

Gardening as a Therapeutic Tool for Healing Mental Health Issues Among Terminally Ill Patients: An Opinion Review

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ABSTRACT

This opinion review delves into the often-overlooked realm of gardening as a potent therapeutic tool for alleviating mental health challenges among terminally ill patients. Drawing upon a fusion of clinical insights and academic literature, this article contends that gardening possesses a unique capacity to foster emotional well-being, psychological resilience, and existential contemplation for individuals facing life-limiting illnesses. With a conceptual framework as its guiding beacon, this comprehensive discourse underscores the intricate interplay between horticultural engagement, mindfulness, and the profound dimensions of human experience. A rich tapestry of subheadings, references, and case studies weave together to illuminate the uncharted potential of gardens as sanctuaries of healing.

Keywords: Therapeutic gardening, Terminal illness, Mental health, Palliative care, Horticultural therapy, Hospice gardens, End-of-life care, Quality of life

1. INTRODUCTION

In the complex tapestry of human existence, the relationship between physical health and mental well-being is a thread of profound significance. As we navigate the labyrinth of life, confronting its triumphs and tribulations, our mental and emotional equilibrium becomes integral to the way we perceive and engage with the world. However, within the realm of terminal illness, this equilibrium is often challenged by an intricate interplay of physical pain, emotional turbulence, and existential contemplation. This introduction serves as an entryway into the realm of gardening as a therapeutic tool, offering a sanctuary of healing for the often overlooked mental health issues faced by terminally ill patients.

Terminal illness, with its looming specter of mortality, confronts individuals with a cascade of emotions ranging from fear and despair to hope and introspection. The convergence of medical prognosis and emotional turbulence underscores the dire need for holistic interventions that not only address the physiological aspects of illness but also extend a compassionate embrace to the realm of mental well-being. In the symphony of medical interventions and palliative care, the role of gardens as therapeutic sanctuaries has emerged as a poignant note, often muted but undeniably transformative. The notion of therapeutic gardens as spaces of solace and healing is anchored in the intrinsic bond between humans and nature - a relationship that has

woven itself into the fabric of our evolution. Rooted in the Biophilia Hypothesis proposed by E.O. Wilson, which posits an innate human affinity for nature, therapeutic gardening capitalizes on the restorative power of green spaces to nurture emotional resilience and psychological fortitude. Gardens, with their verdant tapestries and soothing ambience, offer a refuge from the clinical rigidity of hospitals, inviting patients to immerse themselves in a world where the rhythm of nature intertwines with the cadence of their own thoughts and emotions. Moreover, the symbiotic relationship between gardening and mental health is reinforced by a growing body of research that illuminates the transformative impact of horticultural engagement. Studies have underscored the stress-reducing effects of gardening, citing lowered cortisol levels and enhanced mood states. As hands delve into soil and tenderly care for plants, the mind embarks on a sensory journey that distracts from pain, nurtures a sense of accomplishment, and facilitates emotional expression. The act of gardening becomes a therapeutic narrative, weaving a story of resilience and growth amidst adversity.

Yet, the healing potency of therapeutic gardens transcends the physiological realm. It is in the cultivation of these green spaces that patients are invited to embark on a profound journey of existential contemplation. The garden, with its lifecycle mirroring the cycles of human existence, becomes a poignant metaphor for the ebb and flow of life and death. As petals wither and bloom, patients are prompted to reflect on the impermanence of existence and the eternal dance of change. In the silent embrace of a garden's embrace, individuals grapple with questions of purpose, legacy, and the transcendence of the self.

This introduction sets the stage for a journey into the uncharted territories of therapeutic gardening as a beacon of healing for mental health issues among terminally ill patients. It underscores the symbiotic relationship between the horticultural haven and the intricate landscapes of human emotions and

thoughts. As we navigate the contours of this discourse, we unravel the threads that weave together gardens and the human spirit, inviting us to explore the transformative potential of green sanctuaries as companions in the journey of life's end.

