For people with spinal cord injuries, leisure activity can be an integral part of the rehabilitation process.

By Judy Askins, C.T.R.S.

Therapeutic recreation can significantly enhance the quality of life of people with spinal cord injuries and related neuromuscular diseases. For almost two decades, this type of therapy has made a difference in the lives of thousands of patients at Shepherd Spinal Center in Atlanta.

Leisure activities are a problem for many people with spinal cord injuries (SCI), because their injuries eliminate many of their familiar leisure options.

People with SCI experience a dramatic change in the way their time is spent. They typically do not return to work right away and must adjust to sudden "forced leisure."

With this new forced leisure, people with SCI are often required to make sudden, radical lifestyle changes. Depending on the severity of their injury, they may have to learn new leisure skills. This is often a difficult task since, typically, leisure was not highly valued prior to their injury.

Many people, unsure what to do with this additional free time, turn to substance abuse and a sedentary lifestyle. Statistics show that the SCI population has an unemployment rate of 83 percent. Between 40 percent to 60 percent are substance abusers, more than 30 percent are socially isolated and 31 percent watch six or more hours of television a day(1).

In addition, studies have shown that there is a distinct relationship between leisure patterns and secondary medical complications. The more sedentary or passive a person is, for example, the more medical
Perscription: PLAY

Complications increase, and the less satisfied the person becomes with his or her leisure time. But as leisure satisfaction levels increase, medical complications decrease.

Therapeutic recreation is a vital part of the comprehensive rehabilitation program offered at Shepherd Spinal Center. Everyone admitted to the center is referred to the Therapeutic Recreation (TR) department for services.

The TR department helps each person establish goals and habits for leading productive leisure lifestyles. Leisure education classes are held to help people discover their leisure values and assess their pre-injury lifestyle patterns. In addition, new leisure options are discovered through community reintegration outings and meetings with specialists. Developing a leisure plan and locating resources to carry out this plan are worked on throughout a person’s stay at Shepherd.

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**Structured Recreation**

Shepherd’s TR department consists of seven certified therapeutic recreation specialists (CTRS) who receive referrals from physicians to see all of the rehab center’s acutely injured spinal cord and neuromuscular patients. The CTRSs meet with patients during the first week after they are admitted. They assess each client, gathering information about the person’s leisure history and interests, the leisure resources used and his or her attitude toward recreation. If the patient is experiencing medical complications or is too ill to begin an assessment, the CTRS will meet with him or her briefly to establish rapport with the person.

Based on the assessment, leisure goals are established to be worked on throughout the person’s stay at Shepherd. These goals focus on areas such as community reintegration, leisure education, leisure skill development, mobility training and advocacy.

As with any other kind of therapy, clients are seen by the CTRSs for their individual treatment time throughout the day. The therapists provide counseling about returning to pre-injury leisure interests, developing new leisure interests and possible adaptations needed to pursue those interests. People are also encouraged to identify benefits of their leisure time and to consider the important part leisure played in their lives before their injury.

Each week, the person meets with the CTRS to work on the goals established during the initial evaluation. In turn, the CTRS attends the interdisciplinary treatment team meeting each week to report on the progress made toward meeting these goals, as well as to receive information from other team members that is relevant to the treatment of each individual.

This team approach is key to the success of the entire treatment program. Often, the CTRS works with other rehab team members to assess and meet the needs of the person. This may involve crafting a piece of adapted equipment to allow a quadriplegic to fish, or meeting to discuss a person’s physical limitations in preparation for his or her next wheelchair mobility outing. In a weekly group session held by the social work and psychological services departments, clients often discuss the impact of outings such as a weekend camping trip.

In addition to the CTRSs, the TR department has a staff of five program specialists, focused on the areas of sports, cultural arts, the outdoors, horticulture and aquatics. Based on the individual goals established, a person may be referred to meet with one of these specialists about a specific area of interest, such as hunting, waterskiing, arts and crafts or gardening. They also take people on community reintegration outings to practice a particular skill such as fishing in a local lake, which also provides the opportunity to deal with mobility...
Above, therapists help patients work out in the Pro Motion training room. Below, Shepherd’s TR specialists use adapted devices to help high quads enjoy activities such as photography.

issues such as rough terrain. Safety is emphasized in all leisure activities, and patients are provided with the resources to assist them in continuing these pursuits following their discharge.

Special Events

In addition to its ongoing services, Shepherd’s TR department organizes special events throughout the year. The annual Adventure Skills workshop takes place each September. This four-day, overnight event is held at an accessible camp facility and includes scuba diving, waterskiing, riflery, all-terrain vehicles and fishing. The workshop is open to people with physical disabilities across the country.

Each October, a weeklong Very Special Arts Festival is held in conjunction with Very Special Arts of Georgia. Open to inpatients, staff and the community, it features instruction in a wide range of cultural art options, art shows and performances, by both disabled and able-bodied people.

Shepherd’s horticulture therapy program includes a wide range of equipment, from hand-held tools to an adapted riding lawn mower. An accessible greenhouse and two raised garden beds were created for people with balance problems and wheelchair users.

The Pro Motion health and wellness center is the newest addition to Shepherd’s TR program. The on-site, 30,000-square-foot facility offers a 25-yard pool, gymnasium, indoor track and weight room, as well as a craft room with pottery wheels, a kiln, a dark room and a woodworking room. Pro Motion is fully accessible for people with disabilities. It is used with the inpatient population for therapy and is also open to the general community and available for staff members. Classes and clinics cover a variety of areas including photography, scuba diving, hydro-aerobics and weight training.

Shepherd’s community athletic teams for people with spinal cord injuries are also organized through Pro Motion. These teams include the Peachtree Spinners wheelchair track and field team, the Rolling Thunder quad rugby team, and swimming, air rifle and basketball teams. The newest addition is the recently formed fencing team, the only disabled fencing team in the United States.

Community partnerships are another important part of helping people with SCI. Shepherd’s TR department works with Delta Airlines on airport mobility training and travel issues. Patients close to discharge who are interested in plane travel attend this interdisciplinary outing with TR therapists, who work in conjunction with nursing and physical and occupational therapy.

The group travels to the airport using Atlanta’s public transportation system, the MARTA rail line. Participants are instructed on how to use the rail line, addressing seating and accessibility issues and safety concerns. Once at the airport, Delta representatives meet with the group to discuss travel issues and how to make travel as a disabled person easier. This not only gives clients valuable exposure to difficult transfers and practice in providing instructions to others that may be assisting them, but also serves as a training session for the flight attendants.

Footnote
1, 2 Trader, B., Leisure Education in SCI Rehabilitation, Shepherd Spinal Center, 1988.

Judy Askins, a certified therapeutic recreation specialist, is the director of therapeutic recreation at Shepherd Spinal Center. The center’s TR department received the 1991 Outstanding Agency of the Year Award from the National Therapeutic Recreation Society.

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