



Promoting Community Integration Through Leisure & Recreational Activities

Research has shown that physical recreation (such as hiking) and social recreation (such as going to the movies with friends) play an important role in improving everyone's quality of life, whether or not they have been diagnosed with a mental illness. Recreation has even been shown to reduce hospitalizations in individuals diagnosed with mental illnesses.

Benefits of Leisure and Recreational Activities

Physical and/or social recreation and leisure can be beneficial in the following ways:

- Improve physical health
- Improve self-esteem
- Improve mood
- Increase energy and activity levels
- Reduce side effects of medication (e.g., weight gain)
- Reduce depression and anxiety
- Provide a distraction from stressful situations

Unfortunately, it can be difficult for individuals diagnosed with mental illnesses to pursue leisure and recreational activities.

Barriers to Participation in Leisure and Recreational Activities

Despite the fact that physical and social recreational and leisure activities have many positive effects, people diagnosed with mental illnesses are often significantly less active and may have more difficulties with social inclusion than the general population. This may be because there are many barriers to overcome:

⇒ **Negative attitudes and discrimination against individuals diagnosed with mental illnesses may prevent some of them from participating in leisure/recreational activities.**

In the article *Just Sit Down So We Can Talk: Perceived Stigma and Community Recreational Pursuits of People with Disabilities*, Leandra Bedini writes, "Attitudes can be one of the most powerful barriers to their pursuit of leisure that individuals [persons with mental illness] can experience."

⇒ **The importance of leisure and recreational activities is often overlooked. Often those who provide mental health services do not recognize how much leisure and recreational activities can improve the overall quality of life, increase pleasure and reduce stress for individuals diagnosed with mental illnesses.**

⇒ **Decision-making in leisure and recreational activities may be difficult. People may be unsure of their interests or how to pursue them.**

Improving Leisure and Recreational Opportunities

To improve recreational opportunities, remember:

- It doesn't have to cost a lot to be fun. There are many low-cost activities that are fun, relaxing, and may provide opportunities to meet new people. Such activities include practicing yoga, joining a book group, biking, playing sports or a musical instrument, painting, joining a writers' circle, gardening, and going on nature walks.
- Take inventory. Inventories can help identify interests.
- Check the paper. Local papers often have a "Things to Do" section that lists local activities. Many of these activities are free or inexpensive.
- Talk about interests with others. Friends, family, and service providers can help identify interests and should encourage participation in leisure and recreational activities.

Resources and Internet Sites

Information on the Benefits of Recreation and Leisure

Institute on Community Integration: Social Inclusion Through Recreation: What's the Connection?
<http://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/162/over2.html>

Providing Inclusive Recreation Opportunities: The Cincinnati Model.
<http://www.ncaonline.org/ncpad/inclusion.shtml>

Leisure and Recreational Activities

Official U.S. Web site of recreational opportunities on federal land.
<http://www.recreation.gov/>

National Recreation and Park Association. <http://www.nrpa.org>

Therapeutic Recreation — Activity and Treatment Ideas for Recreation Therapy. <http://www.recreationtherapy.com/tractv.htm>

Exercise for Persons with Disabilities

Exercising with a disability: Physical activity is within your reach.
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/exercise/SM00042>

Physical activity for everyone. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/index.htm>

References

Bedini, L. "Just Sit Down So We Can Talk: Perceived Stigma and Community Recreation Pursuits of People with Disabilities." *Therapeutic Recreation Journal* (2000). 34 (3) 55-68.

