



November 11, 2021

SUBMITTED ELECTRONICALLY

RE: COVID-19, Mental Health Care in Adolescents and Young People, and the Role of Recreational Therapists

Dear Senator,

The American Therapeutic Recreation Association (ATRA) has watched with interest and concern as new data has highlighted the significant impact COVID-19 has had on adolescent and young people's mental health outcomes. As recreational therapists, we are trained to use a variety of services to help patients address mental health challenges, as well as other areas of daily life. Therefore, we recognize the critical need to ensure that resources are in place following the public health emergency to ensure that young people are able to successfully manage the stress and anxiety associated with COVID-19.

In mental health care, recreational therapists support patients with cognitive, social, leisure and physical activity, as well as stress management techniques, to improve a patient's overall health. Recreation therapy (RT) for mental health incorporates activities including music, sports, dance, art, and outdoor activities to help a patient find strategies that work for them to manage stress and ensure they have a healthy outcome for managing their mental healthcare. This type of therapy can be particularly helpful and attractive to individuals, including adolescents, as an alternative outlet.

ATRA is committed to advancing access to recreational therapy and ensuring that individuals, in particular adolescents, are able to receive care that suits their interests and needs and supports the development of functional skills for daily living and stress release. ATRA is the largest professional association representing recreational therapy. Recreational therapists are nationally certified, and where applicable, state-licensed to provide evidence-based treatment services for individuals with a range of disabling conditions across the lifespan. Recreational therapy is active treatment, medically necessary, and can be prescribed by a physician as part of a patient's plan of care.

Impact of COVID-19 on Adolescent Mental Health

Recent data coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that adolescents' and young people's mental health has suffered disproportionately during the public health emergency. Data shows that during the beginning of the pandemic, more than 25% of high school students reported worsened emotional and cognitive health. A survey conducted further into the pandemic showed that only one-third of high school students were able to cope with their sources of stress, which include strained mental health and peer relationships.¹

Furthermore, during the pandemic, parents with children ages 5-12 reported their children showed elevated symptoms of depression (4%), anxiety (6%), and psychological stress (9%), and experienced overall worsened mental or emotional health (22%).²

The impact from the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the next public health emergency: stress, depression, and anxiety among young people and adolescents. To respond to this, serious steps must be taken with interdisciplinary mental health teams deployed. To support young people as they cope post-pandemic, the use of an interdisciplinary team needs to be empowered to ensure that young people have the resources to create healthy coping related stress and mental health crises.

The Important Role that Recreational Therapists Play

Recreational Therapy (RT) embraces a definition of "health" which includes not only the absence of "illness," but extends to enhancement of physical, cognitive, emotional, social and leisure development so individuals may participate fully and independently in chosen life pursuits. RTs seek to reduce depression, stress and anxiety in their clients and help build confidence and socialize in their community.

RT are beneficial for adolescents and young people by finding active, creative, social or intellectual outlets that reduce stress and manage emotions. A recreational therapist is an important and crucial part of a care team supporting young people and adolescents who have been significantly and adversely affected by the public health epidemic.

To better explain the role of RT, we have provided some examples of recreational therapy services specific to adolescents with mental health conditions:

- A recreational therapist in Virginia works at a residential treatment center for adolescents with mental health diagnoses. Utilizing stress management interventions like guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, Tai Chi, and yoga, recreational therapy services help adolescents reach goals like decreasing symptoms of depression and anxiety while increasing self-confidence and personal grounding.

¹ FAIR Health White Paper. The Impact of COVID-19 on Pediatric Mental Health: A Study of Private Healthcare Claims. March 2, 2021. <https://www.fairhealth.org/article/fair-health-releases-study-on-impact-of-covid-19-on-pediatric-mental-health>

² Verlenden, JV; Pampati, S; Rasberry, CN; et al. Association of the Children's Mode of School Instruction with Child and Parent Experiences and Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic – COVID Experiences Survey, United States, October 8–November 13, 2020. MMWR Morb Mortality Wkly Rep 2021; 70:369–376.

- Another recreational therapist works in a school in New Mexico with high school students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) who are experiencing increased anxiety during COVID-19. Recreational therapy services help the students cope with feelings of fear, worry, and hopelessness through after school, group therapy sessions for teaching emotions identification, coping skills, and adjustment strategies to navigate their ever-changing daily schedules.
- Lastly, a recreation therapist in Colorado utilizes nature-based, adventure therapy interventions for adolescents with mental health diagnoses. Goals of improving adolescents' self-confidence, problem solving skills, and sense of community are achieved through outcomes-based, recreational therapy modalities that include kayaking, rock climbing, high and low ropes courses, and wilderness hiking.

Conclusion

We welcome the opportunity to speak with you more about what RT is, and how it can help in responding to the mental health emergency as a result of COVID-19. Please do not hesitate to reach out to the American Therapeutic Recreation Association (ATRA) directly, please contact Brent Wolfe, ATRA Executive Director, at brent@atra-online.com or by phone at (703) 234-4140.

Sincerely,

Brent Wolfe, on behalf of ATRA

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