

Book review

Creating Quality of Life for Adults on the Autism Spectrum: The Story of Bittersweet Farms

Edited by Jeanne Dennler, Carol S. Quick and Ruth Wilson
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The book “Creating Quality of Life for Adults on the Autism Spectrum: The Story of Bittersweet Farms” by Jeanne Dennler, Carol S. Quick and Ruth Wilson is a comprehensive guide that showcases the story of Bittersweet Farms, the first farmstead community for adults with autism in North America. This model integrates therapeutic approaches, focusing on the quality of life for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) by providing a supportive environment tailored to meet the unique needs of these individuals.

Jeanne Dennler is a retired clinical psychologist with over four decades of experience working with individuals with autism, including extensive involvement with Bittersweet Farms. Carol S. Quick has a background in special education and program development for individuals with disabilities. Ruth Wilson is an author with expertise in special education and nature-based interventions. Together, their diverse experiences contribute to a deep understanding of both the clinical and practical aspects of autism care.

The book explores the development and success of Bittersweet Farms, a pioneering community designed to meet the residential and therapeutic needs of adults with autism. Founded by Bettye Ruth Kay in the early 1980s, Bittersweet Farms is a community-based, non-institutional program that

emphasizes social inclusion, autonomy and interdependence within a farm setting. It aims to create an environment where adults with autism spectrum disorder can thrive and live with dignity, offering vocational and recreational activities designed to enhance their quality of life.

Chapter 1 outlines the origins of Bittersweet Farms, starting with the recognition by Bettye Ruth Kay of the unmet needs of adults with autism spectrum disorder. The chapter covers the challenges in creating a supportive environment and the model's success in offering a life-changing alternative to institutional care.

Bittersweet Farms, situated in Ohio, was designed as a residential farmstead community where adults with autism could experience a level of independence that was rarely available to them. The vision of Bittersweet was not merely to house individuals with autism, but to provide them with meaningful opportunities for work, social interaction and self-determination. This chapter frames the entire book, presenting Bittersweet Farms not only as a care facility but as a revolutionary model in the autism community. By focusing on quality of life, the farm challenges the deficit model often associated with autism care, advocating instead for empowerment, dignity and autonomy.

Chapter 2 delves into the theoretical framework that underpins Bittersweet's approach. The model is based on principles of neurodiversity and sensory processing, with a focus on providing individualized care and meaningful work for residents. This perspective is key to understanding the Bittersweet approach, as it informs

their belief in fostering environments where individuals with autism can live with respect and dignity.

The chapter thoroughly explores how the Bittersweet model operationalizes this theory. It integrates key therapeutic principles, such as structured routines and sensory accommodations, to ensure that each individual's needs are met. For example, creating a farmstead environment allows residents to engage in sensory activities – such as gardening, animal care and woodworking – that not only provide therapeutic benefits but also foster a sense of purpose. These activities are carefully chosen to promote self-reliance and social skills while reducing anxiety and behavioral challenges.

In Chapter 3, the book examines the importance of routine and structure in the lives of individuals with autism. For many individuals on the spectrum, uncertainty and unpredictability can lead to anxiety and challenging behaviors. It outlines how Bittersweet Farms addresses this by providing a highly structured environment, with daily routines and visual supports that help residents navigate their day-to-day lives. This supports to minimize anxiety and foster independence.

The chapter also discusses how Bittersweet uses sensory accommodations to create an environment that minimizes sensory overload, which can be a significant stressor for individuals with autism. For instance, the farm's physical environment is designed to be calming, with quiet spaces, low-stimulus areas and opportunities for sensory regulation through interaction with nature, animals and art.

The environment at Bittersweet is not static but dynamic, adapting to the needs of its residents while maintaining a core level of consistency and support. This balance allows individuals with autism to feel more

autonomous and capable of managing their daily lives.

Furthermore, Chapter 4 discusses the core principle of partnership at Bittersweet Farms: the idea of partnership. Unlike traditional care models where staff and residents have a clear hierarchical relationship, Bittersweet promotes a collaborative partnership between residents, staff and the wider community. This partnership is built on mutual respect and shared goals, particularly the goal of helping residents lead meaningful, independent lives.

It explores how purposeful activities can be a crucial tool for building self-esteem, fostering social connections and ensuring that residents feel valued. At Bittersweet, every resident is encouraged to find meaningful work, whether through farm activities like animal care or through engaging in creative work, such as art or crafts.

The idea is that work provides not only a sense of accomplishment but also a way to contribute to the community. By working alongside staff and local community members, residents gain a sense of pride and connection that extends beyond the farm itself.

The importance of physical activity is emphasized in Chapter 5, highlighting how exercise – such as gardening, farming tasks and even aerobic exercises – are integrated into daily routines at Bittersweet. Physical tasks such as gardening and woodworking not only provide therapeutic benefits but also improve the overall well-being of residents.

