

Community inclusion is an urgent issue in mental health

“I’d like to mix in with society without being seen as unusual... able to do all the other things that everyone else does, in the same places that they do them” – Residential mental health participant

People affected by mental health issues have been saying for years that they want to be part of the community – not just present in the community. Full community inclusion means that people have the right to the same opportunities as everyone else to create a home, develop relationships or reconnect to families and friends, find a job or complete education, discover communities of people with similar interests, or explore recreational or cultural opportunities. For people with mental health issues and other psychosocial disabilities who experience discrimination and exclusion, there are real barriers to community inclusion.

Many years after institutions were closed in favour of a ‘life in the community’, and despite a shift within mental health to delivering ‘recovery-oriented’ services, there is strong evidence that people affected by mental health issues remain substantially segregated from mainstream society:

- People affected by mental health issues report having only one-third the number of people in their social networks as those in the general population (Biegel et al., 1994)
- 22% of people living with psychosis report feeling lonely and isolated, and 70% of those surveyed had not attended any recreational activities in the past year (National Survey of Psychotic Illness, 2010)

Fundamentals of community inclusion

Creating inclusive communities requires us to understand inclusion as a human right and a critical enabler of recovery. It also requires a radical rethink of our approach to designing, funding and delivering supports for people affected by mental health issues. For services and workers that are charged with supporting people in their journey to recovery, real progress on community inclusion means a commitment to ensuring all the people we serve have many opportunities to fully participate in the community, and to actively create communities that seek out and welcome the participation of everyone.

In partnership with Wellways Australia, Mark Salzer and Richard Baron of Temple University, Philadelphia, have outlined eleven fundamentals of community inclusion to serve as a blueprint for a new generation of policies, programs and practices.

Wellways Australia is committed to creating inclusive communities and to ensuring that our work improves the lives of people who remain excluded from community opportunities. In this new environment of mental health and disability reform – and with the advent of the NDIS – it is more important than ever that community inclusion is understood and prioritised as a vital area in supporting individual recovery and a benefit to the entire community.

Community inclusion is an urgent issue in mental health continued...

Fundamental #1 Community inclusion is important

While high quality treatment and rehabilitation services must continue to be available, community inclusion needs to be prioritised as an outcome in all funded services and programs.

Fundamental #2 Community inclusion applies to everyone who experiences a disability

Services should ensure that every person has the opportunity to work toward community inclusion, even if someone else believes that they are not yet 'ready' for community participation.

Fundamental #3 Community inclusion requires seeing 'the person', not 'the patient'

Each person should be accorded respect – seen as an individual with unique strengths, problems, interests and cultural identity – and never defined by their impairments or differences.

Fundamental #4 Self-determination and dignity of risk are central to community inclusion

Each person should have the power to make their own decisions about what community inclusion means to them, to choose the supports that will help them achieve their goals, and to identify the best ways to manage any risks that may be involved.

Fundamental #5 Community inclusion should embrace multiple domains of mainstream life

Each person should have the chance to pursue participation in areas that are important to them rather than being restricted to what is available or believed to be important by society.

Fundamental #6 Community inclusion focuses on participation that occurs more like everyone else

To the degree desired by the person, participation should be self-determined, in the community, and should maximise opportunities for interactions with the most diverse group of fellow citizens possible.

Fundamental #7 Community inclusion is strengthened through emerging support technologies, the natural supports of families and friends, and the engagement of peer supports

People should have access to supports that enable participation, including programs that promote awareness of community resources and develop skills to access these, support to involve families, friends and carers, and peer support.

Fundamental #8 Providing support to family and other natural supports promotes community inclusion

Efforts should be made to strengthen the capacity of families to support community inclusion and to experience greater community inclusion themselves.

Fundamental #9 Environmental barriers to community inclusion must be identified and addressed

Community inclusion initiatives should identify environmental barriers to community inclusion – among them, negative public attitudes, pervasive poverty and inadequate public transportation – and address them or advocate for change.

Fundamental #10 Community inclusion initiatives for individuals with disabilities maximise the use of mainstream community resources

Community inclusion initiatives should work actively to engage people in the full range of mainstream resources that are available to all citizens, connecting people to jobs and schools, clubs and teams, religious congregations and recreational programs.

Fundamental #11 Community inclusion requires establishing welcoming communities

Community inclusion initiatives should work with community groups to help establish a welcoming and mutually supportive community, where each individual's participation is valued not only for their uniqueness, but also for the contribution individuals with disabilities can make to enhance their community.

This is an excerpt from Salzer, M.S. & Baron, R.C. (2016). *Well Together – A blueprint for community inclusion: fundamental concepts, theoretical frameworks and evidence*. Published by Wellways Australia Limited, Melbourne, Australia. © 2016 Wellways Australia Limited ACN 093 357 165