



**National
Multiple Sclerosis
Society**

**MS Learn Online
Feature Presentation
Rehab Options for People with Primary-Progressive MS
Nicholas LaRocca, PhD**

Tracey>> Welcome to MS Learn Online I'm Tracey Kimball.

Tom>> And I'm Tom Kimball. Rehabilitation plays a key role in helping people with primary progressive MS live as full and productive lives as possible. And rehab can take many different forms.

Tracey>> Helping us to understand the variety of rehab options is Dr. Nicholas LaRocca, vice president, of health care delivery and policy research, at the National MS Society. He'll walk us through many types of rehab that can assist people in living a quality life.

>>**Nick LaRocca:** Rehabilitation is a very broad branch of medicine, and rehabilitation has as its goal the maintenance and possible restoration of function, in this case, people with primary-progressive MS, who have physical or cognitive limitations due to some condition. Again, in this case it's MS. And there are a wide variety of different professions that are active in rehabilitation.

>>**Kate Milliken:** So, Nicholas, there are a whole bunch of different types of rehabilitation for people with primary-progressive MS. Can you talk to me about some of them, and why don't we start with physical?

>>**Nick LaRocca:** Sure. Physical therapy is the type of therapy in which there's a physical therapist who will work usually individually, but sometimes in a group with patients. And the physical therapist will target different types of symptoms.

So, the physical therapist may work with a patient in order to improve strength in order to improve flexibility, what they call a range of motion to keep people loose, will work to reduce spasticity. And they also work with people in order to help them to select the right type of assistive technology. And by that we usually mean wheeled mobility, wheelchairs, walkers, canes, and so on, so that when people need those kinds of assistive devices to help them walk, that they're using the right type, one that really fits them well, and that they learn how to use it in the right way so that they get the maximum benefit out of it.

So, physical therapy is very important to people not only because of the physical parts of it, but because of the relationship that they form with the physical therapist. It becomes a very supportive, close relationship very often so that people derive a lot of psychological support from the relationship, in addition to what they may benefit from the physical parts.

>> **Kate Milliken** Can you define occupational therapy?

>>**Nick LaRocca:** Sure. Occupational therapy overlaps a little bit with physical therapy, but the occupational therapist tends to focus more on people's everyday activities. And so working in the kitchen, what they have to do in the bathroom in terms of washing and bathing and using the toilet, dressing, doing household chores. And so the occupational therapist will work with the person in order to help them find the best way to go about doing those everyday activities in spite of any kinds of barriers that MS may put in their path.

So, very often the occupational therapist will work in a setting where they have set up a model kitchen and maybe a model bedroom or a model

bathroom, where people can actually practice those skills and learn how to do things a little bit differently so that it's more convenient for them.

The other area that occupational therapists work on is cognitive changes. And so they will also work with people who have MS, Primary-Progressive MS and other forms of MS, who have cognitive changes, and help them find ways to work around some of the difficulties that they may experience, things like memory lapses, for example.

>> **Kate Milliken:** Let's discuss cognitive therapy.

>>**Nick LaRocca:** Okay. Many people with primary-progressive MS experience cognitive changes, and those cognitive changes can take the form of difficulty remembering things, difficulty concentrating, especially in distracting environments, problems with visual spatial things, and also difficulty with organizing things. And cognitive rehabilitation can help a person who is having those kinds of cognitive changes to, number one, find ways to work around those changes.

So, if someone is having memory problems, they can learn how to use memory aids more effectively so that they will not forget a point, they won't forget names, and so forth. And also in cognitive rehabilitation, a person with primary-progressive MS can do various exercises usually with a computer, which will drill them in memory skills and attention and concentration skills, and help to hone those skills a little bit more, and help to maybe bring them a little bit closer to what they had been before they had MS.

>> **Kate Milliken** How about speech therapy?

>>**Nick LaRocca:** Sure. People with primary-progressive MS may experience a number of different problems that speech-language pathologists can help them with, and speech-language pathologists generally work in three different areas. Obviously, they work in speech,

helping people who have speech problems. And in primary-progressive MS, some people experience speech difficulties, what's known as dysarthric speech, where their speech is a little bit difficult to understand. Speech pathologists can help them with that.

One of the other problems that can sometimes arise is swallowing problems, and speech-language pathologists can do an evaluation to determine what's the cause of the swallowing problem, and then to recommend different steps that the person can take in order to deal with that -- avoiding certain types of foods, focusing on other types of foods.

The third area that speech-language pathologists work in is the area of cognitive changes, and speech-language pathologists became involved in working with cognitive changes because they work with language and communication. And so they tend to focus a little bit more on that area of cognitive change, but they in general work on cognitive rehabilitation with people, and can help people to recover some of the skills that may have been affected by MS-related cognitive changes.

>> **Kate Milliken** And I'm interested also in vocational therapy.

>> **Nick LaRocca:** Vocational rehabilitation is a fairly broad field. Vocational counselors will work with a person who has primary-progressive MS, who either is unemployed or is currently employed but is feeling insecure about their job and maybe is worried about being able to hold onto their job. And so the vocational counselor can help them to look at the demands of the job, can also schedule them for different types of evaluations so that they can find out what are their strengths and what are their limitations, so that if they do need to plan a change, they can plan it on the basis of some fairly good and hard facts.

And then the vocational counselor can also work with the person if they are looking either to go back to work or to change jobs, can help the person to find a position and to evaluate what might be out there. And also to work with the individual who has MS and with the employer.

If some type of reasonable accommodations may help that person to remain in the job, so that working with a vocational counselor and with the employer, they may be able to remain on the job in spite of some of the changes that come about because of MS.

Tracey>> There seem to be rehab options for so many of the issues that people with primary-progressive MS can experience.

Tom>> Thank you Dr. LaRocca for giving us a great overview of how rehabilitation can help people with primary-progressive MS. If you would like to seek out some of the local rehab options in your area, consult with your doctor or contact the National MS Society for more information.

Tracey>> See you next time on MS Learn Online.