

Position Statement

Occupational Therapy in Disaster Preparedness and Response (DP&R)

Introduction

Occupational Therapy is a profession concerned with promoting health and well-being through occupation. The primary goal of occupational therapy is to enable people to participate successfully in activities of everyday life in a range of environments and participate in community. Occupational therapists (OTs) achieve this outcome by enabling people to do things that will enhance their ability to live meaningful lives.

Disasters, both natural and man-made, are occurring more regularly world-wide. The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) acknowledges that they can cause loss of life, property damage, and economic loss. They can affect a person's health, well-being and ability to engage in meaningful activities of life. Community resilience and positive well-being are key themes in disaster response and are supported by meaningful occupation.

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists position is that:

Occupational therapists facilitate the engagement in meaningful routines and occupations which may be disrupted by disaster.

Occupational therapists should be involved in all stages of disaster management at both local and national level. This involvement ranges from immediately post disaster to long term rehabilitation and reconstruction. It also includes planning and preparation.

The WFOT notes that effective disaster preparedness and response management also requires long term strategies in collaboration with key stakeholders.

Significance to Society

Through an occupational focus, disaster-affected communities and people are better served in their ongoing efforts to rebuild their lives and livelihoods, contributing to outcomes that can be sustained by local service providers and systems. Improved occupational engagement promotes positive well-being and mental health, enabling greater productivity and community resilience.

Occupational therapists engaging with disaster and reconstruction policy, planning and coordination mechanisms, contribute pertinent expertise to response efforts while laying the foundation for more cohesive involvement and response efforts in the event of future disasters.

Stronger networking and coordination between local health professionals, government services and projects, and national and international NGO programs, potentially provide for a more integrated, holistic and yet rationalised and self-reliant service framework.

At a more practical level, benefits include: better quality, ongoing care and support for individuals and their families, particularly those with psycho-social trauma and physical injuries who will benefit from occupational and community based rehabilitation and support programs; stronger referral and follow-up systems between community care, hospital and rehab centre programs; and more disability and age friendly accessibility in private and public buildings/spaces.

Significance to Occupational Therapy

Specific roles post-disaster may include but are not limited to:

- ❖ ensuring accessible environments post disaster at all stages of recovery (e.g. in displaced persons camps) and reconstruction (in rebuilding homes and community facilities) to better support participation.
- ❖ organization of daily routines in displaced persons camps and surviving communities to include persons with disabilities and existing illnesses, women, elderly and children
- ❖ facilitating access to mainstream health care services
- ❖ liaison with and encouragement of community leaders and others to reorganize community supports and routines
- ❖ use of everyday occupations to facilitate recovery
- ❖ facilitating the reestablishment of livelihoods
- ❖ assessment of mental health status of survivors for anxiety, depression and suicidal tendencies, with subsequent counselling and occupation-based activities
- ❖ training of volunteers to carry out 'quick mental health assessment' and counselling, and to facilitate activities and social connectivity, thus providing more immediate services for greater numbers.

Challenges

Occupational therapists are challenged to raise awareness of the benefits of occupational therapy and occupation-based community involvement to both government and community leaders. Capacity building is necessary to ensure that occupational therapy volunteers are prepared to undertake disaster response.

Strategies

For individual occupational therapists, key recommendations include involvement with local community disaster preparedness and planning to include vulnerable groups.

For national associations: Through national workshops and capacity building, national associations can support occupational therapists to more effectively be involved in disaster response. For occupational therapists affected by disaster and engaged directly in disaster response, national associations can provide support.

For WFOT: Provision of timely responses, distribution of support materials and information package, ongoing support and networking.

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