

POSITION STATEMENT

Disaster Risk Reduction

Introduction

The primary goal of occupational therapy is to enable people to participate successfully in the activities of everyday life in a range of environments. Occupational therapists (OTs) achieve this outcome by enhancing people's ability to do things that will make their lives more meaningful.

Natural and man-made disasters are occurring more often worldwide. The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) acknowledges that disasters may cause loss of life, property damage, serious economic loss and reduced occupational opportunities. Disasters can affect a person's health, physical capacities and sense of well-being, and can impair the ability to engage in the familiar, valued activities of life.

Occupational therapists worldwide prioritize engagement in activities that restore and maintain familiar roles and the routines and occupations of daily living. Key concerns in disaster risk reduction are developing well-being and resilience for individuals and their communities, reducing people's vulnerability, increasing their preparedness for disaster and putting systems in place for forewarning of impending disasters.

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists position is that

Disaster risk reduction strategies should be rights-based, equitable, people-centred, and environmentally sustainable. In order to ensure inclusiveness, a disability-inclusive and community driven approach should be adopted (reference), without discrimination towards age, gender, religion, cultural identity or financial status.

An essential component of the people-centred approach to care is respect for the rights and perspectives of people with disabilities. People with disabilities should be provided with non-discriminatory access to information about safety and survival in disaster situations. This must be supported by education and outreach. Mental and physical rehabilitation and accessibility are essential at all aspects and stages of disaster preparedness, risk reduction and humanitarian response. Overcoming physical and information barriers and ensuring accessibility for all can be achieved through universal design. Overall, participation in occupation is an essential element for everyone involved in natural disaster.

Significance to Society

Strategies to mitigate the effects of sudden disasters need to become a part of everyone's thinking in order to reduce risk and promote global sustainability. Inclusive disaster risk reduction and preparedness require the creation of an enabling environment to promote citizen voices and citizen perspectives. Community planning should incorporate consideration of actions to be taken to avoid the most serious consequences of disaster. This should include the principle of environmental integrity in order to maintain biodiversity and sustain healthy ecosystems essential for people's wellbeing and security.

Significance to Occupational Therapy

The most appropriate approach to disaster prevention, preparedness and mitigation is holistic, proactive and pre-emptive. Disaster risk reduction efforts should focus initially on those disasters that occur most frequently in a particular region, followed by consideration of other, less likely but potentially serious risks.

Roles of occupational therapists

Specific roles of occupational therapists in disaster risk reduction might include but are not limited to:

- Ensuring that the collection, measurement, monitoring and evaluation of inclusiveness is an integral part of disaster risk reduction strategic planning
- Facilitating preparedness planning in geographical areas that are identified as being at risk
- Contributing to disability specific risk reduction and capacity assessments, including risk and resource mapping
- Raising awareness of disability and building shared commitment among stakeholders
- Providing specialised occupational therapy education and peer training to build capacity
- Providing education on disaster preparedness strategies with individuals, groups and caregivers, including family disaster plans/kits and evacuation plans
- Training community members and volunteers in disaster preparedness, community coping strategies and risk reduction strategies
- Participating in community planning, testing and exercises
- Promoting an occupational focus
- Liaising with and encouraging community leaders and others in organizing community supports and routines.

Challenges

Challenges for occupational therapist are in building an understanding and conceptualization of disaster risk reduction within the context of occupational therapy policy and practice, of building knowledge and capacities to effectively engage with disaster risk reduction and disaster response stakeholders at various levels, and of advocating for inclusion of disaster risk reduction and resilience-building considerations within existing occupational therapy/health/community programs.

- At local level: to engage with local partners to promote strategies that are inclusive and respect human rights.
- At national level: to contribute to policy development related to vulnerable groups, accessibility and universal design.
- At global level: to engage with international partners to promote minimum standards, strategies and protocols.

Strategies

For individual occupational therapists: to ensure the inclusion of vulnerable groups in local community disaster preparedness and planning.

For national associations: to support the effective involvement of occupational therapists in disaster preparedness and risk reduction through national workshops and capacity building, and through contributing to governmental policy development.

For WFOT: to proactively engage with international organizations to promote the development of disaster risk reduction strategies that include the contribution of occupational therapy.