



CASE STUDY

The Potential of Men's Sheds as a Resource for Men Coping with Mental Health Challenges and Addiction

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Abstract

Men's Sheds are defined as grassroots community-based organizations comprised of men coping with mental health challenges and addiction. Men in need experience the benefits of receiving support from other men and feel that their levels of loneliness and depression declined after they joined the Men's Shed. Men's Sheds could serve as a mental health refuge for a variety of men with diverse needs. It may be worthwhile to pilot a program investigating the efficacy of using Men's Sheds to support individuals recovering from addictions.

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For the last four months I have been fortunate to be immersed in several Men's Sheds throughout Ireland including both rural and more urban settings. I received approval to do the research from the Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS). Men's Sheds are defined as grassroots community-based organizations comprised of men who come together to engage in discussion "shoulder to shoulder" while working on a craft (e.g., woodwork, art, gardening, etc.); (1). Men's Sheds are informal networks and create welcoming and inclusive spaces for men. Men's Sheds originated in Australia (2) and have expanded to other parts of Europe including the U.K. and Ireland. Although Men's Sheds exist in America, they are not as widespread. Currently, the U.S. has 17 Men's Sheds dispersed throughout country (3). Their inclusive and accepting ethos offer a wide array of benefits to their members.

During my research with the Men's Sheds I set out to learn more about how Irish Men's Sheds contributed to purpose and meaning in the lives of older men. Men I interviewed spoke about the importance of having a place to gather with other men and the benefit of having a purpose when they got up each day. The men discussed the benefits of receiving support from other men and felt that their levels of loneliness and depression declined after they joined the Men's Shed. After completing and reflecting on the interviews it was apparent to me that the Men's Sheds could serve as a mental health refuge for a variety of men with diverse needs. For example, Kelly et al.⁴ suggested that Men's Sheds may be especially helpful for populations of men with unique needs, including addiction. As mental health concerns and addictions increase around the world (5), it is important to consider a wide array of interventions and solutions to address these challenges. Men's Sheds may

offer a worthwhile support framework for these men.

Research indicates that men are more likely to suffer from substance abuse and antisocial disorders as compared to women (6) and The World Health Organization (WHO)⁷ reported that men's risk for premature mortality is higher than women's. Men are less likely to go to the doctor, more likely to engage in riskier behaviors, and imbibe higher quantities of alcohol (7). They also face greater risk of death from opioid overdose compared to women (8). Given these gendered health differences, Men's Sheds may provide spaces to address some of the health inequities between men and women. Wilson and Cordier⁹ explained that Men's Sheds were ideal environments for promoting men's health and Wilson et al.¹⁰ reported that Men's Sheds served as safe spaces where members felt comfortable talking about their health concerns. Of the limited research available, it seems men who engage with Men's Sheds felt that the environment positively contributed to their wellbeing. For example, findings indicate that men who participated in Men's Sheds reported improved wellbeing, including better self-worth and increased ability to cope with depression (11). However, additional research is required to understand the effectiveness of Men's Sheds and its usefulness in helping members cope with mental health and other challenges.

Likewise, it may be worthwhile to pilot a program investigating the efficacy of using Men's Sheds to support individuals recovering from addictions. Gendered approaches for coping with addiction are not new, but Men's Sheds already possess the structure to serve as ideal support infrastructures. Milligan et al.¹² explained that men are reluctant to join groups if they perceive the group to be dominated by women and can struggle to make friendships,

particularly in older adulthood. The ethos and constitution of Men's Sheds also appear to foster healthy environments for all men. For example, the Men's Sheds constitution states that the Men's Sheds spaces are designed to be substance free (1), creating safe environments for men in the early stages of recovery. Robertson & Nesvåg¹³ noted that it is best when recovery environments include social networks of individuals who do not use substances. The structure and routine of visiting a place like the Men's Shed could also be beneficial for individuals focused on addiction recovery. For example, men could attend the Men's Sheds throughout the week and find benefit from the comradery, support, and guidance of other men (4) and gain opportunities to learn new skills. Building routine and structure into one's life is beneficial when coping with recovery (14) and engaging in regular visits to the Men's Sheds would likely be a positive outlet for these men.

Including rural Men's Sheds for pilot interventions investigating the efficacy of Men's Sheds as support resources could also be useful as mental health services and resources for addiction are less widespread in these areas (15, 16). In addition, Monnat and Rigg¹⁷ explained that opioid related deaths in rural areas have increased significantly in the last 20 years and that initiatives designed to combat the expanding issues in rural areas have been relatively ineffective. Likewise, Patel et al.¹⁸ advocated for additional treatment options for individuals with opioid addictions, particularly in rural areas. Conducting interventions in Australia, the U.K., or Ireland would be ideal given the wide array of Men's Sheds available in both rural and urban areas. If successful, interventions could be rolled out in parts of the U.S. where Men's Sheds are less widely known. Perhaps the number of Men's Sheds would increase in America if research

findings demonstrated the effectiveness of these spaces as support resources for men coping with mental health challenges and addictions.

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