

6 Things to Know About Recreational Therapists

They're experts in how play can be therapeutic.



Recreational therapy is used to help promote rehabilitation, independence, health and wellness, with an added play element that is catered to the individual's interests.

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One year ago, 18-year-old Will Richards says he struggled to do much of anything active – endurance was too challenging. Then he started seeing a recreational therapist and now, Richards, who has autism, says his energy levels and enthusiasm for activity have improved significantly.

Richards' therapist at the Logan Center in South Bend, Indiana,

Marli VanLake, uses recreation and leisure activities like swimming to develop a goal-oriented therapy program tailored to his abilities and interests. "Every session he has definitely improved, and now that we are getting the muscles going, it's less working on form and more on balance and core strength," VanLake says. "It's been a real treat to see that [recreational therapy] has helped him improve."

Karen Richards, Will's mom, says her son's improved endurance levels have affected him both physically and mentally. "It's really changed his perspective," she says.

While it's only been a year, Will Richards says he'll continue his sessions with VanLake, striving to reach for new goals: "I want to develop my muscles so I can do more, and I can be more self-dependent."

U.S. News talked to recreational therapists and educators to learn more about recreational therapy, what it is and who it helps:

1. What is a recreational therapist?

A recreational therapist might help someone regain his or her ability to play soccer after a car accident. Or she might help someone reach emotional goals through pottery – the possibilities are broad. But the overall

concept is that leisure activities and hobbies can better someone's quality of life, and these therapists are experts in how play can be therapeutic.

According to the American Therapeutic Recreation Association, recreational therapy is a service used to "restore, remediate and rehabilitate a person's level of functioning and independence in life activities, to promote health and wellness as well as reduce or eliminate the activity limitations and restrictions to participation in life situations caused by an illness or disabling condition."

Jason Schwab has worked as a recreational therapist, a term used interchangeably with therapeutic recreation specialist, for 10 years and is currently at New York-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City. What he loves most about his job is helping patients find enjoyment in life again after an illness or injury. "[Physical therapy] will help you function with mobility, [occupational therapy] will help you with your daily living and I feel like recreational therapy helps people get back to being themselves," he says. "We can be the glue that holds people together."

Emily Messina, therapeutic recreation program director at Eastern Washington University

, says because the profession can be utilized in so many different ways and settings, therapists can customize therapies for their workplace and patients. "The benefits are widespread and a little bit more than what we may be looking at in a strictly clinical sense," Messina says. "From what I have seen, we are the therapy that clients really enjoy going to."

2. What do they do?

From team sports to music, hiking to bowling, a recreational therapist fuses goal-oriented leisure and health care. After meeting with a patient, therapists develop a treatment plan for him or her. They take into account where patients are in their care, their abilities and disabilities, and their interests.

"We will ask you, 'What do you enjoy doing? What makes you, you?'" Messina says. "These aren't questions they're going to get from their physician or their nurse; they're questions they're going to get from their recreational therapist."

3. Who can benefit from a recreational therapist?

Recreational therapists work with patients whose needs range from the physical to the emotional; from pediatrics to geriatrics. Because of this variety, individualized goals and treatment plans are crucial.

Patrick Wetherill, a rising senior at Western Carolina University in North Carolina, has one more semester of classes before completing a professional internship and graduating. While he's considering working with several populations, including veteran rehabilitation and at-risk youth, he says he's glad he'll be qualified to work with many different people. "What I like about it the most is that I can work with different populations and still do completely different work within each of those populations." Wetherill says. "It's a very individualized field. It's very focused on that one client – that one person."

4. Where do they work?

The settings recreational therapists work in are as varied as the type of patients they work with. In addition to clinical settings such as hospitals, inpatient care facilities and mental health centers, many work in community centers and school systems. And they're increasingly working in private practices, according to ATRA.

Stephanie Lopes graduated in 2012 from Eastern Washington University with a bachelors of arts in therapeutic recreation. She now works at a residential facility for children and youth with mental health challenges in Washington. "It's nice to know that if I ever decide that [mental health] isn't where I want to be anymore, I still have so many other options," she says.

5. What are their qualifications?

The National Council for Therapeutic Recreational Certification, the profession's certifying body, requires at least a bachelor's degree from an accredited university, a formal internship working directly in the field and passing a national exam. In general, recreational therapists can only practice if they have been nationally certified through the council. In fact, four states – New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Utah – have state licensure, meaning recreational therapists are legally required to be nationally certified in order to practice.

6. What makes recreational therapy unique to the health care team?

It comes down to the techniques the therapists use. Instead of traditional physical therapy, a recreational therapist might use therapeutic horseback riding or wheelchair sports for an individual recovering from an accident. And instead of traditional psychological counseling, she might pinpoint rock climbing or team sports as an outlet for someone with a mental health condition. "We have the same treatment goals. We just achieve it in a different way," Lopes says. "We achieve it in a more interactive way and building on our client's strengths and interests in order to achieve those goals."

Messina says that as more value is placed on staying healthy outside the hospital, respect for the field has grown. "The role that recreation can play in that recovery continuum and the overall health care continuum is beginning to be recognized a little more," she says.

While recovery or improvement may be the direct goal, the focus is also on self-confidence, self-care and quality of life. "I am drawn to anything that makes a person a better person," Schwab says. "If you end up in a wheelchair or with a walker, you're still able to do the things that make you, you."