

Supporting social inclusion in community gardening: The role of the occupational environment

Why was this study done?

People living with serious mental health challenges are vulnerable to exclusion from work, study, and community life. Mental health day programs aim to provide opportunities for people to participate, meet other people, and be involved in everyday activities. However, people can experience day programs as socially excluding as well as inclusive. There has been only limited research exploring environmental factors affecting social inclusion and participation in Australian mental health day programs with a horticultural focus (supported community gardens).

This study explored the participation of mental health support workers, people living with mental health challenges (participants), and volunteers in the occupation of community gardening, and factors that helped or hindered participation and inclusion.

Where was this study conducted?

The setting for this study was Sprout: Supported Community Garden in the inner northern suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria. Sprout is a service of Mind Australia. Mind is a community managed-mental health service that supports the mental health recovery of people living with mental health challenges.

Unlike many community gardens, Sprout does not have individual garden plots. Rather, the garden at Sprout is set up as a shared garden. Produce from the garden is used for communal activities such as the Taste Community Kitchen or is sold at the weekly "Open Gate" or the Sprout community garden market.

Sprout operates a weekly Day-to-Day Living Program with sessions held on three days a week (gardening, Taste Community Kitchen, food enterprises, creative projects group). Sprout holds monthly community markets in eight months of the year. Market stalls include Sprout food, plant and produce stalls, supported micro-

enterprises established and run by participants, and stalls run by community stall holders.

How was the study conducted?

This study was initiated by Sprout management and used an approach called *ethnography*. The aim of ethnography is to describe and explain events and actions that occur within a particular cultural context. Study data were collected using:

Participant observation: The researcher spent 23 hours participating in activities alongside, and talking with, Sprout participants, support workers and volunteers (at different times of the day and days of the week from November 2010 to January 2011). The researcher recorded these experiences using written field notes.

Semi-structured interviews: Towards the end of participant observation, the researcher completed semi-structured interviews with four Sprout support workers and two participants. Interviews explored how the people and things within Sprout affected opportunities to participate and feel included. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Documents, for example program information, were reviewed to understand organisational factors related to participation. The researcher also took **photographs** of the physical environment.

Field notes and interview transcripts were analysed to identify key themes .

What did we find?

As figure 1 depicts (page 2), we learned that the Sprout supported community garden:

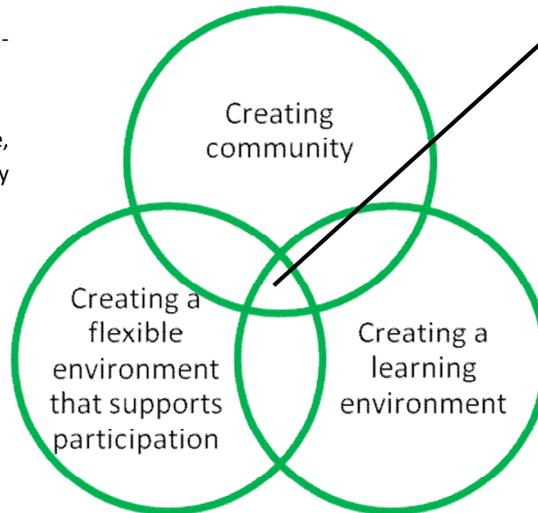
- created a community,
- created a flexible environment that supports participation,
- created a learning environment.

These were interrelated and created a socially inclusive community at Sprout.

“Other people come here as well to do the preserving [of fruit]. There might be three or four of us and that’s sort of a community thing ...” (participant)

“...most people don’t want to work by themselves. ... That’s the beauty of gardening . Yesterday there were three of us tying up tomatoes and we just talked the whole time, but you get a job done. ... So it is not actually the work it is more the scene that you are setting ...” (support worker)

“The decisions I think always come from the participants, that we don’t make anyone do anything. Just offer different activities or options and then they choose or they can choose not to do any of them.” (support worker)



The Sprout context

“We discussed what the needs and what ideas people had about what they wanted to learn.” (support worker)

“They tell you what to do or they actually give you the help and show you what to do.” (participant)

Creating Community

Sprout appeared to create a sense of community that was not segregated or excluded from the wider community, like some other programs. Participants could choose to be part of the day-to-day community of Sprout, participating in activities in the garden or kitchen. However, participants and volunteers could also choose to be part of the Sprout “market community”. This provided participants and volunteers choice and opportunities to make social connections with other participants, volunteers and local community members. Support workers facilitated these social connections through:

- creating opportunities for people to socialise while sharing meals or doing jobs together,
- creating a culture that was welcoming and accepting.

The garden appeared to contribute to participants feeling more relaxed and able to make social connections,

despite the challenges some experienced in doing this.

Creating a flexible environment that supports participation

At Sprout, workers, participants, and volunteers *worked in together* with each other. Sharing tasks with each other enabled people to choose how they wished to contribute to gardening, kitchen or market jobs on any given day. Although Sprout’s organisational culture invites active participation, Sprout workers do not compel people to participate. Participants set their own pace, and this enabled choice and self-direction. At Sprout, there was also a culture of participants and volunteers helping each other out. Support workers participated in activities alongside participants and volunteers, however also provided leadership and guidance. Together these factors created a flexible environment that supported participation, and helped to grow the Sprout community.

