

Parks & Recreation

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**HOW
PARKS BUILD
COMMUNITY**



Parks as Community Wellness Hubs | P&R Supports Mental Health | Addressing Equity in Parks

How Parks and Recreation Can Support

MENTAL HEALTH

Initiatives By Barbara Heller and Molly Young

In the United States, more than 46 million people live with mental health illnesses, according to 2017 data from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). What's more, mental health concerns increase during the holidays, as part of seasonal affective disorder (SAD). This disorder is a form of depression that recurs regularly, mostly from late fall or winter and lasting through spring. Some studies suggest that up to 20 percent of people are affected by a mild form of the disorder, which scientists believe is caused by a biochemical change in the brain, triggered by shorter days and reduced sunlight. Couple this with additional holiday stresses, and the opportunity for mental health illnesses increase for many people.

When discussing mental health, however, we really need to start by talking about those around us. One in 5 individuals suffers from a mental health condition within their lifetime. It's highly likely you know of or know someone who has been affected — even if they haven't said anything.





Speaking from Personal Experience

My interest in mental health offerings within the park and recreation industry is a result of my 55-year-old brother, Rick, who died of suicide in September 2018. He suffered from anxiety and depression his entire adult life and was on medication and under the care of a psychiatrist. Three years before his death, he asked his psychiatrist if it would be OK for him to get off his medications. With the doctor's permission, he did, and from that time on, he spiraled downward in a battle with anxiety.

Many people experience anxiety, but for my brother, it was amplified fourfold. He dealt with his symptoms virtually around the clock. Nothing seemed to help, and he tried as many treatments as he

could — from emergency room visits, two stints in behavior health hospitals and residential treatment programs, to a variety of medications and talk therapy.

My family and I noticed that he did find relief from walking in the woods, riding his bike and working out at a fitness center. Exercise and being in nature made him feel appreciably better, until even those activities didn't help. He felt hopeless about his condition.

Through the experience with my brother's mental health struggle, I became acquainted with April Chambers, who serves on the Florida Board of Directors for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). My sister, Marilyn, who knows Chambers through work, introduced us. After learning of Chambers' involvement

with NAMI, Marilyn decided to share her story about our brother. It was a relief for her to talk with someone like Chambers, who understood what she and our family were going through, and she felt comfortable diving into the details. They discussed the family's attempts to help Rick and the challenges along the way, from seeing multiple doctors to trying out various medications.

Following our introduction, Chambers and I co-presented a session about the park and recreation industry's role in support of mental health initiatives at the 2019 NRPA Annual Conference, which was held in Baltimore, Maryland, in September. The room was completely filled, and many more people were waiting outside the door, which speaks to the significant interest in this topic.

What my sister and I didn't know is that our story is just like others. Often, families aren't equipped to help, and most individuals suffering from a mental health condition are too embarrassed to talk about it. Slowly, the stigma associated with mental health conditions is lessening, but this is a very recent development. Talking about and sharing our experiences are what led to understanding, a healthy future and removing the stigma forever!

My brother has inspired me to believe that the park and recreation industry can play a substantive role in helping people with mental illness by offering services directed toward these individuals. Following are examples of initiatives from agencies around the country:



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF DAVID PILONER OF THE STARK COUNTY PARK DISTRICT

The labyrinth is one of 10 stations that promote relaxation and focus along Stark County Park District's Mindfulness Walk.

Stark County, Canton, Ohio

According to Bob Fonte, park director of the Stark County Park District in Canton, Ohio, the district partnered with Stark Mental Health Addiction and Recovery, a local mental health agency, to create a “Mindfulness Walk,” consisting of a trail with 10 stations. The Walk was designed in partnership with mental health professionals and built with the help of several scout groups and park district staff. The stations, which include a Zen sand garden, a musical instrument, stacking stones and a labyrinth, promote relaxation, focus and awareness, reflection and embracing the present moment. In addition, a public relations campaign was launched when the Walk opened in June 2019. Fonte hopes this program will be an added benefit to the community, which has dealt with an increased number of suicide deaths in a local high school over the past two years.

Lexington, Massachusetts

The town of Lexington, Massachusetts, created a Mental Health and Wellness Task Force (www.lexingtonma.gov/mentalhealth) that includes the Lexington Recreation and Community Programs Department. The Task Force is funded and staffed by town officials and Lexington Public Schools staff. The group provides leadership and a community-wide focus by engaging providers, residents of all ages and the greater Lexington community in mental health and wellness initiatives.

The task force leads four distinct advisory groups made up of several members of the community from cultural groups, faith groups, advocacy groups and other service providers. This is unique in that the

community advises the task force on all initiatives. The initial goals are centered on identifying what all providers are doing in town to support mental health initiatives and developing a centralized place to access this information. This effort will also help to identify areas of duplication, as well as gaps in service offerings for specific populations that have a need for programming and services.

In addition to these initiatives, a town staff person has received Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) training (<https://qprinstitute.com>), which focuses on suicide prevention and approximately 200 participants have received this training.

