

# ADVANCE YOUR PRACTICE SUMMIT

HEALING LONELINESS AND DISCONNECTION  
THROUGH RECREATIONAL THERAPY

**ATRA** AMERICAN THERAPEUTIC  
RECREATION ASSOCIATION



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## Advance Your Practice Summit Program

Event Dates: January 12 - February 7, 2026

Total CEUs Opportunity: 1.4 (14 Hours)

### A Panel-Format of RT Older Adult Experts on the Power of Connection for Aging Populations (0.15 CEUs)

Speakers: Presenters from ATRA's Older Adult Taskforce: Kaitlin Mueller, PhD, LRT, CTRS, Shelly Bates, PhD, CTRS, Lacey Speert, CTRS, Betsy Kemeny, PhD, CTRS, FDRT, Laura Kelly, MS, CTRS, CDP, Dawn DeVries, DHA, MPH, CTRS

**Session Description:** Social isolation is impacting aging populations at staggering rates in recent years. This panel-format presentation will include issues and trends specific to older adult care on social isolation and social prescribing.. RT experts in the field will share their practical steps to combat loneliness through social connection in the following older adult service areas: veteran care, Dementia-practice, private practice/HCBS, long term care, geripsych, and subacute rehabilitation. Applying social prescribing and social connection practices to the APIED process will help to equip RT practitioners in this panel presentation.

### A Multisensory Approach for the Brain (0.1 CEUs)

Speaker: Orquidea Tamayo Mortera (She/Her/Hers), MNZM - NZTRS, NZSDRT Inc.

**Session Description:** The Ronnie Gardiner Method is a multi-sensory brain training technique that uses rhythm, movement, color-coded symbols, speech, and music to stimulate cognitive and motor functions. It's especially effective for older adults and individuals with neurological or cognitive changes. RGM is typically delivered in group settings, fostering social interaction, shared experiences, and a sense of belonging. By engaging multiple senses, it enhances speech, memory, and executive function, helping participants communicate more confidently and connect with others. People that use RGM report feeling more energized and emotionally uplifted after sessions, which can reduce loneliness and increase motivation for social engagement. RGM is inclusive, and brings together people regardless of the condition. It also benefits people with Parkinson's, stroke, MS, dementia, ADHD, dyslexia, and even those seeking mental stimulation. Its adaptability across age and ability makes it a powerful community-building tool. Programs in NZ that focus on Adult Executive Function & Social Skills Groups show its real-world impact in helping people reconnect and thrive.

## AI and Loneliness: The Good, Bad, and Ugly for Recreational Therapy Practice (0.1 CEUs)

Speaker: Susan Purrington, PhD, CTRS, C-IAYT, Connecticut College

**Session Description:** This session examines the complex relationship between artificial intelligence technologies and loneliness within recreational therapy practice. As AI companions and chatbots become increasingly prevalent in healthcare, recreational therapists must understand their therapeutic potential and limitations. Recent research demonstrates that AI companions can significantly reduce loneliness, with effects comparable to human interaction in some contexts. However, these technologies also present ethical concerns, dependency risks, and questions about authentic therapeutic relationships. This session relates directly to the NCTRC job analysis by addressing how emerging technologies impact assessment (Tasks 2.01-2.02), treatment planning (Tasks 3.01-3.02), service delivery (Tasks 4.01-4.02), and professional competency maintenance (Task 1.02). Participants will explore evidence-based applications of AI tools while learning to critically evaluate their appropriateness within the therapeutic recreation process. The session emphasizes maintaining professional standards while adapting to technological advances in healthcare delivery.

## Beyond Physical Recovery: Addressing Social Wellness in a Physical Rehabilitation Setting (0.1 CEUs)

Speaker: Elizabeth Creasman, MS, CTRS, C-IAYT, Sheltering Arms Institute

**Session Description:** Therapeutic recreation in a physical rehabilitation setting contributes to a transdisciplinary care team with a unique scope to address social wellness. In this session, we will explore creation of patient centered care plans through use of the Promis Global 10 outcome measure. By collaborating with patients in goal setting, Recreation therapy can implement interventions that promote social connections beyond the hospital setting. Through community engagement opportunities, group interactions, and exploration of new recreation pursuits, recreation therapy can contribute to social wellness while also promoting physical recovery.

