

Purposeful Casting: Enhancing Occupational Engagement through Nature-Based Fly Fishing

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Background and Problem

Following separation from military services, veterans often report diminished occupational engagement, identity confusion, and social isolation.¹ Eighty percent of veterans avoid traditional

80%

therapeutic interventions for these challenges due to stigma and accessibility barriers.^{2,3,4} Nature-based and recreational therapies have shown promise in improving psychological well-being, but limited research explores their potential to support occupational engagement, and role integration.^{3,4}

This project, centered in the Person Environment-Occupation-Performance (PEOP) model, examines how peer-led, outdoor recreational activities, specifically fly fishing, impact veterans' sense of purpose, social connection, and wellbeing in meaningful daily roles.^{2,3}

Purpose

This project explores how nature-based recreation with peers fosters occupational readiness, purpose, and social-connectedness. Findings may inform the inclusion of occupational therapy (OT) within recreational programs to better support veterans' community integration and holistic well-being.

Method

Setting: The project was conducted in Boise, Idaho, in collaboration with Project Healing Waters and the Boise VA campus. Fly-fishing outings were held in accessible natural environments selected for their therapeutic qualities.

Participants: U.S. military veterans (N=17) of varied ages and abilities, recruited through Project Healing Waters.

Instrument Used: Author-developed survey to assess purpose, connection, and occupational readiness titled "Veteran Occupational Engagement Survey". Survey included 11 Likert-style and 3 open-ended questions.

Procedures: Informed consent and survey packets were distributed via email three days prior to each outing.

- Participants completed surveys before, immediately after, and seven days following each fly-fishing outing.
- Participants engaged in three standalone, single-day fly fishing outings. Trained volunteers were present to provide fly-fishing strategies to participants.
- The following evidence-based practices were implemented to support the experience during each outing:



Figure 1. Evidence-Based Strategies to Facilitate Success

Data Analysis: Pairwise analyses was used to maximize available data. Only participants with matched scores for each time point were included (Pre-Post: n = 9, Post-Follow: n = 8, Pre-Follow: n = 6). Analysis was conducted using Excel's statistical package to run Wilcoxon signed-rank tests on all available matched time points. Qualitative responses were coded and grouped into themes based on patterns in themes (purpose, social connection, and mood/coping.)

Results

A significant improvement from baseline to follow-up ($p = .042$, $z = 2.03$) in summative responses, and positive trends across all time points in each variable (social connection, purpose, occupational readiness) indicate meaningful participant gains. Qualitative themes of purpose, connection, and mood reinforce these results, suggesting that the outing offered both immediate and short-term improvements.

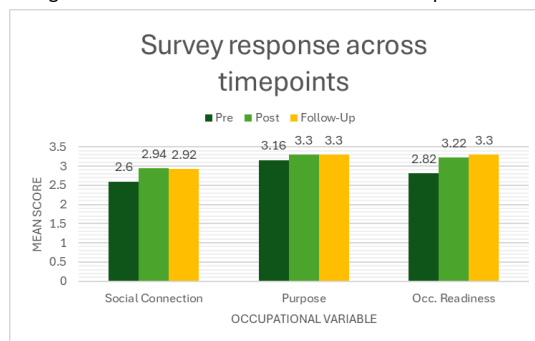


Figure 2. Mean scores in Occupational variable across three timepoints

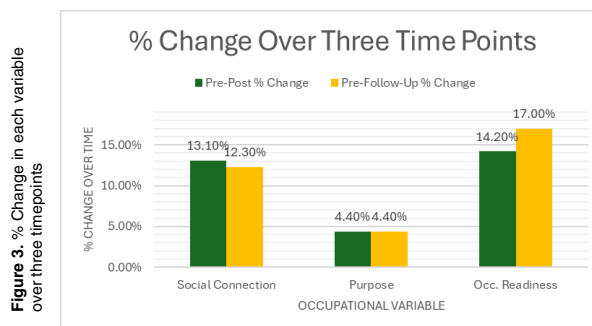


Figure 3. % Change in each variable over three timepoints

Purpose and Meaning

Routine-based, low motivation ► Renewed purpose ► Continued anticipation

Social Connection

Limited ties ► Mixed initial connection ► Sustained engagement

Mood & Coping

Varied coping ► Restorative experience ► Partial sustained improvements

Figure 4. Coding Output for Qualitative Response

Conclusions

Peer-led, nature-based recreation promoted meaningful gains in social engagement and occupational readiness, with significant improvements sustained at follow-up. Veterans described increased purpose, belonging, and stress reduction. Fly-fishing-based, peer-led, recreational therapy may serve as a catalyst for renewed occupational engagement, improved mood, and enhanced social connection among military veterans.

Implications for Occupational Therapy

Clinical Practice: This project underscores the value of expanding occupational therapy services beyond traditional clinical settings. It also aligns with occupational therapy's commitment to providing occupational justice, client-centered care, and community integration.

Future Research: This project serves to inform veteran-focused programming and support future policy development. It also positions occupational therapy as a vital contributor to veteran well-being.

Limitations: Small sample size, limited generalizability, convenience sampling/self-selection bias, missing data across timepoints, short follow-up period, reliance on self-reporting, single outing exposure, and researcher involvement/observer.

References

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