

A LOOK AT

Recreational Therapy

By Elizabeth Stahl, *Recreational Therapist*

Recreational therapists provide treatment to individuals with disabilities or illnesses through recreational activities. Using a variety of techniques including arts and crafts, animals, sports, games and community outings, they treat and help maintain the physical, mental and emotional well-being of their clients. These activities help reduce depression, stress and anxiety. They help individuals recover basic motor functioning and reasoning abilities; they also build confidence and social skills. In addition, recreational therapists help integrate individuals with disabilities into the community by teaching them how to use community resources and recreational activities.

Recreational therapists treat a wide variety of individuals including those with:

- Substance abuse issues
- Psychiatric issues
- Mental retardation (MR/DD)
- Physical disabilities
- Traumatic brain injury

At Rainbow, each treatment facility is assigned a recreational therapist (RT) who leads leisure skills and leisure education groups. These groups help clients explore activities that build skill sets and promote a healthy lifestyle. Many individuals with traumatic brain injuries cannot participate in activities in the same way they did before their accident. It is especially important that they are able to participate in a leisure group so they can discover new activities or relearn hobbies they enjoyed before they were injured.



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Rainbow Recreational Groups

Fitness groups help clients to lose weight, increase muscle flexibility, build strength and endurance, and increase cardiovascular health. Physical exercise can also improve one's self-concept. Overall fitness increases a person's general health and releases endorphins that enhance mood. Fitness groups are often an invaluable resource to help clients in wheelchairs combat the negative effects of a sedentary lifestyle.

Aquatic groups help clients facilitate a healthy lifestyle in many of the same ways that physical fitness groups do, but aquatic exercises can also increase balance and coordination. Water can also be used as resistance to increase muscle strength and endurance. For many clients, the water can be a freeing environment, making it possible for them to do things that they cannot do on land. Even clients who are

unable to walk on land can often walk in the water. This can enhance both their physical and psychological condition.

Arts and crafts groups help clients feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, and can also be used as a fun way to improve fine motor skills and expressive functioning. Individuals are exposed to many adaptable items such as fingertip brushes, which require a downward push with the hand instead of squeezing.

Group games and activity nights provide clients with a chance to interact with peers and encourage appropriate social interactions. Playing games with others at different skill levels gradually teaches appropriate behaviors. Games can include cards, board games or physical competitions. Social interaction has also been found to play a large role in an individual's emotional well-being and helps lower levels of depression.

About the Author...

Community skills groups take clients into the community, providing opportunities for interaction with the general public. Community skills are important to individuals who have a traumatic brain injury because their decision-making skills that guide appropriate social interactions have often been impaired. In order to rejoin the community, many clients need to acquire basic social skills taught in this group. The skills they learn are vital to their success following their rehabilitation. These community outings also help alleviate depression and provide opportunities for individuals to regain social contacts.

Recreational therapists will visit many different places with client groups as they attempt to find activities and locations that interest the majority of the group. These venues include sporting events, museums, movies, theaters, shopping malls and parks, to name a few.

Pet therapy is another intervention technique that is used by Rainbow recreational therapists. Interacting with animals can alleviate stress and enhance overall mood. Animals can also give individuals a sense of normalcy, and petting can stimulate sensory perception. ❖

Elizabeth Stahl, Recreational Therapist

Education: Elizabeth Stahl has a Bachelor of Science degree in recreational therapy from the University of Toledo in Ohio.

Experience/Specialty: Elizabeth interned with Rainbow at the Ypsilanti Treatment Center under recreational therapist Nancy Miller and took the position of activities coordinator at the NeuroRehab Campus in August of 2007. Elizabeth has concentrations in pediatrics and geriatrics. She is a member of the Michigan Therapeutic Recreation Association (MTRA) and the American Therapeutic Recreation Association (ATRA).



Benefits of Recreational Therapy

Psychosocial

- Enhances body image perceptions
- Changes attitudes toward disability
- Improves sense of self
- Helps control stress
- Enhances self-efficacy
- Provides sense of mastery

Cognitive

- Increases mental alertness
- Increases attention span
- Enhances memory skills
- Improves organizational skills
- Improves problem-solving

Community Reintegration

- Prevents social isolation
- Develops/maintains social skills
- Develops self-advocacy skills
- Minimizes disability stigma
- Helps management of environmental barriers (e.g. stairs)
- Provides knowledge of community resources
- Increases activity level

Physical Outcomes

- Increases immune system activity
- Reduces pain
- Increases muscular strength
- Improves flexibility & balance
- Improves cardiovascular functioning
- Develops consistent activity routines for diabetes maintenance
- Reduces decubiti and urinary tract complications
- Increases endurance

Source: www.ncrta.org/Professional/benefits.htm