AOTA’s Societal Statement on Disaster Response and Risk Reduction

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA; 2011) asserts that occupational therapy has a role in disaster response and risk reduction. This assertion is congruent with the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT; 2015) Position Statement on Disaster Risk Reduction. Occupational therapy practitioners can work with teams or autonomously in addressing both physical and mental health barriers to functioning and can contribute to disaster response and risk reduction efforts.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and its precursor agencies have chronicled major disasters and emergency declarations since the 1950s (FEMA, 2017). Just within the past decade, the United States has seen a spate of natural and technological disasters resulting in many deaths, extensive property damage, and billions of dollars in economic and financial losses (Do, 2015). Survivors of disasters experience significant physical and psychosocial stress associated with trauma, loss, and physical displacement. Survivors may be categorized as direct or indirect, according to the impact of the disaster (Cohen, 2002), and may include individuals who have experienced maximum exposure to the traumatizing event; caregivers looking after the individuals directly exposed to the trauma; grieving families and significant others who have close affinities with the victims; communities that are socially linked to populations primarily affected by the disaster; and professional and volunteer workers (e.g., emergency medical and mental health and nursing personnel, clergy, community leaders, law enforcement, firefighters) involved in the disaster response, rescue, and recovery efforts.

The immediate and long-term effects of disaster-related stress compromise the survivors’ health, functioning, and overall sense of well-being. Although certain groups of individuals may be able to effectively cope through personal resources and systems of supports, many other survivors’ ability to cope is overwhelmed by the magnitude of the trauma. Moreover, the effect of trauma may be emergent, and the supports needed to effectively deal with the stress may not be immediately available to survivors, leading to magnified impact. The effects of the disaster on the survivors create a vicious cycle of ongoing disruption in their ability to engage in valued activities and participate in life roles within familiar and sustaining environments.

Occupational therapists are trained to evaluate disruptions in life routines and challenges with role performance among individuals, groups, and populations (AOTA, 2014b). Occupational therapy practitioners also are skilled in identifying strategies to promote healthy engagement in a wide range of valued activities of daily life (occupations), and the reestablishment of familiar routines (AOTA, 2014b), even among the most vulnerable survivors, such as children (Kilmer & Gil-Rivas, 2010), older adults (Stanko et al., 2015), and those with disabilities (WFOT, 2015). Healthy engagement in meaningful occupations and routines is an approach that can enhance physical and mental health and resiliency (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013a, 2013b).

Beyond the immediate postdisaster period, occupational therapy practitioners can monitor and assess the long-term effects on survivors’ health and functioning and provide evidence-based interventions.

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1 When the term occupational therapy practitioner is used in this document, it refers to both occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants (AOTA, 2015). Occupational therapists are responsible for all aspects of occupational therapy service delivery and are accountable for the safety and effectiveness of the occupational therapy service delivery process. Occupational therapy assistants deliver occupational therapy services under the supervision of and in partnership with an occupational therapist (AOTA, 2014a).
Occupational therapy services may be delivered in the survivors’ home and community settings as well as in schools, day programs, clinics, hospitals, and rehabilitation centers. Occupational therapy is an evidence-based profession that can be an integral component of comprehensive and sustainable disaster response and risk-reduction efforts at the local, state, national, and international levels (AOTA, 2011; WFOT, 2016).

References


The American Journal of Occupational Therapy

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Adopted by the Representative Assembly Coordinating Committee May 25, 2017


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