



Module 5: Creating Welcoming Parks

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Learning Objectives

1. Learn about Universal Design
2. Learn how to create Welcoming Parks

So far, we've reviewed a number of factors that contribute to a welcoming environment for individuals with mental illnesses. This lesson shifts to think about how to actively take steps to create a welcoming park or recreation environment. To think about how we can create welcoming parks, we need to take a step back, and think about what characteristics of space make it universally welcoming.

Universal Design

The Center for Universal Design out of North Carolina State University coined the phrase universal design in 1997, and defined it as "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design."¹

There are seven basic principles of universal design: equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, size and space for approach and use. Below, we review a number of these principles and how they relate to creating welcoming parks.

Equitable Use. Equitable use means that all people are able to use the design equally, and the design does not divide or segregate any users. On its surface, equitable use relates to physical disability – forcing users to choose between stairs and an elevator serves to divide users, while a ramp might be suitable for all users. However, equitable design can also relate to mental illnesses. Many people with mental illness live in poverty due to relying on a part time job or disability income and may have limited access to recreational activities. How can you create parks that are welcoming to people with limited resources? Try to increase the number of free or low-cost activities at your park and avoid expensive activities. Try to prioritize activities geared towards adults – many parks only focus on activities for children, but adults need social and recreational activities as well!

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Flexibility in Use & Simple/Intuitive Use. Flexibility in use is related to simple/intuitive use. Flexibility in use is just what it sounds like. Parks that have flexible spaces and offer a diversity of opportunities are more universally accessible. Think about it! Parks that only offer activities for children do not serve individuals who don't have children. Flexibility should be considered in thinking about different ages, different interests, and different cultures, among others. Often, people assume parks and recreation facilities offer opportunities for physical activity. While this is true, there can also be space for arts and crafts, performances, or even spaces to find solitude.

The opportunities within a park should be simple and intuitive. Parks are great in that people can come and participate with little instruction. The opportunities within a park should be intuitive to all users. The next section on perceptive information relates to this principle.

Perceptive Information. The principle of perceptive information calls for important information to be presented in a way that is accessible to all people, and includes different modes of presentation, such as pictorial, verbal, and auditory. Think about some of the likely consequences of having a mental illness – difficulty concentrating, remembering, or paying attention. Would an all-text sign describing the history of the park or this month's upcoming events be accessible to readers with disabilities? Consider utilizing multiple modes of presentation in one sign. Consider also how individuals might access the information. Websites are great to share information; however, not everyone will think to look at the website. There may also be outdated information that could be confusing. Consider sharing current events through social media and marketing events to diverse populations, including community mental health centers.

Lived Experience Spotlight

These are examples of how individuals with lived experience described parks where they felt welcomed as a person with a mental health condition. Take a moment to think about what the park did to create those welcoming spaces.

"I like going to the park. It's nice. People come there with free food would be good. I can go down there when I'm hungry, ain't got no food and I hear a church coming up. They come out with good food. I eat. They give me religious material I can read while I'm sitting in the park. It's cool." (Sarah)

In this example, the park offered space and opportunity for organizations to offer food to individuals in need. The park also provided a space to sit and read information.

"Watch a movie. Then we have a garage sale in the park and I may get something like that. The Amish come out and they have cakes, pies, stuff like that. I'll maybe get a cake. Something like that. Take a water ice to the park."

"Take a walk in the park ... They show movies there, they've got vendors there, free markets there. They've got volleyball there, they've got a lot of events going on, a lot of stuff going on out there. I like it there." (

In these examples, the park offered a number of diverse activities. This is a great example of how parks can use their space flexibly. Additionally, these opportunities were available to everyone, demonstrating the equitable use principle. Movies, thrift sale, food sales, etc... A park can be a great place to interact with other and to get exposure to a number of different local good or services.

"They have one game, I don't know what it's called where they have this thing that goes into a net, not a net, like a little tiny cone type thing and they throw it. Some people bring their dogs out there and they play Frisbee. I like watching that."

In this example, the park offered an opportunity for people-watching (and dog-watching!). Creating a welcoming park doesn't require a lot of time or expense. Sometimes, welcoming parks are just about having a place to sit and observe, and maybe play a game or two.

What can you do to create a welcoming park?

So, what can you do to make your parks more welcoming to people with mental illnesses? For starters, **you can have your staff go through the previous modules in this training:** The Introduction, Disability as an Aspect of Diversity, Benefits of Parks for Persons with Mental Health Conditions, and Avoiding Discriminatory Language. You can more generally help raise awareness through your organization about mental health conditions and foster the expectation that staff and volunteers should be supportive of all park patrons. Ideally, every park would have the resources to hire a peer support specialist to connect with park patrons and with mental health centers.

Another option is to **have staff or volunteers who are focused on including everyone in park activities.** Bryant Park in New York City and Love Park in Philadelphia have a Games Area and an Art Cart, run by part time employees. These employees are responsible not only for facilitating game play, but also in encouraging participation by park patrons. They are expected to serve as ambassadors for the park, communicate the goals of the park, and engage park patrons.

Consider investing some time and money into designating staff towards this effort, as well as creating activities for patrons to engage in. Try creating a giant Jenga game out of repurposed cardboard boxes or host a community drive for gently use board games to be used in the park.

Even if your park doesn't have the budget for sponsored activities, you could still utilize this kind of staff. Park employees and volunteers could initiate friendly chats with park patrons sitting alone and let them know about the many opportunities for community engagement your park offers. **Try creating flyers with the upcoming week or month's scheduled activities** – volunteers could offer park patrons these flyers to initiate a conversation.

Another great way to create welcoming parks is to **ensure the signage utilized in your park is inclusive.** We already discussed the principle of perceptive information, but let's think beyond that. Make sure that the signage in your parks display a wide variety of ages, genders, races, and abilities. You also want to be sure that your signage is not specifically targeting people with mental health issues, but instead raises mental health awareness. A sign that says, "Being outside can improve your mood!" is more inclusive than one that states, "For people with depression, being outside is a way to relieve symptoms." Both signs are accurate, but only the first one is inclusive of all park patrons and doesn't single out patrons with mental health concerns. Another example might include "Feeling down? Get outside for a nature mood boost!"



Consider how you might incorporate these strategies in your park. Whatever you decide to do, making the effort to create a more welcoming and inclusive park is the first step!