Learning disabilities, parkrun and health and wellbeing

Purpose of the research

We wanted to find out the things people with a learning disability do to look after their health and wellbeing,

And

To understand experiences of participating in community activities, such as parkrun.

Background

People with learning disabilities tend to have worse physical and mental health than the general population.

The views of people with learning disabilities are important to help change this.

There is not much research and evidence available as to what works best.

We hope that this research will contribute to better understanding of how activities in the local community, such as parkrun, can be more accessible for people with a learning disability.
What did we do?

We invited people with a learning disability to take part in the research.

Six participants answered questions about their health, wellbeing, friends and activities they do regularly.

The researcher recorded the interviews and took notes. These were looked at to identify themes.

The findings have been written in a report for other researchers and local organisations to use.

What did we learn?

Participants talked about having friends and feeling like they could take part in activities they enjoyed. This was seen as an important part of being healthy.

Participants enjoyed taking part in exercise and did so more when they were having fun and together with other people. Exercising together made people feel better about themselves.

Not many participants knew about parkrun. It was thought of as a place to meet new people. Participants worried that they might not be good enough to run with other people.

Feeling like you ‘fitted in’ was important to participants. This happened when people talked to each other and weren’t made to feel different.
When participants felt they fitted in they wanted to ‘give something back’ to that community.

Social media is used by people with a learning disability to stay in touch with friends. Some think this is a good thing, but others worry it makes people less active.

Being part of an organised social group for people with a learning disability was highly valued. These groups gave participants the opportunity to be together in a safe place.

**Recommendations**

People with a learning disability may need support, from a friend or volunteer to take part in parkrun for the first time.

First experiences at parkrun are important to make people with a learning disability feel like it is a place they can have fun and fit in. This will help people want to take part more often. Volunteers at parkrun could help make this happen.

Online communities may help people with learning disabilities make friends and take part in parkrun, and other activities, more often.

Organised leisure groups for people with a learning disability are very important places to make friends and feel good about yourself. These groups should be included in plans to improve health and wellbeing for people with a learning disability.
Future research

Future research should include and value the experiences of people with a learning disability. This will help design better policy.

More work is needed to better understand:

- What it is like for a person with a learning disability to take part in a parkrun event
- The impact of social media on health and wellbeing of people with a learning disability, and if online communities can have a positive impact
- The long-term impact of exercise which focuses on having fun and spending time with other people.

Where can I find out more?

This research was done by Jo Evans as part of a Master of Public Health. Professor Francine Watkins and Dr Suzie Rotherham helped to complete this research project.

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