It underscores how these activities contribute to both physical well-being and emotional regulation. For many individuals with autism, engaging in physical activity helps manage stress, improve motor skills and regulate emotions.

Bittersweet uses physical tasks not only for therapeutic reasons but also as a way to improve social interaction, encouraged to collaborate and

communicate with one another, fostering a sense of teamwork and community. The activities are designed to be both enjoyable and beneficial, offering a holistic approach to autism care that prioritizes both physical and emotional health.

Chapter 6 tackles the issue of challenging behaviors commonly seen in individuals with autism. Rather than viewing these behaviors as something to be eradicated, Bittersweet Farms takes a compassionate and proactive approach to understanding the underlying causes. The chapter emphasizes that challenging behaviors often have meaning and are responses to unmet needs, such as anxiety, sensory overload or a lack of appropriate social communication skills.

The book provides real-life examples of how staff at Bittersweet work with residents to address and manage behaviors, shifting the focus from control to support. The authors explain how Bittersweet staff are trained to recognize the triggers of these behaviors and use positive reinforcement, redirection and structured interventions to address them. The goal is not to punish or control but to understand and support the individual in a way that respects their autonomy.

This approach is grounded in the belief that behavior change occurs more effectively when individuals feel supported and understood, rather than when they are subjected to punitive measures. It demonstrates that behavior, particularly challenging behavior, is often a form of communication and that the real solution lies in fostering a deeper understanding of the individual's needs.

Chapter 7 discusses how the Bittersweet Farms model focuses on enhancing the quality of life (QOL) for individuals with autism spectrum disorder. The concept of QOL used at Bittersweet is not only based on

reducing symptoms or negative behaviors but on creating an environment that facilitates social, emotional and physical development.

The authors adopt a holistic approach that encompasses several dimensions of QOL, including interpersonal relationships, social inclusion, personal development, as well as physical and emotional well-being. The program emphasizes the importance of individuals feeling that their contributions, whether large or small, are appreciated. This provides them with a positive sense of achievement, which directly improves their quality of life.

Chapter 8 provides an evaluation of the Bittersweet Farms program using quantitative data to measure the outcomes of the model applied. The authors detail the use of a quality-of-life scale developed specifically for this population. The results of the evaluation show significant improvements across various domains of life, including personal happiness, social well-being and satisfaction with daily activities.

The evaluation involved 20 residents who had lived at Bittersweet for over 30 years, providing insights into the long-term success and sustainability of the program. The findings highlighted reductions in aggressive behaviors and improvements in the ability to perform daily living tasks independently. However, the evaluation also noted that not all residents showed the same level of improvement, and some required additional support or more time to reach the desired outcomes.

Chapter 9 highlights the development and expansion of Bittersweet Farms over the years and how the model has adapted to meet the needs of its residents, as well as the challenges faced. Since its founding, Bittersweet has evolved from a simple idea into a widely recognized model that has been replicated by other programs inspired by its approach. This chapter

focuses on how Bittersweet expanded its scope from providing basic residential care to offering a broader range of vocational and recreational activities that enhance residents' quality of life.

Bittersweet has also successfully built relationships with the local community, integrating activities that involve local residents and selling products made by the residents at local markets. This not only provides opportunities for residents to contribute to the local economy but also promotes social integration and inclusion.

The chapter also addresses the challenges faced by Bittersweet, including funding issues and the need for ongoing staff training to maintain the effectiveness of the model. Despite these challenges, this book shows that Bittersweet Farms' sustainability relies on the collaboration between staff, families, the community and non-profit organizations that support the model.

While the book provides an insightful and thorough exploration of the Bittersweet model, it could benefit from a deeper critical reflection on the broader societal implications of this approach. For instance, more attention could be given to the challenges faced in replicating the Bittersweet model in different communities, especially in terms of funding, staff training and policy support. In addition, the book would be even more interesting if it could provided comprehensive comparisons with other community-

based autism programs to give readers a broader perspective on best practices in autism care.

The strength of the book lies in its detailed, evidence-based description of how a supportive environment can enhance the quality of life for individuals with ASD. The authors provide a wealth of practical examples and case studies that illustrate the success of the Bittersweet model.

This book serves as a valuable resource for professionals working with adults with autism, providing a model that can be adapted to other settings. It also offers insights for policymakers, researchers and families looking for alternatives to institutional care. For readers, the book is an essential guide to understanding how holistic, person-centered care can be implemented to improve the lives of adults with autism.

Creating Quality of Life for Adults on the Autism Spectrum offers both a compelling narrative and a practical framework for enhancing the lives of adults with autism. The Bittersweet model emphasizes the importance of individualized care, community integration and the role of meaningful work in enhancing the lives of people with ASD.

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