## Companion Volunteers and Recreational Therapy: Extending Connection and Belonging in Long-Term Care (0.1 CEUs)

Speaker: Paul P. Falkowski, Ph.D., National Association of Long-Term Care Volunteers

**Session Description:** Loneliness and social isolation are pressing concerns in long-term care, profoundly impacting health, wellbeing, and quality of life. Recreational therapists are uniquely positioned to address these issues, yet limited staffing and time often restrict opportunities for one-to-one connection. This session introduces the role of Companion Volunteers—trained individuals who extend the reach of recreational therapy by building authentic, supportive relationships with the people living in care. Participants will learn how volunteers can complement therapeutic programming, reinforce group engagement, and foster belonging among aging adults and veterans. The session will also highlight practical strategies for integrating volunteers into recreational therapy practice and explore how this approach aligns with national priorities such as

the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Loneliness and emerging social prescribing initiatives. Attendees will leave with a deeper understanding of how volunteer engagement strengthens therapeutic impact and contributes to a culture of authentic connection in long-term care.

## Connecting via Recreational Therapy and Telehealth to Combat Loneliness (0.1 CEUs)

Speaker: Holly Eichner, PhD, CTRS, University of Toledo and Mindful Healing Recreational Therapy

**Session Description:** The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated significant adaptations among educators and healthcare professionals, prompting the rapid adoption of alternative methods to fulfill professional responsibilities. In response, the fields of education and therapy have transitioned from a state of crisis management to the strategic integration of online learning and telehealth practices to enhance service delivery and educational outcomes (Forbes, 2024). There is an opportunity in Recreational Therapy professional preparation to build competencies in telehealth skills to meet the growing demands. The session will explore the adaptation of recreational therapy practices to incorporate telehealth interventions, enabling practitioners to support client progress toward therapeutic goals remotely. As telehealth continues to grow within the broader healthcare landscape, recreational therapists are uniquely positioned to employ evidence-based practices, client engagement strategies, and clinical judgment in virtual settings (Cole, et al., 2011; Doughty, et al., 2023; Eichner, 2022).

## Creating Belonging: Tackling Loneliness for People with Disabilities in Rural Areas (0.1 CEUs)

Speaker: Maggie Bayerl, M.Ed CTRS, The Ability Collective of Barry County

**Session Description:** This session explores the realities of loneliness and social isolation for people with disabilities living in rural areas. Drawing on both research and community experience, we'll examine the barriers to connection that often arise in rural life, including limited transportation, restricted peer networks, and social stigma. Participants will be guided through case examples and reflective activities that highlight how to identify individual and environmental needs, design inclusive opportunities for social connection, and adapt strategies to the resources available in small communities. The session emphasizes practical tools for developing and implementing programs that foster a sense of belonging, while also offering approaches for evaluating outcomes and communicating their impact. Attention is given to the role of the professional in modeling compassionate care, advocating for systemic change, and cultivating partnerships across community settings. Viewers will leave with concrete, adaptable strategies for reducing isolation and strengthening connections in rural disability communities.

## Espresso Cafes! A Recreational Therapy response for addressing loneliness and social isolation (0.15 CEUs)

Speaker: Vicky Pitner, CTRS, CDP, The L.O.V.E. Approach for Dementia

**Session Description:** In a 2023 survey, 40% of US adults felt disconnected from others due to social isolation and loneliness and are at higher risk for depression, heart disease and substance abuse. But sadly, adults are not the only ones experiencing a social disconnect. Research shows, since the pandemic, children and adolescents also experience health risks due to these same issues and can impact their overall development. An Espresso Cafe is an innovative community based therapeutic recreation program designed to increase social connectedness, decrease loneliness, foster feelings of well-being, and provide an opportunity to share and engage in a fun and meaningful experience in a supportive environment. By utilizing the expressive arts to process and express feelings, the core aspect is to support healing, create connectedness, decrease loneliness and provide opportunities to take risks for growth and personal development for all ages and specific groups (couples, teens, families) I believe as recreation therapists, we are on the cutting edge of possibilities, and are in a position to create a strategic plan dedicated exclusively to respond to the public health issue of social isolation and loneliness.

