

Therapeutic Recreation Specialist

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) 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.



Career 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,

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 25,000 jobs in 2006. About 40% were in hospitals and 30% were in skilled nursing and residential/transitional facilities. Others were in community mental health centers, adult day care programs, correctional facilities, community programs for people with disabilities, and substance abuse centers. About 2% of therapeutic recreation specialists were self-employed, generally contracting with long-term care facilities or community agencies to develop and oversee programs.



Salary

As of 2004, salary for therapeutic recreation specialists with the CTRS credential averaged \$30,000 (starting), \$39,000 (overall average), and \$60,000 to \$70,000 (upper ranges). Data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2007 shows that wages at the 10th percentile were \$21,700, the 50th percentile (median) at \$36,940, and the 90th percentile at \$58,030 (www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes291125.htm). For more information, refer to www.ama-assn.org/go/hpsalary.



Employment Outlook

Employment of therapeutic recreation specialists is expected to increase 4 percent from 2006 to 2016. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that recreational therapists will experience competition for jobs. Job opportunities should be best for people with a bachelor's degree in therapeutic recreation or therapists who hold specialized certifications and in certain regions of the country.

Health care facilities will provide a growing number of jobs in adult day care and outpatient programs offering short-term mental health and alcohol or drug abuse services. Rehabilitation, home health care, and transitional programs 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 480-hour,

12-consecutive-week internship/field placement experience in therapeutic recreation services that uses the therapeutic recreation process.

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, a minimum 480-hour, 12-consecutive-week internship under the supervision of a certified therapeutic recreation specialist is 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 New Hampshire, North Carolina and Utah. For more information, contact

- Office of Licensed Allied Health Professionals, New Hampshire
603 271-8389
www.nh.gov/alliedhealth
- North Carolina Board of Recreational Therapy Licensure
336 212-1133
www.ncbrtl.org
- Utah Division of Occupational and Professional Licensure
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).

Career Planning Publications

The American Therapeutic Recreation Association at www.tr.org and the National Recreation and Park Association at www.nrpa.org provide valuable information on curricula and faculty in health and human services and parks, recreation, and leisure studies profession. These sources identify the degree levels offered and accreditation status of each program.



Inquiries

Careers

National Therapeutic Recreation Society
22377 Belmont Ridge Road
Ashburn, VA 20148-4501
703 858-2151
800 626-NRPA—membership information and other services
703 858-0794 Fax
E-mail: ntrs@nrpa.org

American Therapeutic Recreation Association
207 Third Avenue
Hattiesburg, MS 39401
601 450-2872
601 582-3354 Fax
www.atra-tr.org

Certification

National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification
7 Elmwood Drive
New City, NY 10956
845 639-1439
845 639-1471 Fax
E-mail: nctrc@nctrc.org
www.nctrc.org

Program Accreditation

National Recreation and Park Association
Council on Accreditation
22377 Belmont Ridge Road
Ashburn, VA 20148-4501
703 858-2150
703 858-0794 Fax
E-Mail: coa@nrpa.org
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