2. Terminal Illness: The Uncharted Terrain of Mental Health

Terminal illness propels individuals onto an uncharted emotional landscape where the fusion of physical affliction and emotional turmoil creates a complex mosaic. This section delves into the intricate emotional journey experienced by those grappling with life-limiting illnesses, illuminating the intricate balance between physical decline and the psychological upheaval that often ensues. In the face of terminal diagnosis, emotions surge in a tempest of confusion and anxiety. The abrupt intrusion of mortality disrupts the familiar rhythm of life, ushering in uncertainty. Straddling the acknowledgment of impending finality and the pursuit of normalcy yields a unique cognitive tension, a backdrop for the emotional odyssey of the terminally ill.

As illness progresses, the metamorphosis of the body—the vessel of vitality—ushers in pain, discomfort, and the specter of mortality. This physical transformation catalyzes emotional responses ranging from frustration to deep sorrow. The emotional toll of bodily upheaval resonates as potently as the physical pain, unveiling the intricate dance between somatic and emotional well-being. Adding to this complexity are societal attitudes around mortality, often shrouded in silence. Those confronting terminal illness can experience isolation due to societal discomfort with discussions of death. This isolation compounds anxiety and depression, intensifying emotional struggles. Acknowledging these nuanced mental health challenges becomes pivotal in devising effective therapeutic strategies. Within this landscape, emotional resilience becomes essential for navigating terminal illness. Amid identity shifts, oscillating hope, and existential queries, therapeutic

interventions, notably gardening, assume significance. Gardening offers solace, not solely in the physical realm but also within the mind—a holistic approach acknowledging the interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit. As we explore gardens as sanctuaries, we unveil spaces where emotional tribulations find solace in the nurturing embrace of nature.

3. The Horticultural Haven: A Conceptual Exploration

Within this contemplative section, the unfolding of the conceptual framework of gardening as a therapeutic haven is akin to treading through a lush meadow of insights:

-A Tapestry of Psychological Resilience:

Here, the immersive nature of gardening intricately weaves threads of cognitive and emotional resilience, intricately stitching a quilt that shelters individuals from the weighty prognosis they bear. The act of cultivating life, tending to fragile plants, and observing their steady growth unveils a parallel narrative of one's own emotional endurance. The tactile connection with the earth and the creation of a nurturing environment mirror the cultivation of inner strength. The journey from seed to bloom becomes an allegory for navigating the complexities of life, fostering a profound connection between the act of nurturing and the nurturing of one's own psychological well-being.

-A Sanctuary for Existential Contemplation:

As the exploration unfurls further, the contemplative nature of gardening emerges as a sanctuary for the contemplation of life's impermanence. Nature, with its cycles of birth, growth, decay, and renewal, mirrors the human journey in profound ways. The rhythm of nature's cadence becomes an echo of the human experience, a tangible reminder of the ebb and flow of existence. Amidst the verdant expanse, one finds solace in the understanding that life's fleeting moments are part of a larger continuum. The act of nurturing plants becomes an opportunity to confront existential questions, inviting

introspection into the purpose and meaning of life. As hands cradle fragile seedlings and witness their transformation, a parallel transformation occurs within the depths of one's consciousness. This conceptual exploration transcends the confines of mere gardening, unveiling it as a bridge between the tangible and the metaphysical. The therapeutic haven of the garden is a liminal space where cognitive and emotional resilience are nurtured and where contemplation on the transient nature of life becomes an essential facet of the healing journey. The intertwining of these dimensions within the realm of horticulture offers a canvas upon which individuals facing terminal illness can paint their own narratives of strength, growth, and transcendence.

4. The Therapeutic Spectrum of Gardening

This section unfurls the kaleidoscope of therapeutic potential inherent within gardening:

-Mindfulness Amidst Nature's Embrace:

The exploration within this facet is an embrace of mindfulness as cultivated within the context of gardening. Engaging with the earth, planting seeds, and tending to flora inherently invites a heightened sense of mindfulness—a conscious connection with the present moment. The rustling leaves, the scent of soil, and the rhythmic pulse of nature intertwine to create a sensorial symphony that anchors individuals within the here and now. Amidst the act of cultivation, worries dissipate, and the mind unburdens itself from the weight of the past and the uncertainty of the future. The garden becomes a canvas upon which mindfulness is painted, fostering tranquility and an intimate engagement with the rhythms of life.

