

CREATING QUALITY RECREATION EXPERIENCES FOR ADULTS LIVING 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 wellbeing 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

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WHY WAS IT IMPORTANT TO DO THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

To help people living with mental health challenges experience the benefits that come from recreation participation there is a need to address barriers that prevent people from participating and to be intentional about designing programs that are welcoming, inclusive and ensure participants experience these benefits.

WHAT WAS THE PROJECT GOAL?

The goal of this project was to learn from the experiences of service providers who have successfully engaged people living with mental health challenges in recreation-related programs in order to identify the characteristics of their programs that make them beneficial, welcoming and inclusive.

HOW WAS THE PROJECT DONE?

A scan was conducted of recreation-oriented programs for people living with mental health challenges in Canada. The purpose was to identify community-based programs considered to be examples of 'promising practices.' 12 different programs were identified and 10 program directors were interviewed. They described factors they considered when designing their recreation programs. Note: these recommendations are specific to programming offered by community mental health service providers. For guidelines for working with people in community recreation settings (e.g., municipal recreation centres) see the Welcoming Spaces summary.

WHAT WERE KEY FINDINGS?

REMOVE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING PROGRAMS:

Program coordinators suggested the following solutions to barriers that people living with mental health challenges experience to participating in recreation programs, whether at their centres or in the community:

- Free/low cost programs, equipment donations or equipment loan program, support access to transportation
- Flexible scheduling, accommodation for mental illness symptoms and other needs (e.g., medical appointments)
- Purposeful efforts to create welcoming environments (see R4MH Project Summary 2016 No. 2)

“ We'll do whatever we can to get you here.

Because we know once you get here, you'll probably participate. ”

PROGRAM FOR MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS:

The program coordinators identified a number of things that can be done to design recreation programs that will have greater likelihood of benefiting people living with mental health concerns, including:

- Designing programs that provide both structure and variety
- Providing opportunities for skills-building
- Infusing leisure education and/or skill development in recreation programs
- Actively facilitating transfer of learning
- Providing opportunities for building social connections
- Being intentional about involving people living with mental health concerns in planning, in providing feedback, and in leadership/peer support roles.
- Ensuring staff/leaders have adequate/relevant training in recreation and related to mental health (e.g., Mental Health First Aid)

TO SUPPORT PEOPLE TO DEVELOP COMFORT WITHIN PROGRAMS OR SPACES, IT WAS RECOMMENDED THAT PROGRAM STAFF:

- Provide an orientation for new participants who may be nervous or unsure about participating
- Actively work to integrate people into already established groups
- Allow people to 'try out' a program session and meet with a program leader ahead of time
- Allow people to bring friends/family or health/peer supporter.

TO SUPPORT PEOPLE TO BE SELF-DETERMINED IN PARTICIPATION AND TO CONNECT TO THEIR BROADER COMMUNITIES, IT WAS RECOMMENDED THAT SERVICE PROVIDERS:

- Assist people with goal setting, action planning
- Help participants connect to community resources and other participants
- Act as advocates and resources, actively reaching out to and supporting transitions into and from the program
- Support people to access information about and/or access transportation (facilitating application for bus pass)