**The Social Work Role in Physical Rehabilitation**

**Definition**

Rehabilitation is a treatment or treatments designed to facilitate the process of recovery from injury, illness, or disease to as normal a condition as possible.

**Purpose**

The purpose of rehabilitation is to restore some or all of the patient's physical, sensory, and mental capabilities that were lost due to injury, illness, or disease. Rehabilitation includes assisting the patient to compensate for deficits that cannot be reversed medically. It is prescribed after many types of injury, illness, or disease, including amputations, arthritis, [cancer](https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/cancer), cardiac disease, neurological problems, orthopedic injuries, spinal cord injuries, [stroke](https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/stroke), and traumatic brain injuries. The Institute of Medicine has estimated that as many as 14% of all Americans may be disabled at any given time.

**Treatment Philosophy**

Social workers believe in the intrinsic worth and dignity of every human being. They are dedicated to the welfare of individuals and families and to the pursuit of social justice for all. Social workers are pledged to serve their clients without discrimination on any grounds. The values of acceptance, self-determination, and respect for the individual are fundamental to all forms of social work practice. The social worker in physical rehabilitation adheres to the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics of their respective provincial governing bodies and of the Canadian Association of Social Workers.

**Purpose of Social Work in Rehabilitation**

As a member of an in-patient or out-patient interdisciplinary team, the social worker facilitates the rehabilitation process to assist the patient in maximizing independence and autonomy in the various areas of his or her functioning. This process includes work with the patient, with his or her family, with the rehabilitation team, and with the community. Through assessment and interventions in the areas of psycho-social functioning and discharge planning, the social worker helps the client and the family move from a situation of uncertainty, anxiety, and dependency to one of increased confidence, hope, and autonomy.

Issues addressed by a rehabilitation social worker include:

1. Acknowledgment of diagnosis and need for intervention.

2. Adaptation to changes in the patient’s role or relationships.

3. Modification in responsibilities and level of dependency.

4. Grief and adjustment to loss as a result of disability.

5. Dealing with altered self-image and expectations.

6. Adjustment to financial and social stressors related to disability.

**Social Workers in Rehabilitation also have a responsibility to:**

• Advocate on an individual and systemic level when gaps in service are identified.

• Initiate, conduct, and collaborate in research projects to enhance social work practice and to contribute to the body of knowledge associated with physical rehabilitation.

• Provide supervision and training to students developing their expertise in the field of physical rehabilitation.

• Act as a resource to community organizations by providing education, presentations, program development, and follow-up consultation.

• Maintain and develop expertise through participation in professional development activities in the hospital and community.

**Social Workers in Inpatient Rehabilitation Facilities**

Social workers are key contributors in the rehabilitation and recovery of patients in inpatient rehabilitation facilities. Their roles may include:

* The initial screening and evaluation of patients and families.
* Helping patients and family members deal with the many aspects of the patient’s condition – social, financial, and emotional.
* Helping patients and families understand their illnesses and treatment options.
* Acting as an advocate for patients and families – including as an advocate for the patient’s health care rights.
* Aid and expedite decision-making on behalf of patients and their families.
* Educating patients on the roles of other members on their recovery team – including physicians, nurses, physical therapists, etc.
* Crisis intervention
* Providing a comprehensive psychosocial assessment of patients.
* Educating patients and families about post-hospital care.
* Helping patients adjust to their inpatient rehab setting.
* Coordinating patient discharge and continuity of care following discharge.

**Serving as a Patient/Family Advocate**

As mentioned, one of the key roles that social workers serve in an inpatient rehabilitation setting is as a patient advocate. The importance of helping the patient understand and adjust to hospital procedures, understand medical plans, and assisting the patient’s family with financial planning is crucial.

The social worker’s role as an advocate also includes maintaining open lines of communication between the patient, family, and other members of the health care team. He or she also will learn each family’s dynamics while understanding its strengths – and encouraging the use of these strengths.

Indeed, the pressure on families as a loved one moves through the health care system can be intense and there’s a lot to learn in a short time. Social workers ease this pressure on all levels, whether it regards the plan of treatment or financial needs.

Studies have shown that the more informed the patient, the better healthcare decisions he or she will make during their treatment and post-recovery. In turn, this results in better long-term health outcomes while also saving money.

While some healthcare facilities will have trained volunteers serving as patient advocates, social workers are more qualified to serve in an advocate role based on their education, training, and experience. At Ernest Health Systems, we believe that social workers are an essential part of a patient’s recovery team.