Welcoming Places in the Community: Perspectives from Individuals with Serious Mental Illnesses

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On Community Inclusion of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities
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This document provides first-person accounts from people with lived experience of mental illness regarding what characteristics turn a community space into a meaningful place, and steps we can take to make all places in our communities more welcoming. A series of worksheets is included that will help readers learn about what spaces they find welcoming. Identifying welcoming features can lead to increased community participation for people with serious mental illnesses.

Suggested Citation:

Overview of the Welcoming Places Project

The Welcoming Places project was a study conducted by the Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion from 2017 to 2019. Participants in this project identified as having a serious mental illness and could describe a location in their community, outside of their mental health services, where they felt welcomed as someone with a mental illness. The project included 90 individuals who answered questions to identify and describe places where they felt welcomed. This document contains some descriptions of welcoming places that were shared with us.

Why Participation is Important

Community participation is something everyone does! It might look different from person to person, depending on the resources in one’s community and an individual’s interests. Community participation can include going to places like the park or library; attending a religious community; going shopping or stopping at a coffee shop to visit with friends. Simply put, community participation is being out in the community and doing the things you like or need to do. The research tells us that community participation is associated with greater mental health recovery, quality of life and life meaning.\(^1\) Examples of participation contributing to recovery include being an employee, volunteer, student, in a healthy relationship or being a member of a group or organization. The environment of one’s community can help to support motivation, socialization, and well-being, as well as allow people to excel in activities and relationships.\(^2\) Therefore, it’s important to find places in the community that are welcoming. These welcoming places have positive environmental characteristics that may increase community participation.

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**Why this Research is Important**

While the literature identifies various environmental characteristics that contribute to preferred environments, there is a need for research that focuses on characteristics of welcoming places from the perspectives of individuals who have been diagnosed with serious mental illnesses. The Welcoming Places study sought to fill this gap by providing the opportunity for individuals with lived experience to describe community locations where they feel welcomed. By sharing our research findings with community members, friends, family, and business owners, we hope to promote greater understanding and awareness of places in the community, and their characteristics that individuals with mental illnesses find welcoming. More importantly, we hope this project will facilitate conversations among a variety of groups, such as service providers and consumers about preferred locations and environmental preferences; advocates and community members about the importance of welcoming environments; and finally, conversations between peer support specialists and others with lived experience about their own welcoming places. It is our hope that community centers, organizations and businesses will be inspired to make their places more welcoming to everyone.

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What is a Welcoming Place?

A welcoming place is somewhere in the community that a person visits regularly and feels comfortable. For our study we required that welcoming places be:

1. Public

It is important that welcoming places be easily accessible by anyone in the community. An office building or a gym that requires a membership would work because anyone could apply to work in that building or purchase a gym membership. However, the home of a friend or family member would not work because, though many people may pass through, it is still private property and not open to just anyone.

2. Regularly Visited

For our study we ensured that participants had visited their welcoming place within the last three months. There are some places, like the zoo or a museum, that don’t lend to regular visits, but you could still visit them frequently enough that you feel familiar with and welcome in the place.

3. Places that Welcome the Whole Person

We asked that participants identify an environment that they not only enjoy visiting, but also feel welcomed as a person with a mental illness. This does not mean that everyone in the place is aware the person has a mental health condition; in fact, many participants identified places as welcoming because they didn’t have to talk about their mental health when they spent time there. Other participants identified places where they could be very open about their mental illnesses. Even if participants did not disclose their diagnosis, nearly all participants said it would be ok if others knew about their diagnosis.

Ultimately, a welcoming place is somewhere that you feel comfortable being yourself, no matter how much of your identity you choose to express there. It should be a place where you feel welcomed as the person that you are.
Participant Stories

The research project not only asked participants to rate certain characteristics of the places, but they were also encouraged to describe them in greater detail and even draw them. These conversations often revealed the deep connections participants had with their welcoming place and provided us with some incredibly valuable perspectives. Following are selected stories from five participants that detail their welcoming places. Names have been changed to protect privacy and there may be some edits to the text for readability, but not meaning or content.
Rosa - Cancer Support Group

It’s every Wednesday, my support group. We go into this little room with plastic chairs all set up in a circle. It’s really not much, but it’s my place. I have the same routine every week; I go in, I get a cup of coffee and then I make my way around the room hugging everyone and catching up until it’s time to start. I like that I get to choose when I go. Some of our meetings are longer and sometimes we go out and do things together, and it’s up to me to decide what I want to do and what I need that week. We hold meetings at the local rec center, they can’t give us much space, but there’s always snacks, coffee and smiling faces. It’s good there.

