

# Therapeutic Recreation Specialist



## Occupational Description

Therapeutic recreation uses treatment, education, and recreation services to help people with illnesses, disabilities, and other conditions develop and use their leisure in ways that enhance their health, functional abilities, independence, and quality of life.

Therapeutic recreation services contribute to the broad spectrum of health care through treatment (recreational therapy), education, and providing recreational opportunities, all of which are instrumental to improving and maintaining physical, cognitive, emotional, and social functioning, preventing secondary health conditions, and enhancing independent living skills and the overall quality of life.

Recreational therapy services use various interventions to treat physical, cognitive, emotional, and social conditions associated with illness, injury, or chronic disabilities. Recreational therapy includes an education component, which enables individuals to become more informed and active partners in their health care by using activity to cope with the stress of illness and disability. Furthermore, these services assist individuals with managing their disabilities so they may achieve and maintain optimal levels of independence, productivity, and well-being and enter/re-enter the mainstream of community life.

Therapeutic recreation services also include the provision of recreational opportunities (eg, wheelchair sports, exercise and fitness programs, social activities, etc) that can minimize health care costs by allowing individuals with disabilities mechanisms to prevent declines in their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional health, thereby reducing the need for medical services.



## Job Description

The day-to-day work experience of therapeutic recreation specialists can vary dramatically, depending on the setting and clients they serve. All therapeutic recreation specialists, however, conduct assessments of physical, mental, emotional, and social functioning to determine the client's needs, interests, and abilities. The therapeutic recreation specialist works with the client, family, and others to design and implement an individualized treatment, education, or program plan, depending on the setting.

Professional therapeutic recreation services are divided into three specific service areas, which represent a comprehensive continuum approach based on individual needs:

**Treatment** is intended to improve functional skills for individuals with disabilities who require treatment or remediation of functional skills as a prerequisite to their involvement in meaningful leisure experiences.

**Leisure education** provides persons in clinical, residential, and community settings—including individuals with disabilities—opportunities to attain skills, knowledge, and attitudes of leisure involvement.

**Recreation participation** provides opportunities for voluntary involvement in recreation interests and activities. Specialized recreation participation programs are provided when assistance and/or adapted recreation equipment are needed or when appropriate community recreation opportunities are not available.

During a typical day, a therapeutic recreation specialist will be responsible for one or more group activities. These might include a stress management group, a high or low ropes course activity, a

community outing, a family activity, an exercise group, or a leisure education group. The therapeutic recreation specialist might also meet with individual clients to conduct an assessment, develop a leisure discharge plan, or plan evening and weekend activities. Charting client progress and communicating with professionals in other disciplines and clients' family members are also part of a typical day.

A therapeutic recreation specialist working in a community recreation agency also conducts assessments to determine client needs and interests and is responsible for adapting activities as needed and for providing adaptive equipment to enable individuals with disabilities or limitations to participate. In addition, the therapeutic recreation specialist provides in-service training for recreation staff who have individuals with disabilities in their programs to orient them to the needs of these individuals and to promote general sensitivity. The therapeutic recreation specialist will generally seek to include clients in existing recreation programs, activities, and classes when possible.

An important responsibility for a therapeutic recreation specialist in both community and clinical settings is to serve as an advocate on behalf of individuals with disabilities. This includes addressing such issues as limited transportation resources, inaccessible facilities, and legislation that affects people with disabilities or limitations. A therapeutic recreation specialist frequently serves on advisory committees and consults with outside agencies to ensure that resources and services are provided for people with disabilities.

One of the most attractive qualities of the therapeutic recreation profession is the opportunity for variety and diversity. The many changes in the health care delivery system have provided—and will continue to offer—an array of challenges and opportunities for continued growth in therapeutic recreation. In addition, the opportunity to positively affect the quality of life of an individual with a disability or limitation is extremely rewarding.



## Employment Characteristics

In clinical settings, such as hospitals and rehabilitation centers, therapeutic recreation specialists treat and rehabilitate individuals with specific medical problems, usually in cooperation with physicians, nurses, psychologists, social workers, and physical and occupational therapists. In long-term care facilities, residential facilities, and community recreation departments, they use leisure activities, individual as well as group-oriented, to improve general health and well-being, but also may treat medical problems. A bachelor's degree in therapeutic recreation (or in recreation with an option in therapeutic recreation) is the usual requirement for an entry-level position in a hospital and in other clinical positions.

Therapeutic recreation specialists assess patients, based on information from medical records, medical staff, family, and patients themselves. They then develop and implement therapeutic recreation programs consistent with patients' needs and interests. For instance, a patient having trouble socializing may be helped to play games with others, or a client with right-side paralysis may be helped to use the left arm to throw a ball or swing a racket.

Therapeutic recreation specialists observe and document patients' participation, reactions, and progress. These records are used by the interdisciplinary team and others to monitor progress,

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to justify changes or end therapeutic recreation services, and for billing, if applicable.

Community-based therapeutic recreation specialists work in park and recreation departments, special education programs, or programs for older adults or people with disabilities. In these programs, therapeutic recreation specialists help clients become involved in leisure activities and provide them with opportunities for exercise, mental stimulation, creativity, and fun.

Therapeutic recreation specialists often lift and carry equipment as well as implement activities. They generally work a 40-hour week, which may include some evenings, weekends, and holidays.