-Nurturing Autonomy and Sense of Purpose:

As the exploration delves further, the spotlight turns to the empowering facets of gardening—autonomy and purpose. For individuals grappling with terminal illness, the erosion of autonomy can be deeply

disempowering. However, in the realm of the garden, one becomes the steward of growth, the orchestrator of life's journey within a confined space. The act of planting, nurturing, and witnessing the transformation of seeds into flourishing plants is a testament to one's agency—a reminder that amidst life's uncertainties, choices still remain. Additionally, gardening ignites a renewed sense of purpose, an affirmation that life's significance endures even in the face of mortality. The rhythm of gardening becomes a cadence of purpose, a melody that resonates deeply within the human spirit.

This spectrum of therapeutic potential underscores that gardening transcends the realm of horticulture; it emerges as an alchemical blend of mindfulness and empowerment. Within its tendrils, the practice of mindfulness is nurtured, creating a conduit for presence and peace. Simultaneously, the autonomy and purpose cultivated in the garden serve as a balm for the challenges posed by terminal illness. As individuals sow the seeds of intention, they find themselves immersed in a sanctuary where the whispers of mindfulness and the echoes of empowerment intertwine.

5. Illuminating Case Studies: Gardens of Resilience

This section breathes life into theory, casting a spotlight on tangible instances where gardens emerge as sanctuaries of resilience:

-A Blossoming Oasis in Palliative Care:

This chronicle unveils a hospice's metamorphosis catalyzed by the inception of a therapeutic garden. Through deliberate design, a once clinical landscape evolves into an oasis of serenity, enveloping patients in nature's embrace. Within this verdant haven, patients find respite from the clinical environment, cocooned amidst the nurturing allure of greenery. The garden becomes a testament to the potential of intentional spaces in bolstering emotional well-being amid the complexities of palliative care.

-From Seedling to Serenity - Hospice

Gardens: Narratives of individuals who sought solace and found transcendence within hospice gardens paint a portrait of the profound impact of such spaces. Through their stories, we witness how the act of tending to plants mirrors the cultivation of resilience within the human spirit. Amidst life's final chapters, these individuals find in the garden a canvas for emotional expression, a conduit for connection, and a sanctuary for introspection. These narratives resonate as testimonies to the gardens' role as sanctuaries where resilience blossoms against the backdrop of life's inevitable conclusion.

These case studies transcend anecdote, serving as beacons that illuminate the transformative power of therapeutic gardens. They affirm that gardens are not mere physical spaces; they are vessels that cradle the seeds of emotional fortitude, fostering resilience, and nurturing the human spirit even within the depths of terminal illness.

6. Cultivating Psychological Well-being

This segment delves further into the discourse on the psychological benefits of gardening:

-Mitigating Anxiety and Depression:

Drawing from empirical evidence, this exploration unveils the transformative impact of gardening in mitigating anxiety and depression. Studies illuminate how the rhythmic engagement with nature's cycles calms the mind, reducing the grip of anxiety. Additionally, the act of nurturing plants provides a tangible source of accomplishment, fostering a sense of purpose that counters the weight of depression. As individuals cultivate life amidst life-limiting illness, the garden becomes a cocoon of solace—a realm where anxiety wanes and depression's shadows retreat, illuminating pathways to emotional well-being.

-Fostering Emotional Expression and Connection: Within this realm, gardening

emerges as a conduit for emotional expression and social connection. The tactile engagement with the earth and the act of tending to living beings awaken avenues for emotional release. For those facing terminal illness, where verbal communication might falter, the garden becomes a canvas for the unspoken—the tears, hopes, and fears that find resonance in the tendrils of greenery. Moreover, therapeutic gardens blossom into spaces of shared experiences, nurturing social bonds among patients, caregivers, and healthcare providers. In cultivating gardens, individuals unearth not only blossoms but also pathways to emotional connection and shared humanity.

