

The American Therapeutic Recreation Association Information Sheet

Recreational Therapy and Older Adults

Recreational therapists work as part of an interprofessional team of clinicians providing services to older adults. These older adults may live in skilled nursing and long term care facilities, assisted living, independent retirement communities, physical rehabilitation or subacute care units, or live in their own homes within the community. With older adults, Recreational Therapists “treat and help maintain the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of their clients.”¹ In addition, Recreational Therapists address the social and recreational needs of those they serve.



Recreational Therapy, also known as therapeutic recreation, is a systematic process that utilizes recreation and other activity-based interventions to address the assessed needs of individuals with illnesses and/or disabling conditions, as a means to psychological and physical health, recovery and well-being. Further, Recreational Therapy means a treatment service designed 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 (ATRA, 2015).

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) recognizes that the role of the Recreational Therapist in working with the older adult is to “reduce depression, stress and anxiety; recover basic motor functioning and reasoning abilities; build confidence; and socialize effectively.”¹ While addressing functional skill and abilities, Recreational Therapists also promote the individual's quality of life. Recreational Therapy is different than services offered by Activity programs, although a Recreational Therapist may be involved in both. Qualified Recreational Therapists have specific training, national certification, licensure in some states, and meet the CMS definition.

Recreational Therapists are trained in lifespan developmental psychology, anatomy and physiology, abnormal psychology, coping strategies and mechanisms, group dynamics and structures, social interaction, activity analysis, and strategies to assist the individual to function as independently as possible.

Areas of focus during Recreational Therapy Interventions include, but are not limited to:

- Reducing depression, stress, and anxiety
- Improving motor functioning
- Increasing cognitive skills
- Assisting to establish routines

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Recreational Therapy and Older Adults *(continued)*

- Increasing tolerance and endurance for participation in life and social activities
- Improving social interaction and skills
- Enhancing coping skills
- Maintaining strength, balance and endurance
- Assisting with community integration after an illness or disabling condition
- Promoting active aging, wellness, and healthy living

Older Adult Services provided by Recreational Therapists:

In the U.S., the older adult population (those 65+ years of age) has increased by 10 million people from 2004 to 2014, and is projected to more than double by 2060,² as Baby Boomers retire. In 2014, only 3.2% (or 1.5 million) people lived in institutional settings, meaning that 96.8% of older adults are living and being served in their community.² In 2016, 1.7 million people were employed in working with older adults in skilled nursing facilities alone.³ Based on these statistics, Recreational Therapists will continue to serve those in institutional settings, but will also provide community-based services through home care services, senior centers and other community services.

- In long term care, assisted living, and retirement communities, Recreational Therapists provide services and therapy interventions to maintain or

improve a person's functional abilities to the highest practical level, while enhancing an individual's quality of life. Individuals served in these settings may live with chronic medical conditions, severe pain, permanent disabilities, and dementia or Alzheimer's, as well as requiring ongoing assistance with activities of daily living or need for some type of support or supervision.

- In physical rehabilitation and subacute units, Recreational Therapists provide medically necessary therapy services, under the direction of a physician designed to improve or enhance an individual's functioning and return to life activities. These services may be provided in rehabilitation after a hospital stay, upon recovery from an illness, injury or surgery.
- In community-based settings and services, Recreational Therapists provide interventions to maintain or improve a person's functional abilities to enable them to live in the community for as long as possible. This may include, but is not limited to: exercise, balance and other physical interventions; cognitive skills training and stimulation; recreational and social activities to promote engagement or interaction; coping and support groups; educational programs related to aging, health, finances, and community resources; and promoting community involvement and engagement.

¹Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. (2011). *CMS' RAI version 3.0 manual, appendix A: Glossary and common acronyms*. Bethesda, MD: Author, p. A-18.

²Administration on Aging: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *A profile of older Americans: 2015*. Retrieved from http://www.aoa.acl.gov/aging_statistics/profile/2015/docs/2015-Profile.pdf

³American Health Care Association. (2016). *Fast facts*. Retrieved from https://www.ahcancal.org/research_data/trends_statistics/Pages/Fast-Facts.aspx



Recreational Therapists are professionally credentialed by the National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification (NCTRC). The Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist (CTRS) "exemplifies the profession's dedication to quality standards and excellence." The CTRS is recognized as the qualified provider of recreational therapy services.

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