The Benefits of Therapeutic Outdoor Recreation

Therapeutic outdoor recreation programs are helping individuals with disabilities build the confidence and physical skills needed to participate in a wide range of sports and recreational activities. From skiing and golfing to biking and hiking, these individuals are participating in activities they previously thought were impossible.

The American Therapeutic Recreation Association (ATRA) has defined therapeutic recreation as the use of treatment and recreation services to persons with illness or disabling conditions. The primary focus of treatment services, which are often referred to as recreational therapy, is to restore, remediate, or rehabilitate in order to improve functioning and independence as well as reduce or eliminate the effects of illness or disability.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), recreational therapists plan, direct, and coordinate recreation programs for people with disabilities or illnesses. They use activities such as sports and outdoor recreation, arts and crafts, or dance and movement to help people with various disabilities reap the social, emotional, and physical benefits of participating in those activities.

“The beneficial effects of therapeutic recreation still have a place in the treatment of diseases, not only of sedentary lifestyles, but also of other conditions which plague the population,” says Dr. A. Ronald Peterson, PT, DPT, GCS, program director of Physical Therapist Assisting at South University, West Palm Beach.

There are therapeutic outdoor recreation programs for children, elderly persons, military veterans with disabilities, and people requiring mental health services.

Disabled Sports USA offers sports rehabilitation programs to anyone with a permanent disability. Activities include water sports, summer and winter competitions, and fitness events. Participants include those with visual impairments, amputations, spinal cord injury, dwarfism, multiple sclerosis, and other neuromuscular and orthopedic conditions. One of Disabled Sports USA’s programs is Warfighter Sports, which offers sports rehabilitation programs to wounded military service members, including those injured in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Therapeutic recreation gives individuals an opportunity to use their abilities to see some tangible results from their efforts.

“Clients typically enjoy recreation therapy and have a high motivation level because recreation therapy is based on self determination, positive psychology, and in general, offers a strength-based perspective,” says Shay Dawson, director of Bradford Woods, an auxiliary enterprise of Indiana University that provides recreational, educational, and leadership development opportunities to youth and adults.

Bradford Woods offers therapeutic programs including canoeing, waterskiing, scuba diving, swimming, archery, soccer, basketball, arts and crafts, music, high and low ropes courses, and a variety of experiential-based initiatives.

At Bradford Woods, there are more than a dozen medically specific camps, including those for people with Down syndrome, sickle cell anemia, physical disabilities, craniofacial differences, autism, and cancer.

The beneficial effects of therapeutic recreation still have a place in the treatment of diseases, not only of sedentary lifestyles, but also of other conditions which plague the population.

“The camp setting is also restorative in that natural environments help to promote restorative feels in individuals that take part in them,” Dawson says. “Outside of the camp setting, the philosophies of empowerment, inclusion, and controlled risk help people to grow developmentally.”

Current research indicates many positive health outcomes resulting from participation in recreational therapy programs. Among these health outcomes are improvements in physical health status, psychosocial status, cognitive status, and an improved ability to deal with life, recreation, and community activities.
“From the social aspect, people need interaction with each other to find harmony and balance with their lives and with each other,” Peterson states. “This is very important for people suffering with disabilities, because of the restrictions imposed upon them by their disabilities.”

Adaptations to equipment and activities have helped enable people with disabilities to independently participate in sports and recreational activities. For example, a monoski is a chair that is custom-fitted and spring-mounted on a narrow ski and is designed for people, including paraplegics and double leg amputees, to ski in a sitting position.

Golf is a sport that offers players the benefit of taking part in a physical activity while enjoying fresh air and nice weather. Several golf organizations have established or adopted rules modifications and use assistive devices in order to provide disabled golfers opportunities to enjoy these benefits as well as compete. Adaptive golf equipment includes adapted golf clubs, gripping aides, and carts with seats that swivel around or allow the golfer to stand upright, be supported, and swing using both hands.

Meanwhile, adapted gear for hunting, fishing, and camping makes the great outdoors accessible for people who have physical impairments. Guns, bows, and fishing rods and reels can be designed for individuals with limited, or no, hand and arm movement and strength. Also, there are varieties of tents, cots, and other camping equipment that are light, portable, or made easy for wheelchair transfer.

This summer, the world got a chance to witness history for disabled athletes and adaptive sports equipment. At the 2012 Summer Olympics, South African runner Oscar Pistorius became the first double leg amputee to participate in the games when he entered the men’s 400-meter race and was part of the 4x400-meter relay team. His achievements on the track were made possible by his carbon-fiber prosthetic legs, called “Cheetahs.”

“The fact that Pistorius made it to the Olympics is an amazing testament to physical therapy, recreational therapy and prosthetic advancements, as well as to his own personal drive,” says Dr. Faith A. Berryman, Clinical Coordinator of the Physical Therapist Assistant program at South University, Montgomery.

Physical therapy and recreational therapy often work hand-in-hand. Physical therapy can give people an opportunity to increase flexibility, stability, and strength to be able to participate in a therapeutic activity safely. Recreational therapy can be a respite from sometimes strenuous physical therapy activities.

“Patients attending in-patient rehabilitation programs often find the use of therapeutic recreation to be an anticipated break from the rigors of physical therapy and occupational therapy, both of which have an emphasis on strengthening and range-of-motion exercises, transfer training, and activities for daily living skills,” Peterson says.

Therapeutic recreation also offers another branch of work for physical therapists and physical therapy assistants, Berryman says.

“Some physical therapists and physical therapist assistants actually specialize in adaptive technology,” she explains. “Others may decide to continue their education to meet the requirements for becoming a certified therapeutic recreation specialist.”