

Abstract

Project Shake-It-Up was a three year study designed to increase health promotion and empowerment for individuals with spinal cord injury and related neurological disabilities. The project incorporated capacity-building strategies for independent living and self-advocacy coupled with health education, physical activity, and recreation. Peer-support and mentoring were complemented by individualized case coordination and collaboration with local service providers to assist participants in developing life strategies and positive coping skills to encourage healthy choices.

Project objectives included: (1) developing a culturally competent training and recreation program, including a manual (2) implementing and evaluating the Shake It Up program for health promotion and physical activity; (3) establishing peer-support networks to provide long-term support for intervention participants; (4) increasing the capacity of collaborating organizations to promote health and empowerment; and (5) disseminating the program nationwide.

Quantitative and qualitative measures were used to evaluate changes in physical activity, independent living skills and self-efficacy at baseline, immediately after the program completion, and at a 6-month follow-up. Two cohorts of individuals participated in the intervention and received follow-up support.

Analysis of results revealed a significant improvement in self-efficacy scores for people participated in the program. This improvement was consistent for males and females, married and non-married people, people with both Multiple Sclerosis and Spinal Cord Injury. Follow-up data suggest that the improvement in self-efficacy provided by the program was maintained over time.

These results indicate the value community-university collaborations. Working together, we can develop distinctive, multi-faceted programs that support the health and empowerment of people with spinal cord injury and other related neurological disabilities.

People with disabilities face problems in many aspects of their lives, such as employment, housing, and relationships. Existing research asserts that a holistic approach to the multiple challenges faced by people with disabilities will be more successful than an approach that focuses only on one or two specific issues. Thus, an approach utilizing case coordination and collaboration with local service providers will be successful at promoting the empowerment of individuals with disabilities. Skills training coupled with individualized holistic support in achieving stability and self-efficacy in major life areas, is likely to promote sustainable positive results that generalize to other life domains. Built on this philosophy, Project Shake-It-Up is a three year model demonstration project to increase health promotion and empowerment for individuals with spinal cord injury and related neurological disabilities who live in Rhode Island. The Brown University-based project incorporates capacity-building strategies for independent living and self-advocacy coupled with health education, physical activity, and recreation. Project Shake-It-Up provides peer-support and mentoring complemented by individualized case coordination to assist participants in developing life strategies and positive coping skills to encourage healthy choices. We seek to determine if participation in this program will result in increased health, independence, and self-efficacy.

Project Shake It Up promotes health and capacity building for people living with SCI and other neuromuscular disabilities through physical activity, recreation, improved independent living skills, peer support networks and self-advocacy. Project objectives include: (1) developing a culturally competent training and recreation program, including a website-based manual that addresses independent living issues such as disability rights, self-advocacy, education, employment, transportation, sexuality, alcohol and substance use, and health promotion; (2) implementing and evaluating the Shake It Up program for health promotion and physical activity; (3) establishing peer-support networks to provide long-term support for intervention participants; (4) increasing the capacity of collaborating organizations, Shake-A-Leg and PARI, to promote health and empowerment; and (5) disseminating the program nationwide through publications, conference presentations and by making the manual for the Shake It Up model widely available through an internet website.

This program was tailored to meet the needs and interests of participants, and was sensitive to ethnic and social differences. Recreational and physical activities combined with a series of training seminars on health and life skills topics were used to develop peer-support networks and as motivational capacity-building tools.

Changes in physical activity, independent living skills and self-efficacy were measured at baseline, immediately after the program completion, and at a 6-month follow-up. Quantitative and qualitative measures were used to evaluate the impact of this intervention on participants' sense of empowerment, efficacy, and advocacy in the areas of physical activity and independent living. Two cohorts of individuals participated in the intervention and received follow-up support.

Preliminary analysis indicated significant improvement in self-efficacy scores, when people participated in the program, as compared to when people did not participate in the

program. The results of an independent-samples t-test indicated a large standardized effect size ($t(38) = 2.855, p = 0.007, d = 0.925$). This improvement in self-efficacy scores was consistent for males and females, married and non-married people, people with both Multiple Sclerosis and Spinal Cord Injury. No statistically significant differences were found for the changes in self-efficacy scores for the post-treatment follow-up period, indicating the possibility that the improvement in self-efficacy provided by the program was maintained over time.

The results of Project-Shake-It-Up provide positive initial signs of the value of combining the resources of universities and community agencies. Working together, these organizations can develop distinctive, multi-faceted programs that support the health and empowerment of people with spinal cord injury and other related neurological disabilities.