks have the potential to improve the health of individual users and the community at large. For individuals with mental health conditions, these benefits are particularly important. In this lesson, we review some of the physical and mental health needs of individuals with mental health conditions, along with some of the potential benefits of engaging with local parks. Many parks departments center their mission on the health benefits of the community and the accessibility of park resources to all community members. Use this training to better understand how parks and recreation facilities can specifically benefit community members with mental health conditions.

People with Mental Health Conditions Value Parks

Individuals with mental health conditions should have the opportunity to participate in the community, just like everyone else. Parks provide that space. Individuals with mental health conditions value participation in parks and recreation and many would like to do it more often. Specifically, research from the Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion indicates that 72% of individuals with serious mental health conditions identify going to a park as important and 48% would like to go more often¹.

Physical Health

Individuals with serious mental health conditions often experience poor physical health that is not specifically related to their mental health diagnosis. Due to poor physical health, individuals with serious mental health conditions have a life expectancy that is 10-20 years shorter than those without mental health diagnoses. High rates of diabetes, obesity, and

¹ Salzer, M. S., Brusilovskiy, E., Prvu-Bettger, J., & Kottsieper, P. (2014). Measuring community participation of adults with psychiatric disabilities: Reliability of two modes of data collection. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 59(2), 211–219. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036002>

This document was developed by the Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities, which is supported by a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant number 90RT5021). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this document do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

heart disease in this population all contribute to this. Lifestyle factors like physical inactivity, isolation, and poor nutrition contribute to the onset of these conditions. Below is a brief description of the lifestyle factors experienced by individuals with mental health conditions, followed by the potential for parks to address these issues.

Sedentary activity:

Need: Individuals with mental health conditions are less likely to meet the physical activity guidelines and spend more time in sedentary activity than their non-diagnosed peers. In fact, in one study, individuals with schizophrenia spent 8 hours of awake time per day in sedentary activities².

Park Potential: Parks provide the opportunity for individuals to get out of the house. Simply leaving your house and visiting a park provides the opportunity for incidental activity. Many parks feature walking paths or fields, which provide opportunity for participation in formal or informal physical activity.

Nutrition:

Need: Like everyone, people with serious mental health conditions deserve access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Many individuals with mental health conditions are unable to meet their nutritional needs and may have vitamin and mineral deficiencies³. Good nutrition is an important part of having a healthy body, as well as a healthy mind.

Park Potential: Many parks serve as locations for farmer's markets. This may be an important resource for individuals with mental health conditions to access healthy foods. If you host farmer's markets, talk with the vendors about accepting WIC or other food subsidies, which will increase accessibility. Think about other opportunities as well! Public events that offer food to participants could consider having a healthier option to offer, or your organization could sponsor a cooking class to teach participants how to cook healthy, affordable meals.

Isolation:

Need: Individuals with mental health conditions may experience increased loneliness and have fewer friends and acquaintances⁴. It is important to minimize loneliness, not only for the emotional benefits of spending time with others, but the physical health benefits as well. Studies have shown that spending time with others, including family and friends, can promote improved physical health⁵.

Park Potential: Simply put, parks provide an opportunity to be around others. This could be an opportunity to meet new people, maintain friendships and relationships, or simply be near other people. Park-sponsored activities are one example but providing a welcoming place doesn't have to be complicated. Try providing extra seating in your park for people to meet and making sure there's plenty of shade and covered areas.

² Soundy A, Wampers M, Probst M, De Hert M, Stubbs B, Vancampfort D. Physical activity and sedentary behaviour in outpatients with schizophrenia: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation* 2013;20(12):558-596.

³ Rao, T. S., Asha, M. R., Ramesh, B. N., & Rao, K. S. (2008). Understanding nutrition, depression and mental illnesses. *Indian journal of psychiatry*, 50(2), 77-82. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0019-5545.42391>

⁴ Cook, J. A. (2000). Sexuality and people with psychiatric disabilities. *Sexuality and Disability*, 18(3), 195-206.

⁵ Seeman, T. E. (2000). Health Promoting Effects of Friends and Family on Health Outcomes in Older Adults. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 14(6), 362-370. <https://doi.org/10.4278/0890-1171-14.6.362>

Mental Health

Often, when thinking about individuals with serious mental health conditions, the related mental health symptoms come to mind. From symptoms of depression to low motivation, parks have the potential to benefit one's mental health. Like the physical health opportunities, these aren't just benefits for individuals with mental health conditions! They could improve the mental health of all park users.

