

Hiking program: nature for people with fewer opportunities related to psychiatric disorders.

INTRODUCTION

This is an initiative developed in a community environment and which involved sports, physical activity and contact with nature for people with psychosocial disabilities. This kind of activities provides inclusive participation opportunities, social inclusion and at the same time, normalizes mental health issues in the field of physical activity and sports.

This initiative is being developed by the *Club Deportivo Duero* (<https://es-es.facebook.com/CDduero/>), a Sport Club supported by Intrins Foundation and the HIKING CLUB 'Ojanco' (<https://clubojanco.es/>), a Club opened to everyone who like hiking.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

In Spain, Sports clubs must also contribute to the promotion of sports practice. Together with federations, they should promote a safe sport practice for all, as it is indicated in the European Charter of Sports, in its Article I:

“Give everyone the opportunity to practice sports activities, specifically:

- a) ensuring that young people have the chance to benefit from physical education programs to develop basic sportive skills;
- b) giving everyone the chance to practice sports and to participate in recreational physical activities in a healthy and safe environment, in collaboration with the competent sporting institutions;
- c) ensuring that everyone, if desired and has the required ability, has the chance to improve their physical skills and reach his/her potential or achieve a recognized excellence level, or both objectives at the same time”

In Spain, there is a gap in the field of sports and physical activities for people with disabilities due to mental health issues; the opportunities provided are generally limited to initiatives addressed and designed for people with intellectual disabilities, accordingly, people with disabilities due to mental health issues find themselves in activities which do not fit their skills, abilities or preferences.

Currently in Castilla y León region where Intrins works, there are no resources to practice physical activities and sports, or any specific leisure activity for people with mental health issues, so they are left in a ‘forced choice’ situation between the specific adapted activities for other groups (e.g.: people with intellectual disabilities) or standard physical activities to which access is still very limited for them yet.

Therefore, Intrins proposes the implementation of an initiative planned with all the quality standards, which opens a new option and enables the access to new experiences within their community and in a normalized environment. It is worth highlighting that during COVID-19 pandemic, where most initiatives

were restricted, we bet for outdoors activities, producing great benefits for users and initiating a growing interest for walking or other activities close to the nature.

This initiative also generated a bridge between the activities proposed by Club Duero and Ojanco Hiking Club. To make this collaboration possible which enriched both organizations, a calendar with all the trips and activities monthly programmed by Ojanco Hiking Club was shared with the Club Duero users which offered to them all support needed to participate in them.

SOME COMMENTS FROM USERS

- I needed to disconnect and get out of the routine.
- I like it a lot, I felt comfortable with people.
- Hiking is a personal challenge; you suffer a bit but you also enjoy it a lot.
- After being locked up for so long, this gives me live.

SCOPE / NEEDS

Challenges that come up when working with people living with the symptoms of mental health issues are:

- Finding normalized environments that suit their special characteristics.
- Engagement in physical activities due to side effects of the medication they take or other illness associated as diabetes type 2, obesity, metabolic syndrome, etc.
- Social stigma associated to mental illness which limits their social participation.
- Anticipated exclusion, which makes the person to isolate his/herself from the community in order to not be rejected.
- Confusion between people with disabilities due to mental illness and people with intellectual disabilities.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TARGET GROUP

People with psychosocial disability supported by Intrass are people with psychosis, emotional problems, bipolar disorders, phobias or dual pathology due to substance abuse, sometimes, they also have learning difficulties. They all have a reference professional in the mental health unit and are working in their recovery process, in areas like training or employment within their individualized recovery plan.

EXPLANATION OF THE ACTIVITY

The activity consists in the involving of people with psychosocial disabilities in hiking activities in a normalized environment with the support needed. Currently, more than 20 users have been involved and they completed 10 trips to walk in the mountains or forests of the region.

Main goals are:

- Preparing and empowering participants to join different activities regardless to whom organize them,
- Open new opportunities to participants,
- Make participants feel accepted and not judged while practicing physical activities and
- Improving their lifestyles and raise awareness about the stigma around mental illness.

Each of the routes were guided by at least two professionals with the support of personal assistants. All of them had a medium-low difficulty, with an average distance of 8-9 km each. The activity was open to everyone and together with people with psychosocial disabilities, six people participated as well. Each

route was adapted to increase participation to people with different physical conditions, adding more periods of rest if needed, dividing the route in two options one more challenging than the other but meeting the two groups at the end and take lunch together, etc.

The calendar was created at the beginning of the season to inform participants of the places and dates, allowing a maximum number of 16 participants per trip, people interested have to inscribe themselves a week in advance. This calendar includes some activities suitable for them organized by the Ojanco Mountain Club, to which they participate with the support of professionals from Intrax. This support was focused on individual needs: social, physical, psychological, etc.

When one participant registers his/herself, he/she receives a document with all the information about the route and the materials needed. Each participant is therefore responsible for preparing it, fostering some autonomy and creating new routines useful for further participation in this or other activities. Other complementary tasks that have to be accomplished by each participant are:

- Preparing lunch for the day
- Wear appropriate clothing for the activity, clean and in good condition
- Personal hygiene before and after the activity
- Meeting points to interact with other people
- Participate in positive leisure activities
- Report results to friends and peers

KEY RESULTS

After organizing the ten trips proposed initially, four participants joined an external activity organized by the Ojanco Mountain Club. Monitors from Ojanco already knew the participants and that make their autonomous participation smoother. That activity was occasional due to the COVID-19 restrictions this year, but the idea is to enhance this space for users of the Duero Club to participate in some of the activities organized by Ojanco Mountain Club.