The National Council for Mental Health and the Missouri Department of Mental Health

The National Council for Mental Health and the Missouri Department of Mental Health operate Mental Health First Aid (www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org), a nationwide training initiative that focuses on giving students the tools to respond to a mental health crisis. As the website states, “Too few of us would know how to respond if we saw someone having a panic attack or if we were concerned that a friend or co-worker might be showing signs of alcoholism.” Courses are offered throughout the United States, so park agencies can train their staff to recognize the signs of mental health conditions and give them tools to respond appropriately. Austin, Texas, and the New York City Parks and Recreation Department Park Rangers are examples of agencies that offer this training program.

Miami-Dade County, Florida

In Miami-Dade County, Florida, the Parks, Recreation and Open

PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID PILDNER/THE STARK COUNTY PARK DISTRICT



Spaces Department has launched Fit2Lead (<https://tinyurl.com/yyxs3j4e>) for youths 12–17 years old, an age group that’s particularly vulnerable to mental health issues (<https://tinyurl.com/y67m5twx>) and that lacks access to treatment. Teens can find enrichment opportunities focusing on promoting mental, social and physical health, or apply to become a part-time, paid park intern. Park interns receive on-site practical work experience and enrichment classes that focus on topics, such as budgeting, résumé writing, communication, stress management, health, goal setting and making positive choices.

Palm Beach County, Florida

In Palm Beach County, Florida, a new initiative aimed at raising suicide awareness has gained momentum. Josh’s Benches for Awareness (joshsbenches.com), a Wellington-based nonprofit, was founded in honor of Joshua Nadelbach, who died from suicide at age 21. Josh’s Benches installs bright yellow benches in participating parks, which are engraved with information and resources to assist those struggling with their mental health. In an interview with the *Town-Crier*, a local newspaper, Josh’s mother, Cindy, says, “Yellow is for ‘hello.’ I have gone to suicide awareness walks, and all the posters say to take the stigma out of the darkness. People don’t want to talk about it, they push it under the carpet, and they think if you don’t talk about



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE INTERNATIONAL SURF THERAPY ORGANIZATION

An instructor helps a child learn to surf as part of a therapeutic surfing course for children with special needs and disabilities.

it, it is not going to happen. But it is just the opposite. You talk about it, and it won't happen.”

Chicago, Illinois

The Chicago Park District has taken a dually focused approach to addressing and supporting mental health and personal wellness by engaging in efforts, both internally and externally. The agency has instated the unique role of a crisis support manager. This staff member is a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) who responds to crises that occur in the parks and other serious situations that affect staff by providing clinical support, debriefing and different mental health trainings. The Chicago Park District is also actively partnering with the city of Chicago in the initiative to train all employees on the concept of trauma and how it impacts themselves, their co-workers and park patrons. In addition, the Chicago Park District offers different mental health and wellness programs, including trauma-informed yoga classes, and partners with agencies such as the

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), to provide further trainings on a variety of mental health topics.

Programs and Initiatives

While park and recreation professionals are not typically experts in mental health, agencies can play an important role in helping those with mental health challenges by working with experts to provide programs and services for individuals in need. Following are a few examples of programs and initiatives that are already underway:

Surf Therapy

In August 2019, the *New York Times* (<https://tinyurl.com/y2ssbp6l>) featured A Walk on Water (awalkonwater.org), a nonprofit organization offering therapeutic surfing courses for children with special needs and disabilities. These programs have mainly taken place in Southern California, but are gaining momentum and have now reached as far as Virginia Beach. The International Surf Therapy Organization (<https://intlurftherapy.org>) also features Amp-

Surf (<http://ampsurf.org/>), which provides surf clinics to disabled adults and children, but has a particular focus on disabled veterans.

Park Rx

Parks across the country can also participate in Park Rx (www.parkrx.org), which facilitates “prescription” programs that often include a collaboration between park and public land agencies, healthcare providers and community partners. With the overall goal of improving health and wellbeing, there are affiliated initiatives in almost every state. Nationwide and internationally, Walk with a Doc (<https://walkwithadoc.org/>) spearheads free, doctor-led walking groups where participants can engage in conversations around health and wellness in a relaxed, fun setting. This program, which is notably active in Boulder, Colorado, can be particularly useful in giving people the chance to connect and seek help without the fear of being stigmatized, which studies have shown to still be widespread (<https://tinyurl.com/yygy3lrw>), despite growing public awareness of mental health issues.

Forest Bathing

Another walking-based initiative agencies have begun to explore is forest bathing. Forest bathing, known as *shinrin-yoku*, or “taking in the forest,” in Japanese, is a guided walk through nature where participants are encouraged to pay attention to sound, touch, smell — anything that can trigger the senses. The ultimate goal is to ease stress and experience mindfulness, which is a common treatment (<https://tinyurl.com/y2pnkg78>) for anxiety and other mental health dis-

Participants of the Walk with a Doc program walk alongside healthcare providers to talk about health and wellness.

orders. Walk with a Doc and Park Rx have begun offering forest bathing options, and many agencies around the country, including in Centennial, Ohio; Boulder, Colorado; and Roanoke, Virginia, have partnered with guides to lead sessions.

Our industry has much to offer for those struggling with mental health challenges; it's just a matter of having an awareness of this serious problem in our country and ensuring we reach out to professionals and individuals in assisting those who struggle. We all endeavor to create health and wellness opportunities for our communities. Being involved in mental health initiatives is just one more way we can make a difference for those we serve. 🌿



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