



American Therapeutic Recreation Association

founded in 1984

NEWS RELEASE

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ATRA Recreational Therapists to Lead Research at NIH

(Alexandria, VA) ATRA Member Carmen Russoniello will be seeking to further understand the healing benefits of fun with investigators at the National Institutes of Health.

Recreational Therapy Clinicians at the NIH Clinical Center and researchers at East Carolina University will collaborate on the Recreational Therapy efficacy study. Dr. George Patrick, Chief of Recreational Therapy at NIH and Lead researcher Carmen Russoniello from East Carolina University will head a team of investigators for a study entitled: *A Randomized Controlled Study of the Efficacy of Recreational Therapy in Reducing Stress and Improving Mood* conducted with the National Cancer Institute.

Russoniello, a former President and current team leader for ATRA will spend two months as a guest researcher at the Mark O. Hatfield Clinical Research Center in Bethesda, Maryland, to further the findings of his doctoral dissertation, which found links between recreational activity and improvements in the participants' physical and psychological symptoms. By examining shifts in participants' brain chemistry, hormone levels, and perceived mood before and after sessions, Russoniello hopes to expand the study and track how recreational activity can affect symptoms caused from depression, stress and pain.

Russoniello, an East Carolina University recreation and leisure studies professor explains "It's hard to be worried when your mind is occupied with doing something, especially when it is something you enjoy. While we intuitively know that it is impossible to have fun and be depressed at the same time, researchers had never looked at what biochemical changes occur when people engage in activities they enjoy. In previous work, Russoniello found that physiological changes such as cortisol (a stress hormone) levels had decreased and positive mood states had increased after participation in recreational activities." During his time at NIH, Russoniello will be looking at these and other biochemical changes, such as levels of dopamine and catecholamines.

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Participants will be assigned in random order to participate in one of three conditions: Recreation therapy, sedentary recreational activity without a therapist and stress management video. The goal is to determine the mood and stress effects of the recreational activity by itself, the recreational activity when directed by a therapist, and to then compare both to a control group that will watch a video on stress management. "By doing so we hope to further understand the processes that underlie enjoyment and how they affect dysfunctional conditions such as depression. We also want to determine the effect of the recreational activity and that of the therapist in reducing stress and improving mood" Russoniello explains.

ATRA President Nancy McFarlane shares the importance of this research, "This study could help further establish the beneficial effects of recreational therapy intervention." Russoniello describes how an important aspect in the study is the participant's enjoyment of the activity, "Establishing a link between recreational activity and feeling better could someday provide a "prescription" for fun where a person could reliably engage in certain kinds of activity in order to boost desirable chemical and hormone levels."

For more information about recreational therapy, please contact the ATRA National Office at (703) 683-9420.

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The American Therapeutic Recreation Association (ATRA) was founded in 1984 to advance the profession of therapeutic recreation. ATRA is a non-profit, professional membership organization dedicating 100% of resources and efforts to promote therapeutic recreation professionals in health care and human service settings. For more information, please contact the ATRA National Office.
