Abstract/Background Literature

This investigation sought to discover the lived experience of engaging in hippotherapy of a young adult post traumatic brain injury (TBI), and the impact hippotherapy might have on the reconstruction of self after a TBI. Hippotherapy is a specialized area of Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT). It is defined as an intervention utilizing horses that is planned and carried out by medical professionals to achieve functional as well as psychological outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Most research studies regarding hippotherapy have been conducted to explore the quantifiable, physical benefits of hippotherapy such as sitting posture, balance, and muscle tone. In one study, the intervention group that had received hippotherapy treatments had made statistically significant improvements in balance. Individuals diagnosed with physical disabilities and mental illnesses who engaged in therapeutic riding or hippotherapy have reported increased motivation, socialization, concentration, self-esteem, and commitment to physical exercise. In one study, six women with mental illnesses (e.g. depression) who engaged in riding therapy reported an increase in positive self-esteem and social interaction skills. After sustaining a TBI, impaired motor, cognitive, balance and postural control, and social behavior can result. When individuals acquire a TBI, their former self-concept may be severely disrupted or destroyed, requiring them to reconstruct a new sense of self. During adaptation, assessment of physical capabilities and the trading of old identities for new identities occur. Literature has revealed that 81% of individuals with TBI had not returned to previous leisure pursuits three to five years post injury. Engagement in meaningful activities can help individuals with TBI to adapt to their disabilities, rebuild self-concept and have a positive influence on overall quality of life. Lastly, meaningful occupations should contain three elements, the Call, Being-with, and Possibilities.

Methodology

A qualitative case study methodology was selected as a research design. Qualitative interview data was collected by an in-depth, semi-structured interview. To be considered for inclusion, the informants had to be between 18 and 35 years old, as this is the typical age range for acquiring TBI in young adults. The informants also needed to be participating in a hippotherapy program that was led by a licensed occupational therapist or occupational therapy assistant who is certified in hippotherapy, and had to volunteer to be interviewed and observed by the researchers. The informants were also required to have had pre-injury horseback riding experience, and to be someone who accurately represents the phenomena being studied. The data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed through a thematic analysis process.

Results

The results found three primary themes that emerged from the data, specifically, Departure from Former Self, Challenges in Recreating Former Self, and Successful Reconfiguration of Self Through Engagement in Hippotherapy. It was discovered that the participant’s injury resulted in a
departure from her former identity and occupational pursuits; and that engagement in the meaningful occupation of hippotherapy facilitated a positive recreation of a self identity. In contrast to the perceived meaningless therapeutic activities that the participant engaged in during clinical rehabilitation, engagement in an occupation that the client valued enhanced her physical progress, her perceptions of herself, and her hopes for the future.

Discussion

Themes similar to Departure from Former Self, are illustrated in current literature which describes the difficulties that individuals with TBI have with daily functioning abilities, such as self-care skills and leisure pursuits. The theme, Departure from Former Self, is also seen in other literature that describes how individuals with TBI are limited in returning to pre-injury activities as a result of impaired motor, cognitive, communication, and social behavior skills. As to the theme, Challenges of Recreating Self, current literature has also noted the challenges that individuals with TBI have with reconstructing a sense of self due to physical, behavioral, and psychosocial deficits. While the informant reported difficult social experiences that included negative behaviors and reactions of others, social stigma, and superficial friendships, the literature only reported general information about limited social participation. As to the third theme, Successful Reconfiguration of Self Through Hippotherapy, the limited available literature on hippotherapy has revealed like themes that show that hippotherapy and riding therapy helps individuals successfully reconstruct their sense of self through hippotherapy. The results of this investigation demonstrate that engagement in meaningful, valued occupations, like hippotherapy is instrumental in the facilitation of the physical and psychosocial progress and the reconstruction of the lives of individuals with TBI.

References


