

Activity: Planting Goal: Psychological/Emotional
Populations: Trauma Survivors

TH Activity Plan – Plant Spacing & Boundaries

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Materials

Plant seedlings (sunflower, basil, tomatoes)
Seeds (carrots, beans, radish, lettuce)
Garden bed
Gardening gloves, hand tools, watering can, rakes, string, plant name tags

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will sow vegetable seeds and re-plant vegetable seedlings appropriate to their growing zone.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Acquire new skills & horticultural knowledge about plants & their needs; improve understanding of personal boundaries and their importance; enhance ability to recognize appropriate and inappropriate closeness/distance; develop metaphorical thinking skills

Physical: Maintain muscle stamina by planting; strengthen hand eye coordination; improve spatial awareness & proprioception; practice physical distancing

Psychological/Emotional: Reduce anxiety related to interpersonal space/closeness; increase feelings of safety and security; improve emotional regulation when boundaries are challenged; develop self-confidence in creating and maintaining boundaries; develop a sense of self-worth

Sensory: Develop greater awareness of space; touch plant textures, smell the fragrance to foster calmness and relaxation; recognize physical sensations related to violation of boundaries (interoception); develop grounding techniques

Social: Focus on identifying & building healthy boundaries; respect other's boundaries; promote trust in others; role play & practice dealing with conflicts and outbursts; improve skill in negotiating shared space & resources; practice communicating personal boundaries effectively

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Prepare the garden bed: Make sure there are no obstacles to entering the garden & beds, & that all the health and safety measures have been considered & implemented.
2. The facilitator begins the session by introducing the important element of well-prepared garden beds.
3. Participants weed the garden, and if needed add matured compost, and level the ground.
4. Explain the 3 different sizes of the planted vegetables and flowers – small plants – lettuce, carrots, radish; medium plants – basil, beans; large plants – tomatoes, sunflowers. After carefully explaining the need for space, allow participants to design the growing plan as a group.
5. Continue discussion about space requirements for plants before sowing or re-planting, including beneficial spacing. For example: climbing beans can use sunflower stalks for support to climb; plant sunflowers at the back or north side of the bed to provide shade for smaller plants & to attract pollinators; basil can be interplanted with tomatoes to enhance the favour; fast-growing radishes or lettuce can be interplanted with slower-growing tomatoes & beans. This example is for hardiness zone 5-6.
6. Proceed to plant the agreed layout of the garden bed. Let participants decide who is doing what but

encourage everybody to actively participate. Facilitator and participants should be mindful of personal space when planting in the garden, and not just space for plants. Water the newly planted garden bed.

7. Encourage participants to [keep a diary of the planted seedlings, seeds](#) & the plant needs. As participants describe the needs of plants, use metaphors for personal boundaries & encourage them to recognize & build their own boundaries & respect others. This personal space/boundaries topic can be discussed prior to planting or as it emerges. Some gardens/beds are small, requiring gardeners to be in close proximity.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: This activity provides a hands-on therapeutic horticulture activity in the [garden as a “safe place”](#) where the facilitator sets the atmosphere free of judgment, allowing trauma survivors to experience calmness and safety in their bodies without feeling overwhelmed and in danger (Silva-Rodriguez Bonazzi, & Febles, 2022). Gardening activities reduce stress, soothe nerves and lower cortisol levels (Husted, 2012; Poláčková et al., 2023) which is important for this particular population where calm and safe environment allow them to be open up health interventions, process the trauma, start a journey of healing, or allow themselves to just be. The TH activity is suitable for participants who have faced adversity in their lives, and who are in the process of healing from trauma and wounds of the heart. Integrating the theme of boundaries, participants can feel empowered by recognizing and building their boundaries and learning techniques on how to maintain them. This also involves recognizing others’ boundaries and learning to accept them without challenge. This activity can create a safe space for effectively communicating personal boundaries, an important aspect for personal growth. Using plant metaphors like spacing of seedlings and seeds can reinforce concepts, discussion and practice. Research supports the use of plants as a way for people to express their boundaries and feelings (Nartova-Bochaver, & Muhortova, 2020; Silva-Rodriguez Bonazzi, & Febles, 2022).

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. Working with this population facilitators need to be trauma-informed, consider working collaboratively with trauma care professionals, and be aware of possible medications that can affect behavior patterns, cognitive perceptions, emotional reactions and physical responses.

Safe spaces, silence and trauma care are linked. Creating a safe place with suitable activities, avoiding re-traumatization may require silence for some. [Silence can be healing](#) on many levels. At the same time, [breaking the silence](#) is a crucial part of healing from trauma that involves stages: realizing how one was silenced, recognizing [methods of silencing](#), and learning to tell one’s story securely (Briedis, n.d.). Do not correct participants if their story changes from the last time they shared it. That can be a sign of processing complex trauma and participants cannot always verbalize what or how trauma occurred. Traumatic experiences are often stored as fragmented sensory or emotional memories rather than coherent narratives (Van der Kolk, 2014). Being aware of possible reactions to sensory stimulation is critical. These have a vital impact on survivors and can act like powerful antidotes to the negative sensations that horrify and paralyze survivors (Van der Kolk, 2014).

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: This activity requires good balance for bending and squatting during planting. Plant materials should not come from labor trafficking environments or conditions that may have caused trauma, pain or suffering.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

- Briedis, H. (n.d.). [Breaking the silence](#). *Pathways of Mine(d)*.
- Husted, K. (2012). [Can gardening help troubled minds heal?](#) *The Salt*.
- Poláčková, Z., Fleming, L., Brown, J., & Kelejian, H. (2023). Horticultural therapy health interventions with female survivors of human trafficking: Program models. *Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture*, 33(1).
- Nartova-Bochaver S, & Muhortova E. (2020). If people are attached to plants, do they love other people? Case of the Russian youth. *Behav Sci (Basel)*, 10(2), 40.
- Silva-Rodriguez Bonazzi, D., & Febles, A. (2022). [Horticultural therapy program for trauma survivors](#). HTI.
- Van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma*. Penguin Books.

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TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2024.