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Therapeutic recreation for people with a mental illness is beneficial

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Therapeutic recreation for people with a mental illness is beneficial

Abstract

The positive benefit of therapeutic recreation for people living with mental illness has been identified in a recent BN Honours research study. The study findings concluded the supportive and encouraging milieu provided a therapeutic environment conducive to the principles of a strength based mental health recovery.

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A recent BN Honours research study has identified the positive benefits of therapeutic recreation for people living with mental illness. The findings of the study concluded the supportive and encouraging milieu provided a therapeutic environment conducive to the principles of a strengths based mental health recovery. The study's participants described the therapeutic intervention as positive which increased their physical activity and social engagement while enhancing personal empowerment. These positive benefits can contribute to mental health recovery as well as reducing some of the significant health disparities experienced by people living with mental illness.

It is widely acknowledged people living with mental illness experienced significant health disparities with a reduced life expectancy (Lawrence et al. 2013). A lack of physical activity and medication side-effects increase the risk of metabolic syndrome and its associated health risks (Lawrence et al. 2013). Often people living with mental illness experience an excessive amount of free time and social isolation which can cause them to partake in behaviours posing a risk to their health (Iwasaki et al. 2014; Lawrence et al. 2013). Innovative projects involving therapeutic recreation can be a means of reducing some of these disparities.

The study concerned the Recovery Camp, a University of Wollongong innovation, which brings together people living with mental illness with nursing and allied health undergraduate students to participate in therapeutic recreation. The five day outdoor adventure camp is run by the YMCA at Yarramundi, west of Sydney. The camp activities include activities such as a giant swing; flying fox; archery; orienteering and a high wire course (Moxham et al. 2015).

The participants of this qualitative study were people living with mental illness. The participants were asked during semi-structured interviews to reflect on their camp experience with regard to personal recovery. From the participants descriptions five sub-themes and one overall theme were identified. The sub-themes were self-determination; participation, extending self; relationships and positive change. These sub-themes interrelate with each other and with the overall theme of empowerment. For example, the interrelationship of the sub-themes self-determination; participation and extending self were described in the following quote from Participant 5 who was determined to increase her level of activity when she said:

It was about deliberately deciding to increase my participation, my activity, to stir myself up to get into new things.

The sub-theme of relationships was described by all participants as having the biggest impact. For example, Participant 1 said '*The biggest thing for me, the friendships; the camaraderie*'. The study's participants all talked about how the supportive and encouraging relationships at the camp create a safe therapeutic environment which moved them '*out of my comfort zone*' and challenged them into trying new activities. Each participant described positive changes such as increased confidence and trust. Importantly, participants expressed the camp experience contributed to their resolve towards their mental health recovery following the camp.

The study concluded the participants experienced empowerment, self-determination and increased physical and social involvement. These findings indicate the Recovery Camp is an efficacious intervention which can enhance wellness by encompassing the principles of mental health recovery.

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