As we unravel the tapestry of psychological well-being cultivated within therapeutic gardens, it becomes evident that these green sanctuaries hold transformative potential. The empirical foundation for anxiety and depression mitigation is illuminated, revealing gardening's role as an antidote to emotional distress. Simultaneously, the garden emerges as a realm where emotions are tended to with gentleness, and connections are nurtured amidst the flourishing of flora—a testament to the intricate relationship between the act of nurturing and the nurturing of the self.

7. Nature as a Catalyst for Meaning-Making

This section delves into the existential dimensions nurtured by therapeutic gardens:

-Gardens as Metaphors for Life and Transition: Within this realm, gardens emerge as living metaphors for the journey of life and the enigmatic passage of transition. The cycle of birth, growth, decay, and renewal mirrors the human odyssey, becoming spaces for introspection and contemplation. The garden's constant evolution—a reflection of nature's ceaseless transformation—invites individuals to confront the impermanence of existence. Amidst petals that wither and blooms that unfurl, one finds a mirror to their own journey, an opportunity to meditate on the

poignant transience that characterizes human life.

-Reverberating Echoes of Legacy and Presence: In this exploration, we encounter how therapeutic gardens evolve into arenas where individuals facing terminal illness sculpt legacies and affirm their presence. These gardens become blank canvases upon which individuals paint enduring imprints—an embodiment of their spirit and essence. Amidst the act of nurturing, they intertwine their essence with the verdant tapestry of life, leaving indelible marks that reverberate long after their physical presence has receded. These gardens encapsulate the paradox of life and death, an affirmation that within the realms of finite existence, the echoes of one's presence can reverberate eternally.

As the layers of nature's symbolism unfold, therapeutic gardens transcend their physicality, morphing into spaces where existential contemplation finds fertile ground. They become portals for meaning-making, where life's enigma is mirrored, and where the legacy of human existence takes root amidst the soil, the flora, and the very essence of life itself.

8. Ethical Considerations in Therapeutic Horticulture

Within this segment, navigating the ethical currents of therapeutic horticulture brings forth reflections on responsible practice:

-Empowerment in Decision-Making: This perspective advocates for the active involvement of patients in the design and management of therapeutic gardens. Recognizing the pivotal role gardens play in fostering autonomy and purpose, it becomes imperative to extend this empowerment to the very genesis of the garden itself. By engaging patients in decisions related to layout, plant selection, and even ongoing care, a narrative of empowerment is woven, affirming that their voices and preferences matter amidst the challenges of terminal illness.

-Ensuring Accessibility and Inclusivity: This exploration delves into the ethical

imperative of ensuring that therapeutic gardens are accessible and inclusive for a diverse range of patients. Just as nature embraces diversity, so too should therapeutic spaces. Wheelchair ramps, sensory pathways, and inclusive plant selections become integral facets. Moreover, attention to cultural sensitivities and spiritual preferences ensures that gardens become spaces of solace for individuals from various walks of life. Ethical practice demands that the restorative embrace of nature be extended to all, fostering a sense of belonging and inclusivity.

As we navigate the ethical landscapes of therapeutic horticulture, these considerations underscore that gardens extend beyond physical spaces—they become arenas where ethics manifest as tangible actions, where empowerment and inclusivity are nurtured, and where the healing embrace of nature is accessible to all.

9. A Path Forward: Integrating Therapeutic Gardens

This practical section illuminates the integration of therapeutic gardens into medical practice:

-Collaborative Endeavors in Medical Practice: Here, a proposal emerges for collaborative partnerships between horticultural therapists and healthcare providers. This fusion of expertise fosters an intersection where clinical understanding meets the therapeutic potency of gardens. By coalescing medical knowledge and horticultural insights, a comprehensive approach to patient care unfolds. Health professionals and horticultural therapists, each contributing their unique proficiencies, cultivate an ecosystem where healing becomes holistic, addressing not only the body but also the intricate realms of the mind and spirit.

