Sprouting new directions

Lucy Mott shares her experience of designing a new therapeutic cycle while on student practice placement at St Mary's Secret Garden

hen I discovered that my final placement would be at St Mary's Secret Garden in Hackney, East London, which provides therapeutic gardening sessions for people with learning difficulties, mental health problems and physical impairments, I was excited by the challenge of using occupational therapy in a non-traditional setting, with no occupational therapists on site.

As winter warmed to spring, I spent my days outside supporting a wide variety of wonderful people in tasks as diverse as picking nettles to make soup (gloves were a necessity) and planting up flowers in an abandoned toilet, kindly left on our doorstep.

OTs have long recognised the therapeutic benefits of using gardening with their clients, and more recently social and therapeutic horticulture has emerged as its own approach (Hagedorn 1987; Fieldhouse and Sempik 2007). Therapeutic horticulture can benefit occupational performance, health, wellbeing and social connectedness and promote independence and confidence (Sempik 2005).

I was lucky enough to observe these benefits first-hand at St Mary's, watching friendships blossom and seeing the satisfaction and confidence inspired by a hard day's work in the garden.

Horticultural therapists specialised in matching and adapting gardening activities to clients' preferences and abilities, working towards individual aims such as increasing physical activity, improving communication skills or working more independently.

Providing therapy in a natural, rather than clinical, setting enabled a relaxed and fun atmosphere full of laughter and endless cups of tea and biscuits. These social benefits were often as important as those gained from gardening itself, as attendees included some of the most vulnerable and excluded groups in society.

OTs will instantly recognise, in this brief description of St Mary's secret garden, some core elements of our profession that are implicitly present, such as use of meaningful occupation, activity analysis and activity adaptation. As my supervisor was not an OT, it was up to me to make explicit these links between our work at the garden and occupational therapy.

To help with this, I went back to the basic occupational therapy process of assessmentplanning-intervention-evaluation. I then sketched out a model of how this process tallied with our work with clients in the garden, both on a daily basis and over a longer cycle (see diagram opposite).

My placement educator and university tutor liked the model and suggested I develop it into a user-friendly tool for the St Mary's website. The therapeutic cycle now allows referrers, potential clients and their

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families and others to understand at a glance how the garden project provides therapeutic benefits.

In this time of government cuts, a clear articulation of this therapeutic value is vital

to ensure that referrals (and therefore funding) from bodies such as social services continue, ensuring the project is able to thrive.

In addition, the model could also have practical relevance to other OTs using, or planning to use, gardening in their practice, whether in a large country garden or inner city window box. The therapeutic cycle shows how OTs can use their core skills and training to facilitate meaningful occupation through gardening, thus making the case for more OTs to be involved in community horticultural projects.

As in all settings, being able to demonstrate clearly the role and value of occupational therapy is vital for the continuing development of our profession in both emerging and existing areas.

References

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• Lucy Mott graduated from Brunel University in July 2011 and is now an OT at Sussex Community Trust. More information about St Mary's Secret Garden is available at: www. stmaryssecretgarden.org.uk



St Mary's Secret Garden therapeutic cycles*



Evaluation

We conduct daily evaluations to assess our clients' progress and six-monthly reviews with clients, family members and key professionals. We support clients in conducting user feedback questionnaires. Clients' aims are adapted to meet changing needs.



Assessment

When a new client is considering starting gardening sessions, a horticultural therapist will arrange a visit and trial session to see if they enjoy and might benefit from coming to St Mary's. We assess the client's needs and gather further information through discussions with them, their family and the referrer. We also conduct a risk assessment.

Long-term therapeutic cycle

Planning

Using the information gathered, we set aims amd objectives in conjunction with the client. We plan how horticultural tasks could be used or adapted to meet their aims. We assess which group would be appropriate for the client to join, and what their support needs to be.

Intervention

In each session, we support clients in working towards their aims. Horticultural tasks are designed to create the right level of challenge to expand the clients in related interventions to promote health and well-being and build life skills, *eg* cooking, socialising, tea making, group stretch, literacy and numeracy.



Evaluation

We complete daily evaluations for each client to assess whether they worked towards their objectives, how successful our support strategies were, whether the client enjoyed the task and the level of challenge was appropriate.



Daily therapeutic cycle

which jobs they want to do in the garden.

Assessment At the start of each session we consider the client's aims, their recent work, abilities, successes and skills, their presentation on the day, and their preferences for

Intervention

Next, we explain and demonstrate the task and support the client in completing it. A flexible approach means that we alter tasks and change support startegies where needed as we work. We monitor clients' pacing, patterns of movement and safe working.

Planning

We assess the gardening tasks available and match these to our clients. We consider what support is needed and from whom, asssess and manage risks, and decide which tools to use, including any assistive aids. We plan how to incorporate additonal aims into horticultural tasks, such as healthy eating, group work *etc*.