At the time of final evaluation of the activities, trips proved to be very meaningful for all participants, where the good environment created between people and not judging anyone stood out. All participants would like to join the Club and participate in further trips to be organized.

Apart from this, two key results were evaluated: increase in participation and visibility of people living with mental health issues.

1. Increase participation: We evaluate success by assessing whether people wanted to continue or not participating in the activities. For this, we use the following indicators:

- Participation recorded in each trip
- Further demands for hiking activities
- Number of routes organized and free seats on each trip
- Events outside the club in which participants got involved
- Participation in the activities organized by the Ojanco Mountain Club
- People who join Duero Club just to participate in the hiking activities
- People who become members of external hiking/climbing clubs
- Groups who meet independently to walk in the nature

Visibility: We evaluate success by assessing whether the results got the public attention and whether the community offers other inclusive activities. For this, we use the following indicators:

- Posts and publications in local/regional Media (social media, newspapers, magazines, etc.)
- Impact and statistics in social media. Facebook – twitter – Instagram
- Chances to participate in activities organized by other entities and synergies created

KEY FACTORS

○ INFORMATION

The process of informing potential people who could be interested in participating started at the Duero Club, where this initiative was explained right in advance, for participants to be able to organize themselves and decide about their participation. Additionally, this was done in coordination with other INTRAS' resources to first reach more people, and then, to include this activity within the recovery process of each person and evaluate it accordingly. Potential participants were informed directly by professionals from INTRAS' resources, through posters placed in the centers and when needed, sending individualized WhatsApp messages. Participants themselves act as disseminators and inform/motivate other peers talking about the activity.

○ EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

INTRAS' communication department supported the dissemination of this initiative, which was spread using social media channels and press releases sent to local/regional media.

○ MOTIVATION

Carrying out activities in the nature has an intrinsic motivation for everyone, since we all feel the need to leave the city, disconnect from our daily lives and interact with other people.

We believe in leisure activities as transcendent and freely chosen human experiences. From this approach, we look for inclusive leisure and free time activities for people with psychosocial disabilities too, where we try to enjoy and understand diversity as a value and not as a barrier. This approach is above all an attitude based on respect, recognition, openness and a common desire to get to know each other.

This initiative gives participants the opportunity to engage in a safe hiking-climbing activity where people with a common interest gather and this is the only prerequisite: to enjoy walking in the nature. Sharing time and space with people with mental or other challenges, people linked to different educational fields and backgrounds, people at risk of social exclusion and anyone else who wants to enjoy a mountain activity does only enrich it.

The previous work and preparation of participants during the trips organized by the Duero Club was important for participants to join the trips of Ojanco Club. During these trips we had the chance to prepare participants' motivation, overcome frustration and fears and be ready for a physical effort like this. There are several factors to success: ensure safety and confidence within the group, make them do not feel judged but on contrast feel one more member within the whole group. Completing a route makes them feel better physically and psychologically, improves their self-esteem, coping abilities, expand their connections by meeting other people and promotes in a very effective way social inclusion not only within the hiking group but also beyond it.

All experiences lived during this activity enables conversations throughout the day, which facilitates situations for socializing, enable them to use community resources and feel active members of the community make this activity not only an attractive personal challenge but also promotes the progress further within their individual recovery process.

COOPERATION WITH EXTERNAL PARTNERS (DISSEMINATION AND VISIBILITY)

The following chart shows how the Club Duero works and how it involves external partners, as public social services, AEDIR (Spanish Sport Association for Inclusion and Recovery) and other sport/physical activity services and resources of the community.



Making activities visible makes them sustainable, as Public Social and Mental Health Services learn the model and can refer people who could benefit from them, extending the impact of the activities and being able to organize them more often. Also, document activities to disseminate them makes us able to share good practices with professionals from other organizations, associations, sport clubs, public administrations, Universities, other training centers, etc. not only at National level but also at European/International levels inspiring and being inspiring by them.

Also, disseminating the activities organized we not only sent a strong message against stigma and disseminate a positive picture of Mental Illness, we also involved relatives and friends who benefit directly or indirectly from these activities.

KEY CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

The biggest challenge is to open our closest community to include people who live with the symptoms of mental illness in all the activities and initiatives proposed. Therefore, the first step is to make this group of people visible and show their neighbors that they can add value if they have the opportunity to participate. To smooth participation in the community, we also need to prepare our target group and give them opportunities to practice social contacts and to extend their social network, to be autonomous and to feel able to participate without fears. In this way we aim at changing little by little the perception of our society in relation to people living with the symptoms of mental illness and to create more common spaces. Achieving it is a work that has to be done little by little but constantly and involving society.

The support and acceptance received by the *Ojanco Mountain Club* has been a key factor of success, a valuable cooperation which we would like to sustain. Extend our network including more external resources is another key challenge to continue raising awareness.