-The Role of Holistic Support Teams: In this exploration, the role of multidisciplinary teams takes center stage. The synergistic interplay between physicians, nurses, therapists, and

horticultural experts amplifies the benefits of therapeutic gardening. As diverse expertise converges, a web of support is woven around patients—each strand reinforcing emotional well-being, resilience, and quality of life. This holistic approach recognizes that addressing terminal illness extends beyond medical intervention; it encompasses a comprehensive network where therapeutic gardens serve as vibrant nodes of healing.

As we navigate the path forward, the integration of therapeutic gardens into medical practice becomes a testament to the power of collaboration. It is a tapestry where disciplines unite, where the healing properties of gardens are harnessed within the structured framework of healthcare, and where patients receive the embrace of holistic support.

10. Reflections and Future Prospects

This concluding section gazes upon the transformative potency of gardening, casting reflections that illuminate future directions:

-Nature-Centric Approaches: Here, contemplation centers on the integration of gardening as an integral facet of holistic patient care. As we reflect on the tapestry of benefits woven by therapeutic gardens, a tantalizing future unfolds—a landscape where gardens become intrinsic to the very fabric of medical practice. Nature's embrace, coupled with its potential to foster resilience, mindfulness, and emotional well-being, beckons toward a paradigm shift. Gardening becomes more than an adjunct; it emerges as a cornerstone, a nature-centric approach that redefines how we navigate the complexities of terminal illness.

-Research Frontiers: This exploration urges the pursuit of further research into the nuanced impact of gardening interventions. As we stand on the precipice of understanding, questions abound—How does gardening shape emotional trajectories? What elements of garden design are most potent? How can therapeutic gardens be optimized for diverse

patient populations? Delving into these inquiries, research emerges as a compass that guides the evolution of gardening as a therapeutic tool. Rigorous studies will unravel layers of insight, illuminating the pathways where flora and human resilience intersect.

As we cast our gaze both backward and forward, reflections merge with aspirations, showcasing how the blossoms of therapeutic gardens transcend their physical form. In these contemplative spaces, we unearth not only the stories of those who have walked amidst petals and foliage but also the narratives that are yet to be written—a tapestry where nature's embrace and human fortitude entwine in an eternal dance.

CONCLUSION

In the intricate tapestry of human existence, the intersection of terminal illness and mental well-being casts shadows that challenge the very core of our being. As we navigate the labyrinthine terrain of life's end, the therapeutic sanctuary of gardens emerges as a luminous thread—a beacon of healing that transcends the boundaries of the physical and the metaphysical. The journey we embarked upon, delving into the symbiotic relationship between horticulture and mental health, has woven a narrative that underscores the profound impact of therapeutic gardens in the lives of terminally ill patients. The exploration of terminal illness as uncharted emotional terrain revealed the delicate interplay of physical affliction and emotional turmoil. The garden's embrace offered a refuge where cognitive and emotional resilience found root amidst the ebb and flow of prognosis. It became evident that the garden's appeal extended beyond aesthetics, nurturing the human spirit in ways that medical interventions alone could not fathom. Amidst the verdant expanse, the garden's role as a catalyst for existential contemplation came to light. Its cycles of growth and decay, mirrored in the journey of human existence, invited individuals to confront life's impermanence. The garden

became a canvas for introspection, where the echoes of life's transient nature found resonance and meaning. The diverse therapeutic spectrum of gardening, from fostering mindfulness to nurturing autonomy, served as a testament to its multifaceted capacity. Empirical evidence underscored its role in mitigating anxiety and depression, while narratives of emotional expression and connection painted vivid portraits of its healing impact. Ethical considerations illuminated the importance of patient empowerment, inclusivity, and collaborative medical practice in the realm of therapeutic horticulture. The integration of therapeutic gardens into healthcare settings emerged as a tangible path forward, driven by collaborative endeavors and the synergy of holistic support teams.

As we conclude this journey, the intertwining threads converge into a tapestry that showcases gardens as sanctuaries of resilience, existential contemplation, and emotional well-being. These vibrant spaces offer solace amidst the tumult of illness, allowing individuals to rewrite their narratives of strength and growth. With the promise of nature's embrace and the fortitude of the human spirit, therapeutic gardens stand as testimonials to the enduring potential of healing within life's final chapters.

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