



MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY GARDENING

Community garden programs can have significant mental health benefits for participating gardeners. There is a substantial body of evidence that shows that, when taken together, the essential components of a community garden program (growing plants, spending time with others in a safe and supportive environment, being active outdoors and bringing home healthy produce harvested from the garden) can contribute to positive mental health outcomes. In fact, horticulture therapy, which is part of the broader umbrella of 'ecotherapy' (or therapy that involves activity in nature), is a well-established practice used by mental health professionals in combination with other therapies to treat people living with mild to moderate mental disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety (Bellows et al., 2003; Husted, 2012; Mind, 2007).

Community gardens are an important program element within a Community Food Centre (CFC). The Stop, founding partner of Community Food Centre Canada, runs a number of community garden programs at two gardens located in Toronto's Earlscourt and Hillcrest parks, as well as in the greenhouse and sheltered garden, located at the Green Barn urban agriculture demonstration site. Our newer CFC partners, The Table in Perth and The Local in Stratford, also run community garden programs.

Examples of the type of gardening programs offered by CFCs include Shovel and Spoon, which integrates both cooking and gardening projects, and is offered in partnership with community agencies. The Stop and The Local have partnered with local mental health agencies, including the Canadian Mental Health Association, which has allowed clients with mental health issues to take part in the program. The Stop's Global Roots gardening program, meanwhile, is geared towards seniors and newcomer youth from diverse cultural backgrounds, and brings them together once a week to create bountiful gardens that are representative of their various cultures. Given that seniors and newcomers are two target populations associated with higher levels of social isolation, this program is particularly important for its potential to create positive mental health outcomes for participants.

A significant amount of evidence relating to positive mental health outcomes has been gathered from participants in The Stop's community garden programs through the annual program survey. (See below for highlights from the 2011 and 2012 surveys.) Capturing mental health outcomes and program feedback in CFC garden programs allows us to assess and maximize the collective impact these programs can have on the mental health and well-being of participants.

Increased Social Capital

Studies have shown that community gardening programs can provide an important source of social support and result in improved social skills for people living with mental health issues. These impacts are felt both when programs are offered in a structured horticulture therapy context and in community-based organizational settings such as a Community Food Centre. Community gardens can also provide a supportive environment where individuals can discuss issues they are facing in their lives with others who have experienced similar challenges (Kingsley et al., 2008; Wakefield et al, 2007).

- 80% of garden members surveyed at The Stop Community Food Centre made new friends in the community garden program and 90% felt that they belong to a community at The Stop.
- One community garden member at The Stop described the social benefits of taking part in the garden program: *"First of all, you have the opportunity to be with people from different backgrounds. Secondly, it's a way to learn from each other. Thirdly, it's a way to socialize."*
- Another garden member explained: *"I meet nice people and share experiences with other people. I can talk to people. Toronto is a big city and I feel alone sometimes. [Here] I'm involved with something and the garden is alive. You can bring some tomato, salad or callaloo home and they smell good and fresh and you're proud of something. It's life."*
- A third member described the social importance of the garden program for him: *"It is important for me to learn some of the plants because this is my first time in Canada, and to network."*

Improved Use of Leisure Time and Greater Community Involvement

Community gardeners have described the sense of motivation, achievement and pride that they feel as a result of being regularly involved in a productive and positive activity in the community through a garden program (Kingsley et al; Wakefield et al).

- 90% of garden members surveyed reported that The Stop plays an important role in their lives.
- One Stop garden member reported: *"I enjoy gardening. In spring, when things grow back, it makes me happy - to see the green and other colours. I work hard like it's my own garden."*
- Another described the sense of achievement resulting from being involved in the garden program as: *"Knowing I am doing something useful. Being around positive people."*
- A third said: *"It gives me a reason to get out the door and get moving cause I'm not ready to go back to the work and it gets me on a schedule."*
- And a fourth member explained: *"I feel alive. I'd die if I stayed in my apartment."*

Decreased Stress

The literature explains how community gardens provide a sanctuary in which individuals can escape the stresses of everyday life. There are also proven tension-release and meditative benefits associated with handling plants (Kingsley et al). The health-care sector has begun to recognize the therapeutic benefits of gardening to reducing stress, lowering pain levels and speeding the healing process by featuring gardens in the design of most new hospitals (Franklin, 2012). The powerful impact of being around

plants is especially important in a heavily urbanized environment where detachment from nature is a common problem, particularly for low-income people who are less likely to have access to a backyard (Kingsley et al.)

- One Stop garden member reported: *"I have less stress, depression and sleep better. [The garden's] my second home."*
- Another garden member explained: *"It's been so therapeutic. It's the first time I've ever gardened. It's the outdoors. It's recreation. And to see the fruits of our labour. It's so great."*
- A third shared: *"Watching things come to life and the fresh air. It's peaceful and the people are nice."*
- A regular Stop garden member from Sagatay, a transitional shelter for Aboriginal men, explained: *"I find it tends to calm us down because it's really bang on with what we used to do traditionally all the time."*
- Another Stop garden member described the importance of the program, as an urban dweller who would otherwise not have direct access to a garden: *"Because I live in such an urban place, I've never had the opportunity to grow."*

Increased Physical Activity and Consumption of Fresh Produce

Gardening is good physical exercise, which has been shown to be helpful in the treatment of anxiety, depression and dementia (Thrive, 2008). Physical benefits, which are associated with feeling better overall, also result from travelling to and from the garden and from eating greater amounts of high-quality, fresh produce, much of which is organic and culturally appropriate (Kingsley et al; Wakefield et al).

- 73% of Stop garden members surveyed made healthy changes to their diets because of something they learned at The Stop and because they participated in the garden program. Most notably, they were eating more fresh fruits and vegetables. Other changes included eating fewer unhealthy foods, buying more local and organic foods and eating less overall.
- One Stop garden member described the physical benefits associated with the garden: *"Having better food and people who are involved in healthy choices and also biking here."*
- Another explained: *"I move, am active and relaxed when I come here. My blood pressure gets better when I come here."*

Less Fear

Finally, community gardens have been proven to improve security and safety in local communities, which is relevant because environmental contributors to poor mental well-being include feeling unsafe and fear of crime (Wakefield et al; Friedli, 2009).

To Sum Up

Community garden programs that are offered as part of a multifaceted suite of programs at a Community Food Centre have significant potential to achieve positive outcomes for participants suffering from mental health issues and the participant population more broadly. Benefits include stronger social support networks, a sense of pride and motivation from being active in the garden, reduced stress (which can be particularly acute among individuals with mental health issues and low-income populations), spin-off mental health benefits resulting from increased physical activity and improved nutrition and a reduction in neighbourhood-based fear. It's amazing what a patch of land can do.

References

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