

The American Therapeutic Recreation Association Information Sheet

Recreational Therapy with Military Service Members and Veterans

Recreational Therapy (RT) uses many types of interventions and activities to improve and promote the health of veterans and other military service members.



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).

When working with active military and veterans, the specific purposes of Recreational Therapy is to:

- Restore physical and mental functioning
- Facilitate home and community reintegration
- Increase family functioning
- Promote quality of life for veterans, service members, and their supporters

The type of treatment and programming depends on type of injury/disorder, cause of injury/disorder, purpose of the service organization (e.g., medical center, community program), and the generation of military service member served (e.g., post-9/11, Gulf War, Vietnam veterans).

RT is commonly provided in physical rehabilitation and mental health programs, during the transitional phase between rehabilitation and home, or after veterans have returned to their home and community. Many RTs use leisure education; programs with a family and supporter focus; recreation, leisure, and sport skill building; and connection with other veteran support organizations in the community.

Examples of therapeutic approaches and their outcomes include:

- Recreation, leisure, and sport to increase specific physical, cognitive, and social skills.

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Recreational Therapy with Military Service Members and Veterans *(continued)*

- Leisure education to increase awareness of positive, health promoting leisure activities.
- Therapeutic use of art and music to improve motor skills, expression of emotions, and increase social skills.
- Adaptive recreation, sport, and leisure activity to increase specific skills related to the activity, improve family and other interpersonal relationships, increase perceived competence and self-efficacy, and increase the use of recreation as a stress management technique.
- Animal-assisted therapy, such as canine and equine-assisted interventions, to assist with gross and fine motor skills, improve attention span, improve communication skills, and improve trust.
- Yoga to improve balance, pain management, self-awareness, and its use as a coping skill.
- Therapeutic camps to increase family functioning, provide time for self-reflection and self-awareness, promote expression of emotions, increase recreation and leisure skills (Townsend, Hawkins, & Bennett, 2015).
- Nature interventions to promote strengths-based outcomes (e.g., prevailing in adversity, developing identity, social connections, sense of purpose) (Hawkins, Townsend, & Garst, 2016).
- Home/community-based recreational therapy interventions that take a strengths-based approach to recovery (Thompson, Bennett, Sable, & Gravink, 2016).

These approaches are used to help treat veterans and service members who have conditions such as brain injury, post-traumatic stress, depression, limb loss, spinal cord injury, military sexual trauma, substance abuse, and many other diagnoses.



Hawkins, B.L., Townsend, J.A., & Garst, B.A. (2016). Nature-based recreational therapy for military service members: A strengths approach. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 50(1), 55-74.

Thompson, C.V., Bennett, J.L., Sable, J.R., & Gravink, J. (2016). Northeast Passage PATH™ program: A strengths-based recovery oriented approach for veterans who experience mental health issues. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 50(2), 138-154.

Townsend, J.A., Hawkins, B.L., & Bennett, J.L. (2015). Chapter 12: Military Service Members. In D. Austin, M. Crawford, B. McCormick, & M. Van Puymbroeck (Eds.), *Recreational Therapy: An Introduction* (pp. 253-277). Champaign, IL: Sagamore Publishing.



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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