Therapeutic recreation specialists should be comfortable working with people with disabilities and be patient, tactful, and persuasive. Ingenuity and imagination are helpful in adapting activities to individual needs.

Therapeutic recreation specialists held about 39,000 jobs in 1998. About 38% were in hospitals and 26% were in nursing and personal care facilities. Others were in community mental health centers, adult day care programs, correctional facilities, residential facilities, community programs for people with disabilities, and substance abuse centers. About one out of three therapeutic recreation specialists was self-employed, generally contracting with long-term care facilities or community agencies to develop and oversee programs.

According to a 1999 study of members of the National Therapeutic Recreation Society, the average salary of therapeutic recreation specialists was \$35,349. In long-term care facilities, the average annual salary was \$34,362 in 1999. Average annual earnings for therapeutic recreation specialists in the federal government in nonsupervisory, supervisory, and managerial positions were approximately \$36,000 in 1995.



### Employment Outlook

Employment of therapeutic recreation specialists is expected to grow as fast as the average for all occupations through the year 2008, because of anticipated expansion in long-term care, physical and psychiatric rehabilitation, and services for people with disabilities. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that there are approximately 39,000 positions in therapeutic recreation. Nonetheless, the total number of job openings will be relatively low because the occupation is small.

Health care facilities will provide a growing number of jobs in hospital-based adult day care and outpatient programs and units offering short-term mental health and alcohol or drug abuse services; rehabilitation, home health care, transitional programs, and psychiatric facilities will provide additional jobs.

The rapidly growing number of older people is expected to spur job growth for therapeutic recreation specialists and paraprofessionals in long-term care facilities, retirement communities, assisted living facilities, adult day care programs, and social service agencies. Continued growth is also expected in community residential facilities, as well as adult day care programs for people with disabilities.

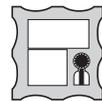


### Educational Programs

**Length.** A major in therapeutic recreation or recreation with an option in therapeutic recreation entails completion of a bachelor's degree, including a minimum of 18 semester or 24 quarter units in therapeutic recreation

and general recreation content coursework; completion of supportive courses to include a minimum of 18 semester units or 27 quarter units; and completion of a minimum 360-hour, 10-consecutive-week internship/field placement experience in a clinical, residential, or community-based therapeutic recreation program.

**Curriculum.** In addition to therapeutic recreation courses in clinical practice, program design, management, and professional issues, students study human anatomy, physiology, abnormal psychology, medical and psychiatric terminology, human development, characteristics of illness and disabilities, and the concepts of inclusion and normalization. Additional courses cover professional ethics, assessment and referral procedures, and the use of adaptive and medical equipment. In addition, 360 hours of internship under the supervision of a certified therapeutic recreation specialist are required.



### Licensure, Certification, and Registration

A few states regulate the therapeutic recreation profession through licensure, certification, or registration of titles. Applicants for licensure must pass a state examination. Licensure is required in Utah. For more information, contact

Division of Occupational and Professional Licensure  
160 East 300 South  
Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0801  
801 530-6628

National certification is available through the National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification (NCTRC), which awards the title of Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist (CTRS).

Through registration, qualified individuals are listed on an official roster maintained by a governmental or nongovernmental agency. Information regarding registration requirements may be obtained from state recreation and park associations.

### Career Planning Publications

The *1998 SPRE Curriculum Catalog* (published by the Society for Park and Recreation Educators) provides valuable information on curricula and faculty in the parks, recreation, and leisure studies profession. Degree levels offered and accreditation status are indicated for each program. Each listing includes the location and mailing address for the program, enrollment data, a description of the character of the campus and community, and a detailed listing of the faculty and specialties.

The *Job Bulletin* newsletter, published twice each month, details job opportunities in parks, recreation, and therapeutic recreation across the United States and abroad, including internships and seasonal positions. Annual 22-issue subscriptions are available to NRPA members only. Individual issues are available to members and nonmembers for \$5 each (prepaid). Career centers may also subscribe at a special rate.

*Preparing for a Career in Therapeutic Recreation* describes the continuum of services within therapeutic recreation and includes a listing of colleges and universities that offer therapeutic recreation programs, including those accredited by the NRPA/AALR Council on Accreditation.



## Inquiries

### Careers

National Therapeutic Recreation Society  
22377 Belmont Ridge Rd  
Ashburn, VA 20148-4501

703 858-2151

800 626-NRPA—membership information and other services

703 858-0794 Fax

E-mail: [ntrsnrpa@nrpa.org](mailto:ntrsnrpa@nrpa.org)

### American Therapeutic Recreation Association

1414 Prince St/Ste 204

Alexandria, VA 22314

703 683-9420

703 683-9431 Fax

### Certification

National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification

7 Elmwood Dr

New City, NY 10956

845 639-1439

845 639-1471 Fax

E-mail: [nctrc@nctrc.org](mailto:nctrc@nctrc.org)

[www.nctrc.org](http://www.nctrc.org)

### Program Accreditation

Council on Accreditation of the National Recreation and Park  
Association

Professional Services Division

22377 Belmont Ridge Rd

Ashburn, VA 20148-4501

703 858-2150

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[www.nrpa.org](http://www.nrpa.org)