



Rutgers NEXUS Clubhouse Model Overview

A strengths-based, neurodiversity-affirming approach to building belonging, skills, and autonomy

What Is the Clubhouse Model?

The **Clubhouse Model** is a community-based psychosocial rehabilitation approach originally designed for people living with serious mental health conditions and adapted by the Rutgers School of Health Professions to support Autistic young adults. Clubhouses operate as strengths-based environments where members and staff collaborate as equals to support wellness, skill development, and community integration. In contrast to some medical approaches that use errorless learning, Nexus employs an errorfull learning approach, where members are given the opportunity to make safe mistakes.

Core Principles of the NEXUS Clubhouse Approach

1. Membership and Belonging

- Participants are considered “members” (not “clients” or “patients”)
- Participation is voluntary, collaborative, and identity-affirming.
- Everyone contributes to making the community safe, welcoming, and inclusive.

2. Side-by-Side Work

- Student clinicians and autistic group members work together as equals. Everyone is a member of the clubhouse.
- Staff do not “do for” —they “do with.”
- Supports emphasize guided discovery, collaboration, and shared responsibility.

3. Strengths-Based, Neurodiversity-Affirming Practice

- Activities highlight what members can do and build new capacities through habilitation.
- Intervention focuses on self-advocacy, autonomy, and sensory, communication, and executive functioning needs.
- Members make choices and express preferences throughout all activities.

4. The Work-Ordered Day (NEXUS Version)

Instead of clerical or business tasks (traditional Clubhouse), NEXUS structures programming around **functional life, social, and vocational skill experiences**, such as:

- ADL tasks (e.g., cleaning, laundry, bed-making)
- Cooking and nutrition activities
- Resume writing and interview prep
- Technology skills (e.g., Microsoft Word)
- Social participation

Each session includes:

1. Time to socialize and care for community, such as by making coffee for other members
2. Introduction to a skill/day's focus area
3. Collaborative activity emphasizing skill-building/habilitation
4. Self-reflection and group debrief

How the Clubhouse Values Show Up at NEXUS

Community & Relationships

- Strong emphasis on peer bonding, conversation initiation, and shared decision-making.
- Activities always include discussion, reflection, and mutual problem solving.

Meaningful Roles

Members lead elements of each activity by:

- Ordering steps using visual systems
- Facilitating group discussions
- Volunteering for demonstrations
- Contributing ideas for reference sheets
- Participating in leadership tasks (e.g., calling on peers, presenting group results)

Choice, Autonomy, and Agency

Members choose:

- Recipes, ingredients, meals
- Resume content and job goals
- Activities in the Belonging Room

- How to divide labor during group tasks

Metacognitive Skill Development

Across all sessions, student interns guide members to:

- Build goals, plan steps for accomplishing them, and checking in on successes
- Think about their thinking
- Reflect on strategies that worked
- Build internal scripts for problem solving
- Plan and check their own work

These steps mirror the Clubhouse focus on personal growth and capability building.

Clinical Training & Interprofessional Collaboration

NEXUS embeds the Clubhouse value of shared responsibility by integrating SLP and OT students under the supervision of licensed professionals. Each discipline supports the group holistically:

- **SLP:** Communication, participation, AAC support, executive functioning
- **OT:** Sensory needs, routines, ADLs, transition skills

Members see students working collaboratively, modeling teamwork—another hallmark of the Clubhouse model.

Why This Model Works for Autistic Young Adults

The NEXUS adaptation of Clubhouse principles is effective because it:

- Emphasizes habilitation
- Values neurodiversity and strengths
- Promotes autonomy through co-created experience
- Integrates social, vocational, and life skills naturally
- Builds peer connections and interdependence
- Strengthens metacognition and functional communication
- Offers real, meaningful participation—not simulated tasks



Research and programming reported in this presentation was supported by the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS), a component of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) under award number K12TR004788. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.