I’m opening up the more I get to know people and I’ve never experienced that in my life. I always walked around and felt like I wasn't part of anything; I couldn't fit in. Now I have, well, I call them my survivor sisters, because we’ve all had breast cancer. I never used to be able to look anyone in the eyes, always just stared down at my lap and was quiet. Now, I feel like I have a place to belong and people who care about me. If I haven’t been to a meeting in a few weeks they will say “Rosa! Where have you been? Are you okay? We missed you!” We check in on each other, and it means so much to me. I feel better when I go there, but I also get to help the other women, I get to ask how they are and if they need anything. Since I joined this group four years ago I’ve learned so much, but mostly about me. I’ve seen parts of me that I’ve never seen before. I feel like I’m growing in all of the areas that I always needed to.

My mental health is hard to talk about, but it’s a little easier here, because we are all in the same boat. All of us are going through the same thing and can give each other a helping hand. Sometimes that means talking about what a procedure is like, sometimes it means talking about the depression that comes with it. I feel like I can talk about anything there, because we’re all going through the same thing.
I used to be alone a lot, when I lived in a boarding home, so when I come here it brings me back to the time when I was figuring things out and trying to get better. Sometimes I feel like I need to revisit that place again, maybe to think about how much I have been through and how far I have come. Being there reminds me how proud of myself I am for making it this far.

Usually I don’t stay for too long, maybe 20 or 30 minutes, and I like to switch up where I sit. Sometimes I’ll sit at one of those big tables with other people and chat with them, usually the other regulars. Other days I want to be alone, so I sit by the window and watch the cars go by while I drink my coffee. They have these counters at all the windows where you can set your things down and sit for a while. No one ever asks you to leave, well, as long as you’re spending money. But they have to stay open somehow, so I understand.

I volunteer a lot and that involves talking to people all day, so it’s nice to come to my coffee shop and just take a break and be alone. Sometimes I do bring a friend though, we’ll sit at a little table together and chat for a while; it’s a good place to hang out. Also, I recognize some of the cashiers. They have been seeing me there for a while. When I wasn’t doing well they always treated me kindly, and they still do now. When I come in I don’t even have to order, they just ask me if I want my usual and I say yes. If I get the chance I’ll talk to them for a little bit, because they are so good to me.

The coffee shop is laid back, no one will ever judge or bother you there. I can stay for as long as I want and just relax, there’s no time limit. It’s my time alone, but I still feel like I’m part of a community when I’m there, it’s my favorite place to be.
I feel comfortable in there, because it’s the church that I was baptized in, had my Bible studies, and talked to people about my life. I was able to tell them about my mental illness and they didn’t discriminate or belittle me. They told me I was still welcome there, because it was my home, it has always been my home.

When I go into my church I always see lots of smiling faces, all my friends and family. We have people who have a lot of money and people who are more working class, we’re all very different but we don’t discriminate. Our differences don’t matter because we’re all there for the same thing. It seems like, every Sunday when I go, the preacher knows exactly what I’m going through and he talks about it. I feel like he’s talking directly to me and I always feel good after I leave there, like I have a new perspective.

When I go to church and I'm around church family, I can express myself in any way that I want, it makes me feel like I belong. We all have our own problems, but we care for each other, it really builds a sense of community.
I go to the park alone because you could do your own thing, you know? With nobody in your way, you don't have to talk to nobody. When you’re with somebody, you normally have to talk and be like an entertainer, or they have to entertain, but not there. When the weather's hot, I can go to the water park and cool down. So that's about it, it's pretty much the water, because I can swim. Thank you God, I can swim. It feels good.

It's water, hills--something about water and hills. And I like the lake. Just knowing that there’s a lake next to it is beautiful. I like looking at the lake, and people fishing, and seeing it through the seasons. The snowy seasons when the lake is frozen, and the height of it. It's just beautiful, because they can't build on it, and that's what's so beautiful about it. Everything else they can build on, and when you look at the lake, it's just like you can't build on it, you can't drive on it. It's a peaceful thing to look at, and my mind can go any ... my mind just go any place it choose to go, or I choose to let it go. I'm basically just ... I can say I'm meditating, man, so I’m clearing thoughts.

If a friend has a problem, or if I have a problem, as a friend, we go to the park. "Oh, I got something on my mind, man." "Oh, you wanna go to the park? Let's go to the park," and we talk about it, man. We go to the park, and it gives me and that person a chance to sit down and ... toss ideas, you know what I mean? Map out things that may be beneficial to him, I, both, or him, her, both. You know?

I think I was connected to the park from a child. I'm familiar with it, and I developed the peace ... I've developed safety. It's like I've found safety in the park, and a sense of belonging, without being discriminated against.

It makes me feel good. It just do something to me that's my whole ... Just to get away. Just to concentrate. I feel good, I do--like a whole new different person. I guess, in a kind of way, like a person reading a book or whatever it is that they do, their hobbies or something. The park, that's my thing. It just do something to me. I really feel good. No pain. No headache. No nothing about being stressing. Just stress free. Then I go back home and I'm cool. I feel good. I went down, I did what I had to do and went down to the park.
Denise - Library

Why I go there? Because I don't want to be home by myself and it's a safe place to go. You don't have to spend money, you get free information or free literature. I feel welcomed there because for me it's a safe haven place that I can go and be at peace with myself. You know, entertained but, you know I feel ... When I go there I feel welcome. So I feel welcome, even though some people don't talk, and stuff like that. But I feel welcome with me, you know what I'm saying? With me.

