

Guest Editorial

The Benefits and Barriers to Leisure Occupations

Leisure may be central to the lives of individuals with complex neurological disabilities because their opportunities for employment are rare, carers and assistive technology support their self-care, and therefore opportunities for leisure are their main resource for avoiding occupational deprivation.

Many researchers have written about the factors affecting leisure satisfaction, what makes them meaningful and the leisure occupations that individuals engage in. This special edition seeks to highlight the importance of leisure as a key variable in an individual's quality of life, placing it further up the agenda for commissioners and funding bodies and busy members of the multi disciplinary health care team. As John F. Kennedy said in 1961 when addressing the White House Conference on Aging, "It is not enough. . . to have added new years to life. Our objective must be to add new life to those years."

Leisure activities being freely chosen contribute to a sense of personal identity and control, and help the individual to adapt to life with a disability through linking their past and present self. They also help individuals coping with stress and negative life events because they tend to choose leisure activities that they feel successful in, which encourage positive reflection on achievements. Encouraging leisure gives opportunities to experience self-efficacy, self-worth, creativity and self-expression with unengaging leisure being significantly related to negative mental health outcomes.

Social leisure occupations reinforce social/cultural roles and values, facilitate social approval and self identity, through feedback from others. While solitary leisure provides an opportunity for self-reflection contributing to identity development and to transcending negative life events. A lack of engagement in social occupations creates a sense of truncated experience, which reduces the sense of competence, self-

determination and shared understanding of society and its culture.

Preventing boredom depends on a finely tuned regime of challenge and stimulation since insufficient information motivates exploration, and insufficient challenge leads to boredom, while overload also leads to boredom and the inability to deal with information successfully and in extreme cases shutting down.

Goal orientation/purposefulness is unique to the individual and can lead to a sense of pride in achievement if successful, contributing to a perception of life satisfaction. Individuals grow based on the challenges encountered as they move through the life span. Life is made up of reality orientating occupations, which alter across the lifespan, e.g. a play focussed in childhood leading to a work focus in adulthood.

Altruism, companionship and the shared values, which are part of belonging to a group, can be more important than the occupation itself. Other leisure activities can be given meaning by rules, rituals, customs, and traditions. Gender, age, educational level, ethnicity and socio-economic status all affect leisure engagement patterns as do personal abilities, the choices available and cultural value judgements.

Creativity which involves concentration and exhilaration could be a defining feature of 'flow', and is refreshing, invigorating, being an outlet for self-expression, freedom and enjoyment, acting as a catalyst for growth while creating a legacy for the future, and allowing others to see who we really are.

Achievement leisure is demanding, requires commitment and challenges the individual by pushing the boundaries of previous experience, thus contributing to personal growth. Interaction with the occupation and with others, experimentation and personal growth

are important factors to investing an occupation with meaning.

The value of a change of environment when carrying out different types of occupations, to replace the routine and change of location involved in employment has been highlighted.

So when Bhogal et al. [3] reported an 80% reduction in participation in leisure activities after a stroke they described a major decline in opportunities for defining and expressing individuality. Many authors suggest that leisure participation reduces following neuro-disability due to the barriers experienced when either participating in or facilitating leisure activities. Backman [2] attributed the fall in leisure participation to a perception of constraint, related to loss of interest, lack of facilities/support, reduced ability, or lack of time. Other barriers to leisure engagement documented in the literature include:

The attitude of others has a profound impact on the quality and quantity of leisure that individuals engage in. If carers do not value the importance of leisure in the lives of individuals, this can discourage or fail to facilitate the individual to attend or join in. An evaluation of both the leisure occupation and its requirements and the individual's abilities and preferences is needed in order to be able to adapt an leisure occupation to the individual's needs and abilities. Leisure facilitators need to be aware of the demands of the occupation, the needs of the individual and the impact of their diagnoses, and evaluation, empowerment and enabling techniques.

Additionally, the attitudes of fellow participants can have a major effect on the leisure opportunities taken up. Much of the awkwardness displayed by able-bodied people towards people with disabilities is more the result of ignorance, fear and lack of familiarity than outright prejudice, however it can manifest itself as abusive or patronizing behaviour or avoidance of contact, even in the 21st century.

Limited activity tolerance means that either individuals can participate in time-limited activities or that other participants are disturbed when the individual has to withdraw.

Challenging behaviour can be distracting to others or unpredictable and can sometimes be the most prominent symptom of a neurological disability to the observer, making social skills harder to use and interpret which impacts on social activities. Cognitive impairment can manifest itself as rigidity, an insistence on doing things "my way," and a refusal to try something new. Challenging behaviour in individuals with cognitive deficits may be a sign of unmet need such as oc-

cupational deprivation, boredom, over-stimulation or challenge.

Communication problems can depend on many factors that include an individual's previous abilities, and the severity of the neurological damage. Assistive communication technologies require interpretation skills from the receiver of the communication especially if they are using mutually incompatible or unfamiliar communication methods.

The unpredictability of emotional lability reactions can affect social relationships, being distracting and embarrassing to both the individual and those around them.

Physical access can present substantial challenges, e.g., the use of a tilt in space wheelchair and ventilator combined require a far bigger chair than an average attendant propelled chair.

Understanding leisure contexts is important because of its impact upon quality of life, the meaning assigned to leisure, and includes the environment, its atmosphere and the participants themselves who may not be used to using free time for leisure activities. A range of environments for leisure occupations can replace the routine and change of location involved in going out to work for some individuals.

Life with a complex neurological disability can be characterized by dependence and lack of control. So a lack of interest and a lack of motivation to join in non-routine activities is not unusual.

Support for leisure occupations such as holidays and outings may be reliant on the good will of a carer who is willing to respond to hitches and emergencies sometimes in isolation. Human nature being what it is, carers may be more willing to support individuals to and participate in activities that interest the carer.

Leisure activities for people with disabilities can be more expensive because of the carer support, adaptations and equipment or special transport needs of the individual.

Spirituality and beliefs can contribute and challenge meaning and purpose in life and can be explored through leisure occupations.

Support for leisure occupations engagement can include adapting the occupation, the use of assistive technology or the environment; experimenting with and choosing new leisure activities, which satisfy individual needs, or using them as a therapeutic media.

This special edition contains articles about adapting activities to the needs of the individual be they physical [4] or cognitive [10]. It also addresses adaptations to leisure through computer use [1] and creativity [6]

based leisure occupations and the use of sensory stimulation as a leisure tool through activities such as multi sensory environments [5], music [9] and a sensory spectacular [12] are proposed. It also addresses adaptation to disability through leisure [8] of the right type for the individual [11] and which is meaningful to the individual; and leisure programme design based around the sensory diet [7].

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