
Integrating Functional Activities into Acute Physical Therapy

Today's health care market and its insurance parameters often require a heightened focus on maximizing the outcomes patients achieve within a limited time frame. The field of physical therapy is continually working to stay on top of such changes in health care. As we focus on achieving excellent patient outcomes, it is also necessary to address patients' functional deficits as quickly as possible. This adds value to the patient experience as well as provides outcomes required by payers and referral sources.

Therefore, it is important to integrate functional activities into acute physical therapy early in the course of treatment. However, it is equally important to realize successful outcomes do not necessarily correlate to the patients' pain reports. Physical therapy can achieve both functional goals and pain-based goals, but oftentimes we focus too narrowly on resolving patient pain, which may affect the restoration of function.

Pain can be an ill-defined entity that a therapist "chases" during the course of patient care, but function is a very concrete measure of patient progress. A patient's ability to perform functional tasks often occurs ahead of, or even in spite of, the continuation of pain. And, in some cases, discomfort may continue even with fully restored function. The sooner a therapist is able to integrate function and a reduction in pain, the better chances the patient has for a complete return to normal daily, sport, or work activities.

As therapists, we need to look immediately at function and how our skills can minimize or reverse any impairment in that function across all patient populations. The emphasis on integrated activity moves the focus from subjective pain complaints to objective functional deficits. By its very nature, emphasizing function with patients enables them to see how improvement in the classic testing indicators in therapy (i.e., range of motion, strength, segmental mobility of the spine, etc.) translates to their everyday lives. Most patients cannot appreciate a 15-degree increase in internal rotation of the shoulder, but they can see and feel improvements while dressing, throwing, or using hand tools.

Functional activities in therapy integrate the musculoskeletal and neuromotor systems more quickly when patients perform tasks that mirror or are, at the very least, similar to those performed in everyday life. The patient who maintains a neutral pelvic alignment when successfully performing one- and two-handed lifting activities experiences greater benefits, than when performing random exercises on a treatment table. This integration allows us to demonstrate directly to every patient how the more isolated stretching/strengthening exercises and manual therapy interventions can readily translate to greater functional gains.

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Carson Lux, a physical therapist for more than 20 years, has been with Accelerated Rehabilitation Centers for 10 years. Carson has extensive sports medicine and orthopedic rehabilitation experience, and was recently promoted to Director of Operations for the southwest Chicagoland area. Carson is involved in Accelerated's Industrial Rehabilitation program.