



Participatory arts, sport, physical activity & loneliness: the role of space and place

How can spaces and places enhance wellbeing or reduce loneliness through sport, physical activity and participatory arts?



Photo: Nigel Spooner

THE BIG IDEA

The spaces and places that cultural and sporting activities take place in can enhance wellbeing and alleviate loneliness.

This is shown by a mix of high and moderate quality evidence.

Previous reviews have highlighted the importance of place for promoting wellbeing through good social connections (Bagnall et al., 2018) and the links between loneliness and wellbeing (Mansfield et al., 2019)



THE FIVE MINUTE READ: What you need to know

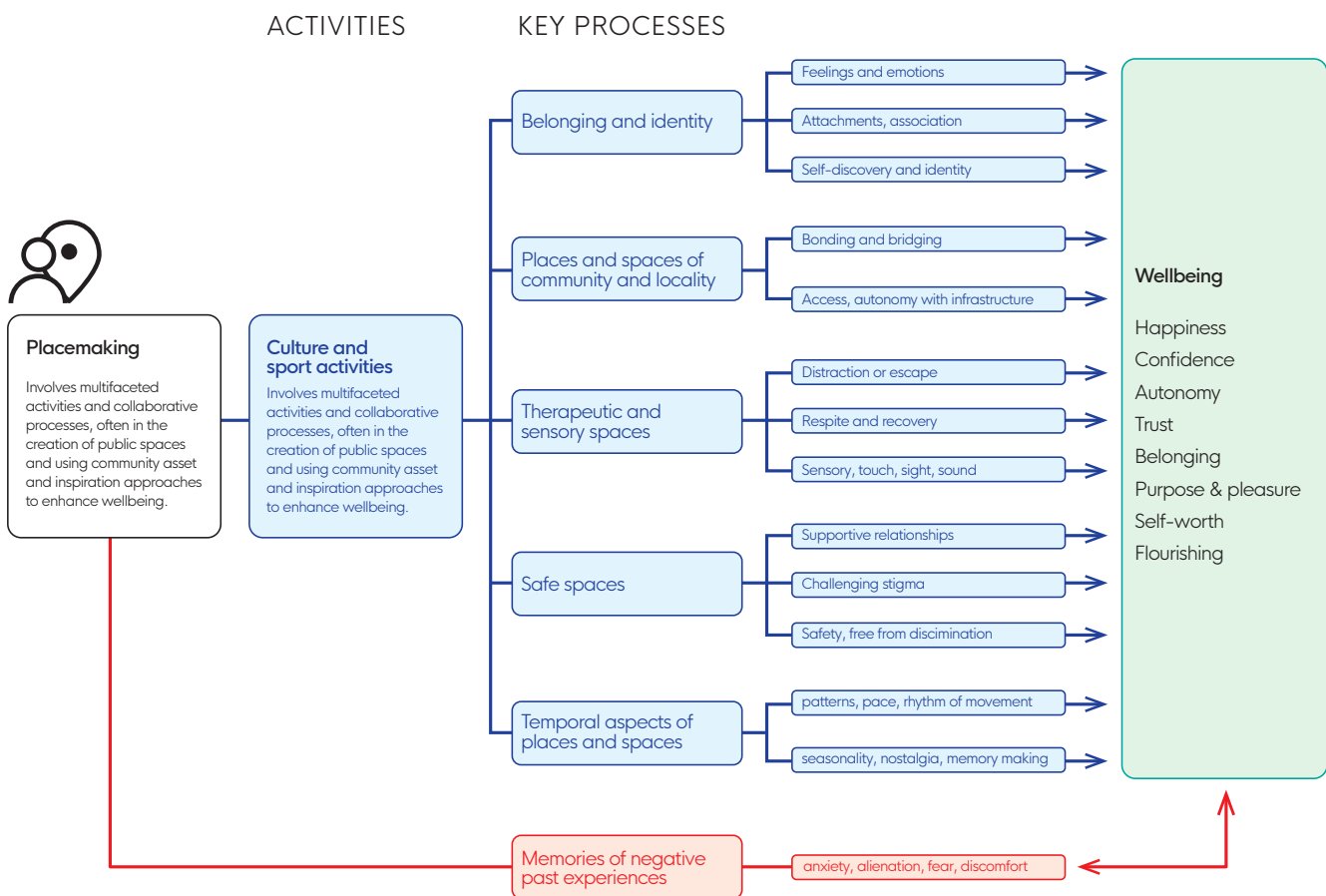
The [review](#) identified five key themes in the evidence base. These highlight processes by which participatory arts and sport increase wellbeing and/or reduce loneliness.

They are:

- belonging and identity
- relationships to community and locality
- therapeutic and sensory spaces
- safe spaces
- Pace and rhythm of a space and place

The following chart shows the ways spaces and places can influence wellbeing and loneliness.

WHAT EVIDENCE DID WE FIND?



Definitions explained

- **Sports/physical activity:** any kind of sport or physical exercise.
- **Participatory arts:** the active participation in any form of creative activity using voice, body or inanimate objects to convey artistic expression.
- **Space or place:** the physical and social characteristics of places including things like community, neighbourhood or physical environment, or particular kinds of places – for example, public parks, green spaces or leisure centres. Place may refer to a location and its activities as well as the people in it.

