What exactly is Occupational Therapy in Mental Health?

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DISCUSSION PAPER

Introduction

We have been given a mission: to define exactly the role of Occupational Therapy in Mental Health and to clarify the function of group work. In this short discussion paper, we hope to eradicate some of the misconceptions others have of the profession, so as to enhance understanding and application in a multi-disciplinary setting.

What is meant by Occupation?

In its simplest terms, ‘occupation’ refers to any activity that meaningfully and actively occupies our time. Occupations cover all aspects of life, ranging from activities involved with meeting our basic needs – for example, to eat, sleep and have security – to fulfilling our greatest ambitions.

Why is Occupation important?

Occupation is a basic human need and hence an essential component of life’ (Townsend 1997, cited in Mee and Sumson 2001). A ‘healthy occupational’ person has a variety of meaningful roles, a
balanced lifestyle of varying occupations, as well as self-perceived competencies to carry out the activities to fulfil their roles.

Our occupations are made up of a constellation of activities which give meaning to our life by determining roles, values, habits and routine. Those aspects give shape and purpose to our lives and as such provide the vital ingredients which contribute to a sense of well being’ (Blair and Hume 1997, cited in Creek 1997).

Therefore, engagement in occupations contributes to an individual’s sense of personal and social identity, as well as providing a sense of control and quality of life. When occupation is so key to our identity it is possible to see how any deficit in our ability to engage in activities can have serious effects on an individual’s mental health. Williams (1997) states that ‘Dysfunction is often demonstrated by a basic lack of structure to the day which has the effect of generating low self-esteem, a lack of motivation and general hopelessness, all of which exacerbate the original problem.’

What is Occupational Therapy in Mental Health?

We are concerned with how an individual’s mental and physical health difficulties impact upon their daily functioning, independence and quality of life. We take a holistic, client-centred approach, which focuses upon the individual’s self-maintenance (for example: eating, sleeping and personal hygiene), their productivity (for example: work, education and domestic responsibilities), as well as their leisure (for example: hobbies and interests). A balance of all of these occupational areas is vital for good mental and physical health. Blair and Hume (cit. in Creek 1997) suggest that a ‘central component of Occupational Therapy …is the promotion of a balanced and satisfactory lifestyle.’ Occupational Therapists aim to empower individuals, so as to gain a quality of life that is satisfactory to them.

Empowering the Individual

Occupational Therapists use occupation to enable people to retain current skills, re-learn lost skills and learn new skills that are required to effectively fulfill their roles in life. Roles shape our identity and are a vital component in maintaining a healthy view of ourselves. An individual will have a variety of roles – for example, as a mother, employee, daughter, wife, student, musician, runner and friend.

The primary aim of Occupational Therapy is to help the person to transfer the skills that are acquired and developed through intervention, into their daily life so that an individual’s roles and identity can be recreated. Consider, as an example, the complex skills required in completing a quiz – for example: problem-solving, concentration, multi-tasking, planning, memory and social skills. All of these skills are developed and transferred to the many activities a mother needs to engage in to fulfill her role.

Using group work as a form of intervention in mental health

Finlay (1997) states that ‘Groups help us develop our sense of personal and social identity. Through interaction with others we acquire skills, attitudes and ways of behaving ….we gain strength as we share with others, both giving and gaining support.’

Therefore, participating in a group setting promotes learning from others, the development of self-awareness, interactive skills and provides the opportunity to enjoy
being in the presence of others, in a non-threatening environment, whilst engaging in purposeful activity. All of the skills that are developed through participating in a group can then be transferred into the individual’s ability to fulfill their roles – for example, in working with colleagues in a team or being a member of a family unit or a friendship group.

Lloyd and Maas (1997) identified that ‘Group therapy is effective as a treatment model in acute psychiatry because the inter-relationships and personal interactions create the potential for therapeutic change.’

Occupational Therapists carry out a variety of groups, which include social-based, activity-focused, creative and expressive, promotional and educational groups. It is essential when providing interventions to provide a variety of these types of groups, each with their own focus, if we are to ensure that lifestyle balance is being encouraged and that a wide range of skills are being developed. Each group will have identified aims and objectives, which are shared with the participants to aid understanding.

The Occupational Therapist’s role is therefore to be a facilitator, rather than an instructor, and to become an active member of the group using themselves therapeutically to guide and motivate participants.

References

Lloyd C & Maas F (1997) Occupational Therapy group work in psychiatric setting. British Journal of Occupational Therapy 60(5)