

Harnessing Physical Therapy Students to Support WWE Self-Directed Participants

Action on Arthritis 2021

Case

The prevalence of arthritis in America is at an all-time high with roughly 58 million Americans living with the debilitating joint disease.¹ At a statewide level, the incidence of age-adjusted arthritis in Massachusetts is between 21.6 and 23%.²

Arthritis can significantly limit individuals' ability to carry out functions of their normal routine beyond activities of daily living. For example, in Massachusetts, nearly half of adults with arthritis reported arthritis-attributable activity limitations and roughly one in five experience social restriction attributable to arthritis.² Moreover, more than one in four adults in Massachusetts experiences severe joint pain attributable to arthritis.²

Despite its ability to affect people of all ages, arthritis risk increases with age. Older adults, those over 65, are most at risk for developing arthritis and being adversely affected by its symptoms.³ Older adults are also more likely to need support with activities of daily living and may move to a nursing home, assisted living facility or other retirement community for additional support. Arthritis is a major cause of nursing home placement in seniors.⁴

Decreased mobility is also a function of older age. Roughly 90% of nursing home residents have limited mobility, which increases risk of accidental falls and medical problems, and can lead to lesser quality of life.⁵ Supporting older adults with low-impact walking or movement programs is one way to help them maintain mobility, health and independence, and to effectively manage their arthritis symptoms.

Actions

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the traditional in-person clinical experience for many physical therapy students, who often work with older adults. This led the leadership team of the Springfield College Department of Physical Therapy to innovatively pivot and created an opportunity for their Doctor of Physical Therapy students to have a remote experience guiding older adults through the Walk With Ease (WWE) self-directed program while still gaining the necessary educational experience.

The Springfield College Department of Physical Therapy developed a student coaching manual to guide the Doctor of Physical Therapy students in their role as a WWE coach and to introduce the students to the key principles that are components of this model of delivery. The manual includes a background about population health and physical therapy, motivational interviewing and the transtheoretical model of behavior change.

The student coaching program supplements the content and plans for participants in the Arthritis Foundation's self-directed WWE program. In lieu of progressing through the program alone, participants partnered with a student coach receive additional support and guidance, enhancing their

Sources:

1. https://www.cdc.gov/arthritis/data_statistics/national-statistics.html
2. https://www.cdc.gov/arthritis/data_statistics/state-data-current.htm
3. https://www.cdc.gov/arthritis/data_statistics/arthritis-related-stats.htm
4. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/anr.1780321208>
5. <https://bmcgeriatr.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2318-13-110#:~:text=Background,health%20and%20general%20well%2Dbeing>

WWE experience. The manual provides week-by-week guidance and assignments for physical therapy students participating in the health coaching program. It also emphasizes the importance of program fidelity. While student coaches are not trained WWE leaders, they are guided by faculty that have been trained as WWE leaders.

In the fall of 2020, the Springfield College Department of Physical Therapy piloted the manual through an engagement with the Plymouth Public Library’s consumer health programming and a partnership with the senior services/outreach librarian. The library system promoted the program through its social media, the Plymouth Center for Active Living and a local news article. Patrons were able to sign up online and Springfield College linked them with a student coach. Registrants picked up their WWE book at the library’s curbside pickup area along with a welcome letter explaining how the program worked. Patrons and students met virtually and proceeded through the program based on each person’s capabilities. Upon the conclusion of the program, the Plymouth outreach librarian offered, and participants agreed, to continue meeting virtually each month through April as a means of ongoing support. The library looks forward to returning to in-person group activities once the “all clear” is given post-pandemic.



In the spring of 2021, the Springfield College Department of Physical Therapy partnered with three local retirement communities for its second cohort of participants to follow the student coaching model.

Data Collected

The Springfield College Department of Physical Therapy conducted a WWE participant evaluation at the end of the pilot program in the fall of 2020. The survey asked participants to rank their level of agreement to the following seven statements:

- I would recommend this program to a family member or friend
- The program motivated me to become more active
- I learned how to safely and comfortably exercise
- I am confident that I will continue walking or being physically active
- My Walk With Ease student coaching sessions kept me interested in the program
- I am satisfied with how my Walk With Ease student coaches presented information to me
- The Walk With Ease student coaching program fulfilled my expectations.

The evaluation also offered participants the opportunity to provide a free response answer about the student coaching program.

The Springfield College Department of Physical Therapy intends to replicate the participant evaluation again at the end of the spring 2021 cohort.

Successes

Through the Plymouth Public Library partnership, 25 older adults were paired with students and participated in the WWE program in the fall of 2020. Eleven completed the participant evaluation.

Collectively, responses were positive with all participants indicating they would recommend the program to a family member or friend. With two exceptions, all participants “strongly agreed” with every

statement, thus affirming they learned skills to walk safely, comfortably, and confidently, and that they plan to continue being physically active thanks to the support of their student coach and the program.

Student coaches were described as “extraordinary,” “enthusiastic,” and “encouraging,” according to participants. The student coaches were “knowledgeable in their field and able to present information in language that was easily understood,” remarked another participant.

“The program was a great idea especially with so many activities curtailed,” noted another participant, citing the value of offering WWE self-directed during COVID-19.

As mentioned, following the end of the six-week WWE course, the outreach librarian began offering an elective once a month Zoom call so participants could stay connected and motivated. That low-effort action promoted sustainability and was well-received by participants. One reported, “The weekly Zoom calls really motivated me to stretch and exercise.”

The outreach librarian also shared praise for the program and collaboration with Springfield College. “The Walk With Ease program is a fine example of a collaborative effort between public libraries and the educational community. Very little work was needed on our part to ensure participant success and it provided access to expertise and resources that would not have been locally available,” he shared.

The manual was updated based on feedback from students and participants, and version 2.0 was released in December 2020.

The new guide was used for the second cohort of participants, who began in February 2021. More than 40 older adults from three retirement communities enrolled and were paired with a Springfield College student coaching team.

Next Steps

The Springfield College Department of Physical Therapy intends to continue offering WWE coaching support to older adults in their area using this model and the student coaching manual. The student coaching manual was shared with another physical therapy program in Massachusetts and that program piloted the curriculum and coaching model in the spring semester 2021.

Additionally, the Springfield College Department of Physical Therapy intends to share the guidebook with other schools of physical therapy and disseminate it through the American Physical Therapy Association.

Challenges

The challenges faced by the program were particular to curricular integration and to the maintenance of participants through the six-week program. In terms of curricular integration, the coaching manual needed to be revised in its second iteration to stress the relationship of WWE and population health to physical therapy and wellness. Participant maintenance for the second round of the coached WWE program was secured by ensuring a mode of communication for the coaching teams and the participants in advance of participant registration.

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Student coaching manual download:

<https://springfield.edu/walk-with-ease/dpt>

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