WE SIFTED THROUGH
11,088 STUDIES
AND 59 HAVE BEEN INCLUDED

WHAT EVIDENCE DID WE FIND?

THREE TYPES OF EVIDENCE

STRONG



We can be confident that the evidence can be used to inform decisions.

PROMISING



We have moderate confidence. Decision makers may wish to incorporate further information to inform decisions.

INITIAL



We have low confidence. Decision makers may wish to incorporate further information to inform decisions.



Belonging and identity in place and space

Feelings and emotions can be awakened in certain spaces and places. This is especially the case through inclusive practices, encouraging a sense of belonging. This enhances wellbeing or alleviates loneliness.

Attachment, association, processes of connection to places can be enhanced by evoking different memories depending on the history of the place and its meaning for the individual. This can happen through sensory stimulation (sights, sounds, smell, touch) arouse positive emotions. When memories have a more negative connotation, it can also happen by facilitating transformational processes.

Self-discovery and identity represent those processes of reflection about personal values, beliefs and views that can lead to enhanced wellbeing. These can be facilitated by allowing opportunities for learning, collaboration, connection, curiosity, healing and recovery and enabling a sense of security and authenticity.



Therapeutic and sensory spaces

Amplifying opportunities for places and spaces to evoke the sense of sight, sound, touch, taste and feel can enhance wellbeing. These senses can generate feelings of distraction and escape from everyday stresses and support recovery from distressing experiences. There seems to be some added value in nature-based activities in enhancing therapeutic and sensory benefits of physical activities.



Community and locality

The shared interests, experiences and values of participants in physical spaces and communities can enhance wellbeing. Enhancing these positive collective experiences is important.

Availability of and access to opportunities for participants to maximise the meaning of places and spaces for themselves can make a difference to their engagement. This, in turn, can enhance wellbeing.

Ensuring inclusivity in a space or place through participatory arts, sport and physical activity is central to optimising wellbeing. This is because group divisions – such as class, gender, ethnicity, age and ability – can be reinforced by place and space the activity takes place in.



Patterns and rhythms of space and place

Places and spaces and the activities that take place in them create patterns or rhythms of movement that can enhance wellbeing.

The creation of slower rhythms of movement can lead to feelings of relaxation and faster paced rhythms can evoke feelings of excitement. Both create opportunities for enhanced wellbeing.

Temporal aspects of a place are connected to the seasons, heritage, histories, storytelling, memories and nostalgia which can all be drawn on in enhancing wellbeing through place-based activities.



Safe spaces

Safe spaces support good wellbeing and can alleviate loneliness. This is because they are free from bias, criticism, prejudice, discrimination, harassment and threatening actions allowing people to feel comfortable to discuss or reflect on sensitive issues.

A safe space can facilitate honest, transparent, and authentic experiences. These experiences can be the starting point to facilitating the processes of challenging stigma and creating relationships who are free from criticism and harassment.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'WELLBEING'?

Positive wellbeing is associated with feelings of excitement, nostalgia and pleasure, a sense of freedom, kinship, security, support and being valued, recovery and restoration, a positive sense of identity, agency and autonomy.

Negative wellbeing is connected to feelings of fear, anxiety, discomfort (mental and physical) alienation and stigma. Studies which provide findings on loneliness refer to the various unpleasant feelings that occur when the quality of a person's social relationships is poor.

There is evidence in this review that the absence of meaningful relationships (emotional loneliness) can lead to a negative wellbeing impact. Additionally, it can cause deficits in the quality and quantity of relationships (social loneliness). There is also evidence of positive wellbeing impact of solitude conceptualised as a powerful force for calm and peace; a type of recharging experience adopted when people feel a need to break from human connection for a while.

EVIDENCE INTO ACTION

1. Put place at the centre of culture and sport

This evidence shows the importance of overcoming barriers to engagement, including perceptions of class, gender and ethnicity. National provision policy can play an important role in enabling positive cultural and sport engagement in places and spaces.

Make people feel safe and free from judgment.

For effective and sustained interventions, create safe spaces to facilitate open, honest, transparent and authentic experiences. This is especially important for those facing poor physical and mental health or trauma.

Consider how to address the stigmatising elements of space and place. Resolve discriminatory practices and create environments that support meaningful connection, value, celebrate diversity and offer support for those experiencing - or creating - stigma.

Create spaces for people to come together and to thrive on their own. In addition to spaces for coming together, there should be spaces for solitude and activities that help people develop personal growth and creativity; explore future hopes; or re-frame their life.

Listen and give voice to different people. Effective, sustainable policies for place-making design require multidisciplinary, cross-sector and co-production approaches. These can incorporate ways that local area design can improve wellbeing through participatory arts, sport and physical activity.

2. Invest in local knowledge and skills

The evidence shows the awareness and skills of local cultural and sport leaders play an important role in successful interventions.

3. Recognise the importance of place from different perspectives

Space and place can be perceived and conceived in different ways. Creating policies or wellbeing in participatory arts, sport and physical activity requires the adoption of and support for multidisciplinary, cross-sector and co-production approaches to design place-making to support wellbeing in effective and sustainable ways.



In partnership with

