

CREATING WELCOMING PROGRAMS AND PLACES FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES



Recreation for Mental Health is an initiative designed to strengthen partnerships, enhance capacity, and create supportive environments to enable all Nova Scotians to have opportunities to experience the mental well-being benefits of recreation, physical activity, sport, and play.

This project is a collaboration between Recreation Nova Scotia (RNS), Dalhousie University and the Canadian Mental Health Association (Nova Scotia), which was funded by the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness.

To view this and other research project summaries online, visit:

recreationns.ns.ca/mental-health-and-recreation

For additional information about this research project contact Dr. Karen Gallant: Karen.Gallant@Dal.ca

R4MH Research Team:
Fenton, L., Gallant, K., Gilbert, R., Hamilton-Hinch, B., Hutchinson, S., Lauckner, H., White, C.

This project was funded by the Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation

WHY WAS IT IMPORTANT TO DO THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Community based recreation programs (sports, arts, volunteering) promote participation and bring people together, which can positively benefit mental health and aid in recovery. However, people with mental health challenges often experience barriers, stigma, and may not feel welcomed.

To help people living with mental illness experience the many benefits that come from recreation participation there is value in learning what is working well in community settings in order to identify the components or characteristics of their programs that make them welcoming and inclusive.

WHAT WAS THE PROJECT GOAL?

The goal of this project was to understand characteristics of programs and places that help people living with mental health challenges feel welcome and included in community-based recreation settings.

HOW WAS THE PROJECT DONE?

Four focus groups were held (with 28 people in total) to discuss characteristics of welcoming and inclusive recreation programs and settings. Seven people from the focus groups volunteered to take part in a "go-along interview", where a researcher participated alongside them in an activity they experience as welcoming, and subsequently interviewed them about this experience.

Key themes were shared at a workshop-style event attended by people living with mental health challenges, and results were collaboratively refined, resulting in draft guidelines.

WHY SHOULD YOU KEEP READING?

This project allowed us to learn from the experiences of people with mental health challenges who attend community-based recreation programs. Thus, the findings represent real-life experiences and also offer tangible suggestions for how to foster inclusive and welcoming recreation programs and places.

WHAT WERE KEY FINDINGS?

FIVE NOTABLE CONTRIBUTORS TO POSITIVE COMMUNITY-BASED RECREATION EXPERIENCES WERE IDENTIFIED, BASED ON THE PERSPECTIVES OF PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES.

HELPING TO REDUCE BARRIERS THAT KEEP PEOPLE FROM GETTING TO RECREATION PROGRAMS. Barriers were reduced by: Ensuring that participants have easy access to information about available opportunities; program affordability; ensuring that programs can be easily reached using public transit; awareness of challenges related to hygiene and clothing.

"If they've never been there before or they don't know where it is, it's just impossible."

PEER SUPPORT (E.G., THE PRESENCE OF OTHERS WHO HAVE PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES OR PERSONS WHO CAN PROVIDE INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT).

Peer support can be strengthened through: The presence of warm and caring instructors who function as peers; creating opportunities for individuals to attend with peers; providing one-on-one support or mentorship for first-time attendees.

FEELING PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE. PROVIDING INFORMATION THAT LETS POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT SUPPORTS ENJOYABLE AND WELCOMING EXPERIENCES.

People can be helped to feel prepared by: Providing a short individual orientation to new activities; providing written materials about what to expect in different recreation settings; ensuring that participants have the proper clothing, equipment, and are aware of the norms or "rules" within the setting.

"But I'm actually having the courage now to do something I might not have ever done by myself, knowing that I have a backup support when I come here."

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP: LEADERS SET THE TONE FOR A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE BY CREATING A COMFORTABLE, WELCOMING, AND SAFE SPACE FOR PARTICIPANTS.

Leaders can create an inclusive atmosphere by: Providing feedback without singling people out; building relationships with participants; being available to chat informally with participants before and after recreation programs.

SUPPORTING NATURAL SOCIAL ACTIVITY (E.G., OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION WITHIN A RECREATION PROGRAM).

Social activities can be promoted by: Creating opportunities for natural "add on" activities, such as coffee and social time following a recreation program; leading recreation programming at a relaxed pace.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS?

The findings from this study suggest that recreation programs and places that are experienced as welcoming by those with mental health challenges have several common characteristics. More specifically, they provide some assistance in helping people to address barriers they face in accessing recreation program and settings, provide peer support options, help people to feel prepared to participate, have inclusive leadership and incorporate activities that are naturally social.