Depression:

Need: Depression is a mood disorder characterized by persistent sad feelings and loss of interest in activities. People with depression may not participate in their community as much as others, but it is clear that community participation is important for everyone.

Park potential: Physical activity has been shown to significantly reduce levels of depression, even if the activity is mild, such as regular walking in a park. In addition, simply being in a natural environment can have mental health benefits. In addition, the social connectedness opportunities that parks provide can have a positive effect on depressive symptoms.



Motivation:

Need: Many individuals with mental health conditions experience difficulties with motivation, which can have a huge impact on one's life. Having low motivation can make not only undesirable tasks more difficult to complete, but even activities that are enjoyable or important to the person! For people with mental health⁶, negative emotions like depression can lead to decreased effort and lower motivation. In addition, many people with⁷ spend their day primarily engaged in passive activities, like watching tv, but these passive activities have been associated with negative emotion and low motivation.⁸ So, promoting participation in engaging and pleasurable activities has the potential to increase motivation among people with serious⁸, leading to increased community participation.⁹

⁶ Beck AT, Himelstein R, Bredemeier K, Silverstein SM, Grant P. What accounts for poor functioning in people with schizophrenia: a re-evaluation of the contributions of neurocognitive v. attitudinal and motivational factors | Psychological Medicine | Cambridge Core. Psychological Medicine 2018;48(16):2776-2785.

⁷ McCormick BP, Snethen G, Lysaker PH. Emotional episodes in the everyday lives of people with schizophrenia: The role of intrinsic motivation and negative symptoms. Schizophrenia Research 2012;142(1-3):46-51.

⁸ McCormick BP, Snethen G, Smith RL, Lysaker PH. Active leisure in the emotional experience of people with schizophrenia. Therapeutic Recreation Journal 2012;46(3).

⁹ van Roekel E, Heininga VE, Vrijen C, Snippe E, Oldehinkel AJ. Reciprocal associations between positive emotions and motivation in daily life: Network analyses in anhedonic individuals and healthy controls. -PscNET. Emotion 2019;19(2):292-300.

This document was developed by the Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities, which is supported by a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant number 90RT5021). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this document do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

Park Potential: A hallmark of recreation is choice and enjoyment. Participation in enjoyable activities has the potential to increase motivation and engagement in the community.^{7 8} Furthermore, social interaction and social commitments can also increase one’s motivation. Providing a diversity of activities, opportunities for individuals to meet and deepen social connections are key strategies to increasing motivation.

PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITIES ARE IN A
UNIQUE POSITION TO INCREASE MOTIVATION AMONG
INDIVIDUALS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS.

Lived Experience Spotlight

Beyond desired participation, parks are a valued resource for participation. Take these stories that were shared by our research participants, for example:

Aaron visits his local park several times a week year-round. He loves to sit on the benches, people watch and let his mind relax. Because of his mental illness, he often feels uncomfortable and unwelcomed in public spaces, but according to him “everybody is welcome at the park”. When he sits in the park, he feels like no one’s eyes are on him, they are all focused on their own lives. Parents play with their kids, animals roam around, teenagers play basketball, and he sits on his bench. Aaron says he feels safe at the park because there are so many people around, he has even fallen asleep in the shade on a nice day! He says a trip to the park is his vacation.

“Everybody is welcome at the park”

Adele has struggled for many years with her mental health and the park is a great resource for her when she doesn't feel well. When she's at the park she feels good, no pain or headaches or stress and once she feels better the calm mood sticks with her for the rest of the day. The park makes her feel less lonely, “A lot of people with mental health problems feel lonely. I isolate myself, but just being at the park and being around other people makes me feel less lonely. I get to feel like I'm part of something and I like to think that other people there are going for the same reason as me.”

Summary

Parks are important and can benefit the health of participants! The goal of this lesson is to increase your awareness of how parks can specifically benefit individuals with mental health conditions. Think about the things that are already occurring at your park. In the discussion questions, you will be encouraged to think about how to share information about the potential benefits of park participation. Think about how you might share this information with a general audience as well as specifically with individuals with mental health conditions.

This document was developed by the Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities, which is supported by a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant number 90RT5021). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this document do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.