## Fighting Loneliness with Friendship: Fostering Connection With RT (0.1 CEUs)

Speaker: Tim Miller, MS, CTRS, HCA Florida Healthcare

**Session Description:** This session explores the connection between friendship and loneliness, focusing on common barriers such as self-isolation, insecure attachment styles, racism, technology, and stigma. Participants will review assessment tools like the UCLA Loneliness Scale and the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire to identify opportunities for therapeutic support. Evidence-based interventions—including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, mindfulness, leisure education, and peer support—will be discussed, with examples from acute behavioral health and community recreation settings. Attendees will learn how to use assessment data to guide interventions that promote meaningful friendships and reduce loneliness.

## Measuring Loneliness: Assessment Instruments and Opportunities for RT Practitioners (0.15 CEUs)

Speaker: Kristina Gordon, CTRS, University of Iowa

**Session Description:** From identifying strengths and supports to establishing a baseline and evaluating outcomes, assessments are foundational in the Therapeutic Recreation process. If we, as a profession, aim to decrease loneliness, we need to be able to measure it using valid and reliable strategies. This session intends to offer an overview of existing standardized assessment tools related to loneliness and a discussion of their potential applications and limits in therapeutic recreation settings. It concludes with an exploration of opportunities for the development of RT specific assessments and examples of custom instruments designed by students in the Therapeutic Recreation Program at the University of Iowa.

## Recreational Therapy Plays Key Role in Fostering Social Connections to Support Health of Clients (0.1 CEUs)

Speaker: Kara Schweitzer, MA, CTRS, University of Illinois Extension

**Session Description:** Multiple research studies show that social isolation and loneliness have a serious impact on the mental and physical health, longevity, and overall well-being of older persons. In fact, the World Health Organization has declared social isolation and loneliness a priority issue during the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing, 2021-2030. This session will highlight the difference between, prevalence of, and risk factors for social isolation and loneliness, and the connection between social engagement and health. The role recreational therapy professionals play in fostering social connections among their clients, and ideas for building social networks in their settings will be emphasized.

## Recreational Therapy: Responding to the Loneliness Epidemic (0.1 CEUs)

Speaker: Karen Carnicello Wenzel, Ph.D., CTRS, FDRT, Eastern Washington University

**Session Description:** Loneliness has been declared a public health epidemic, with mounting evidence linking it to adverse outcomes across physical health, cognitive functioning, mental health, and overall quality of life. This session examines the role of recreational therapy in addressing loneliness through evidence-based interventions. Participants will engage in self-reflection activities, distinguish between the concepts of loneliness and social isolation, and explore the underlying causes and contributing factors. The session will also include a critical review of assessment tools used to measure loneliness and track therapeutic outcomes. Emphasis will be placed on practical, client-centered recreational therapy approaches that promote meaningful connection and community integration

## Why Recreational Therapy Matters: An RT intervention to enhance mattering and reduce loneliness (0.1 CEUs)

Speaker: Bryan P. McCormick, PhD, CTRS, FDRT, FALS, Temple University

**Session Description:** People living with serious mental illness (SMI) experience significant disparities in terms of social exclusion, social disconnection and loneliness. These experiences frequently result in situations in which they exist in social networks in which they do not matter. Mattering is a psychological construct reflecting the degree to which people believe that others are aware of them, consider them important, and rely on them. Mattering is strongly connected with loneliness and is a phenomenon that can be enhanced. This session will present a clinical trial currently under way to support the creation of social connections that enhance a sense of mattering among people with SMI. Although this trial is focused on adults with SMI, the application of this approach to enhancing mattering and reducing loneliness has broad application among other groups who experience exclusion, disconnection and loneliness.

## Wired for Connection: Science of Loneliness, Friendship, and Happiness (0.15 CEUs)

Speaker: Shay Dawson PhD, CTRS, Central Michigan University

**Session Description:** Have you ever felt alone in a crowded room or longed for a friend who understands you? To be human is to struggle with the balance of friendship, loneliness, and the pursuit of happiness. Many are surprised to learn that in a hyperconnected world, loneliness has been deemed a public health epidemic. Recreational Therapy and Rehabilitation faculty member Shay Dawson will discuss the science of happiness, friendship and loneliness, including your current levels of loneliness and social support as well as the importance of finding reciprocal friendships through leisure social structures. Whether you're thriving socially or feeling a little lost, this conversation is for you. Because everyone deserves to feel connected—and sometimes, understanding the “why” behind our feelings is the first step toward building the kind of friendships that truly matter.



### ***Important Note***

*This program is NCTRC pre-approved for CEUs*

*The schedule is subject to change*

*Updated November 11, 2025*