I go there for specific reasons, and when I'm out of there, when I get out of the library, I did what I had to do, you know what I'm saying? And I just walk, I walk. I just get out. Sometimes I talk to people or stuff like that, and I feel welcome there, you know what I'm saying? It's a very nice library.

The library helps me ... It helps me express my roles because I can find what I need there, you know what I'm saying? It's like a safe haven for me, because I find peace in there, and I find people that are welcoming, and I feel as if I'm welcome there, and express my feelings by just not ... I don't have to shut down at the library, I don't have to shut down.

That's the way the library was, it was a safe, easygoing place, but it was also, everybody minded their business and stayed to themselves. If somebody came in who needed help, the library would help them. The library helped me in my role as a citizen. Like I said, part of being a citizen is being a part of the work-force, and I had a job interview at the library. I used to look for jobs at the library--not with the library--but, it was an office type of place for me. If it required more help than the librarian, like a group of people that had to help somebody, that would happen because it was like the library was more like a church. It was more like a church, in that respect. It was, we're all praying to the God of books.
What is your Welcoming Place?

Taking inspiration from these stories, think about places in your community that you feel welcomed in. These could be anywhere you spend your time. Maybe you have a favorite restaurant that you visit every year on your birthday, or feel welcomed and at home around your co-workers. There is a worksheet on the next page which will help you guide your thoughts.

Use this worksheet to explore your preferences for welcoming places. Consider different aspects, such as the people you see and interact with there, the things that you do, the way you feel when you’re there, the decorations or lighting, the level of noise, the location, and other characteristics.

Consider environments that are welcoming to you and what about them you like so much. Use the questions below to guide your responses.

1. In my welcoming place I prefer to hear (circle all that apply):
   - Music
   - Nothing
   - White Noise
   - Traffic
   - Conversation
   - Nature
   Other: ________________________________

2. I prefer areas where I am surrounded by (circle all that apply):
   - Art
   - Plants
   - Open Space
   - Windows
   - Furniture
   - Nature
   Other: ________________________________

3. I feel welcome when I am (circle all that apply):
   - Socializing
   - Reading/Writing
   - Sitting Quietly
   - Shopping
   - Eating
   Other: ________________________________

4. I like smells that are (circle all that apply):
   - Floral
   - Strong
   - Not Noticeable
   - Natural
   - Familiar
   Other: ________________________________

5. I feel welcome in a place where (circle all that apply):
   - I Know Everyone
   - I Meet New People
   - I Don’t Have to Talk
   Other: ________________________________
Finding your Welcoming Place

You can use this worksheet to explore specific features that make places in your community welcoming to you. Consider different aspects, such as the people you see and interact with there, the things that you do, the way you feel when you’re there, the decorations and lighting, the level of noise, the location, and any other kinds of characteristics.

Use the table below to summarize your preferences that you identified earlier. This will be an easy reference sheet for you to keep track of what features are important to you when looking for a welcoming place!

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sounds</th>
<th>Physical surroundings</th>
<th>Social interactions</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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Where do I spend my time?

Think of the places where you spend time in your community. These could include a grocery store, restaurant, clothing store, pharmacy, place of worship, library, park or anywhere else you typically go in your community.

List 3 places in the community that you visit regularly, and their environmental features that you feel meet your above criteria:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Feature 1</th>
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**Can’t think of a welcoming place?**

That’s ok! One of the reasons we did this project was to raise awareness of the importance of welcoming places and to help people to think about places in their community that could feel personally welcoming. The good news is, many people are able to identify a place in the community where they feel welcomed. Look at the preferences you listed. Think about these as you visit different places. Make a conscious effort to find your welcoming place!

Share your interest in finding a welcoming place with someone you know! It could be a friend, family member, or even a mental health professional. Ask them to help support you in your goal to find a welcoming place!

Who will you share this with? _____________________________________________________

Think about how this person might support you to find your welcoming place. Is it going to visit the place with you? Asking about your experience at different places? Take some time to think about what support you might want. Write it down and share it with that person!

Desired Supports: ________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________
**Pick a welcoming place!**

Of the places and characteristics that you listed above, think about a place that you feel is the most welcoming for you. This spot should be somewhere you really enjoy spending time and feel free to be yourself in.

What is your welcoming place?

___________________________________________________________________________

While the features of a place can help, sometimes a place is welcoming because of your experiences within it! Can you think of a time when you felt welcomed in the place you chose? Take a moment to write it down!

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

Share your story with someone! While writing your story down can help you remember positive interactions, sharing it with someone is another way of sharing the importance of welcoming places! Take a minute to think who you might share your welcoming place with! Tell them your story. Consider inviting them to visit your welcoming place!

Who might you share your story with? __________________________________________

Take a few minutes to think about why this place is meaningful to you.

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________