We are grateful to Sprout participants, volunteers, support workers and external key workers who readily shared their experiences, and to Mind Australia for supporting this study.

Creating a learning environment

Learning at Sprout included learning about one's self and others alongside learning practical gardening, cooking and enterprise skills. Learning was mostly informal, however workers also used formal approaches like organising "how to run a market stall" training in response to stall holders needs.

Learning at Sprout was sustained by:

- support workers getting to know participants and their learning needs and challenges
- workers using coaching in everyday conversations while participating alongside participants,
- participants' desire to learn and their willingness to share their knowledge with each other and support workers,
- workers learning to allow for mistakes and differences in how participants completed tasks.

Participation could be affected if participants or volunteers did not know what to do or had not learned the necessary skills for a task.

Table 1 (page 4) describes factors that enabled and constrained participation and inclusion at Sprout.

What do the study findings mean for Sprout?

It may be beneficial for Sprout to:

- develop written or multimedia information outlining Sprout's practices to provide to new support workers, and to assist in the development of new supported community gardens
- address restrictions on garden access by consulting with participants, volunteers and local community members to determine if and what type of further access they would like,

- consider use of peer or consumer-operated service approaches to expand the availability of the garden as a community resource.

What do the findings mean for mental health day programs?

This study highlights that:

- occupation-focused mental health day programs, such as supported community gardens can enable participation and contribute to social inclusion,
- participating in shared, meaningful everyday activities in a flexible and accepting environment where learning is encouraged are key factors for enabling participants to feel included and part of community,
- it is important for day programs to create connections with their local communities (so they do not perpetuate exclusion by being physically or socially separate). This requires day programs to look beyond only providing recovery services to participants, to also building community with participants and local community members.

Building community means that people get to participate together as a local community in shared spaces (like a garden), and move between roles rather than being defined by living with mental health challenges or not. The benefits of mental health day programs, such as shared experience of mental health challenges, are kept but extra opportunities for participation, connection and social inclusion are created. Organisational support and effective communication are needed to manage the relative informality of community building approaches.

Table 1: Social, organisational, physical and occupational factors in a supported community gardening environment that enabled or constrained participation and social inclusion

Environmental factors	Enabled participation and social inclusion and created community	Constrained participation and social inclusion
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An accepting, friendly and safe social environment created a sense of belonging • Permeable social boundaries (e.g. opening Sprout to local community members) created occupational opportunities and opportunities for social connection • Choice in the nature of social participation (e.g. with people with mental health challenges and with the wider community), and in social setting (e.g. alone, in small groupings, in a bigger group, and/or with a larger number of people at the market) • Being treated as equal and not defined by mental health challenges 	
Organisational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational structures enabled participation (e.g. no waiting list) • Worker to participant ratio (not too many people per worker) enabled participation. The participation of external key workers and volunteers assisted with this. • Organisational and worker aims to encourage working together facilitated participation • Organisational environment invited participation however did not compel participants to actively participate (enabled choice and self-direction) • Staff leadership, and actions of guiding and coaching facilitated participation and sense of community • Modelling/supervision by the senior worker created a culture of participation, and achieving a balance between being directive and letting things flow • Workers intervened with external key workers and volunteers to maintain a culture of active participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational demands restricted participation (e.g. locked out on weekends; closed over Christmas) • Worker to participant ratio restricted participation (e.g. limit on number of sessions new people could attend in a week as would 'lose' people if too many participants per worker) • Limited participant involvement in formal management structures less consistent with and a constraint to development of community
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing physical spaces (garden, kitchen) promoted participation and power-sharing • Permeable physical boundaries (e.g. openness to local geographic community; garden visible from the street) created opportunities to engage with local community • Physical environment experienced as relaxing which facilitated participation • Physical environment offered choices of kitchen/ garden/ market/ local community which facilitated participation 	
Occupational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating in shared meaningful occupations created community • Flexible opportunities to learn, use or develop skills (social and personal, as well as skills related to community gardening), as chosen by participant, • Inviting community members in to Sprout to participate in occupations (to volunteer, sell produce, shop, play music) created community and promoted social inclusion • Active participation in occupations created and maintained community • Choice in a range of occupations supported participation • Engagement of staff in shared occupations (e.g. sharing meals, being part of the team) built community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At times, a mismatch between skills required for an activity and participants' or volunteers' capabilities constrained participation

This study was conducted by Elise Whatley in partial fulfilment of her Master of Occupational Therapy, under the supervision of Dr Tracy Fortune, Dr Ellie Fossey and Ms Anne Williams of La Trobe University. The study was conducted from 2010-2012. Permission was granted for this study by Mind Australia, and ethics approval was obtained from La Trobe University Faculty of Health Sciences Human Ethics Committee. Contact us on: Elise Whatley, email: ewhatley@mindaustralia.org.au or Tracy Fortune and Anne Williams at <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/health/about/staff/allied-health-staff>