

Title

Grupo de Acção Comunitária (GAC) – green space initiative for people with mental health problems

Short description

GAC results from the urgent need to break the effect of the revolving door on mental health - the patients were discharged from hospital but given the difficulty in adapting to the environment there was a recurrence of hospitalizations. Based on their experience in the psychiatric service of Hospital Santa Maria, a group of technicians realized that they would have to go to the community and respond in loco to the needs of patients. In addition, they would have to transcend merely medical care, beginning to contemplate the psycho-social rehabilitation of individuals.

One of the several initiatives developed with the aim of promoting the social inclusion of people with mental illness was the creation of professional courses, among them the gardening course. In the scope of this course, the beneficiaries had the opportunity to contact with the community and with nature - through the maintenance of the school gardens, the Parish Council and even the Botanical Garden - to develop technical and social skills, to feel capable of learning and performing new tasks (increased self-esteem), perceive themselves as active and integrating parts of society and were able to enter into the labor market more easily. In parallel, the green spaces of the community enjoyed adequate maintenance.

Although the professional gardening course has ended - currently beneficiaries who want to follow the path of professional training are referred to other training entities - GAP has shown openness to reestablish this initiative or to initiate similar ones.

Topic

Living – Green spaces.

Characteristics (type, level)

Local/Regional Intervention.

Country/Countries of implementation

Portugal

Aims and Objectives

The initiative was created to promote closer links between the association, the beneficiaries, the family, the hospital, the health professionals and the community. The project intends to sensitize the community to the reality of mental illness; promote the reconstruction of the life project and social inclusion of people with mental illness; and prevent or reduce the revolving door effect - recurrence of entry and exit of the hospital. At same time the practice contributes to maintaining and improving urban green spaces.

Target Group

The targeted groups are people with mental illness and the local community.

Status

Completed - no plans for follow up.

Start and Completion dates

GAC was created in 1995.

Lifestyle and Behavior Change

This practice stimulates the community to accept and integrate people. In addition, it encourages people with mental illness to leave home – which in many cases did not happen before – be in touch with nature, develop social skills and gain an occupation.

Effects on:

Health and Wellbeing	Being in contact with nature, living with others, being an integral and active part of the community and being able to perform tasks (increased self-esteem) contributes to the health and well-being of the beneficiaries.
Vulnerable populations	In the first instance, gardening as a service to the community allows the social inclusion of the participants. In addition, training and subsequent entry into the labor market counteract the financial hardship of this population, which contributes to the reduction of social inequality.
Environment	This practice allows the maintenance of several green spaces, in addition to sensitizing the participants and the surrounding environment to the preservation of these spaces.

Initiated and/or implemented by

The idea of this practice came from the community intervention team of the Hospital Santa Maria. Some members decided to create a private association, while maintaining the hospital liaison, to provide a community response to people with mental illness who left the hospital or who had never contacted the services. They believed that it would be outside the hospital environment that they would be able to provide a truly capable response to avoid the recurrence of hospitalizations.

Stakeholders and sectors involved

The main stakeholder was the Junta de Freguesia de Carnide, which provided the space for the association and facilitated access to the places of implementation of the gardening

classes. They also had the support of the Constellations program of the Instituto de Emprego e Formação Profissional (IEFP; Institute of Training and Professional Development).

Financial support

Financial support was provided by the IEFP Constellations program.

Evidence-base

GAC results from the need to invert the higher rates of recurrence in psychiatric hospitalizations. Is based on the experience of group of mental health technicians of the psychiatric service of Hospital Santa Maria, that identified the need of communitarian response to contemplate the psychosocial rehabilitation of mental illness patients.

Main activities

The main activities include the development of a professional training course in the field of gardening; the establishment of partnerships with schools, the Parish Council and the Botanical Garden in order to allow the practice of gardening; the referral to employment when possible; and the support in rebuilding users' life project.

Evaluation

The practice was not evaluated.

Main results

The main outputs of this practice were:

- Training courses in the field of gardening for people with mental illness;
- Maintenance and new investments in green spaces in public spaces;
- Promotion of social inclusion, mental health awareness in schools and other public entities.

Key success factors and barriers

GAC intervention was endorsed by the Parish Council, which, besides giving up spaces, worked as a promoter of the project. Also it benefited from the community involvement; the articulation between the association, hospitals, health professions, the family and the beneficiary; and from the personal qualities of the technicians and the internal organization. In opposition, the main barriers were related to the instability of the evolution of mental illness; the fact that mental health is not a priority at the policy and funding level (lack of support and adequate legal framework); the poor integration of the mental health into the general health care network, ignoring their specificities; the stigma associated with people with mental illness and the lack of financial resources to cover the costs associated with human resources.

INHERIT Perspective

This project has been chosen for inclusion because of its role in rehabilitate green areas for health improving. This gardening project allows the social inclusion of people with mental illness rehabilitating from psychiatric crisis. Training and subsequent entry into the labor market counteract the financial hardship of this population, which contributes to the reduction of social inequality. Also, this practice allows the maintenance of several green spaces, sensitizing the participants and the community to the preservation of these spaces.

More information

<http://gac.com.pt/>

Contact

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