

Occupational therapy and social inclusion: helping people with mental problems in the recovery process

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This study is a reflection on the relationship between the social inclusion of mentally ill people and the work of occupational therapists undertaken in a psychiatric section in a general hospital in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. The aims of the research were to describe the perception of people with mental problems about their own social inclusion and identify the contribution of occupational therapy for their social inclusion. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 users who attended the occupational therapy service twice a week, participating in different groups during the day. A qualitative research approach was adopted and the data gathered was submitted to discourse analyses and grouped in themes related to the guiding concepts of the research.

The results showed that some of the interviewees expressed that they consider themselves included in society and feel that there is a place for them. Other interviewees related feeling not included and few of them said that they considered themselves as partially included. The limitations of their condition were noticed by all those experiencing mental problems, who expressed feeling impotent in the face of life's difficulties. It was common for the mentally ill to assume the identity of a sick person, without considering the possibility of other social roles. It was also common to find a disruption and decrease in their social network.

However, the paramount aspect related by the users was the improvement in their communication ability noticed over the course of the occupational therapy groups. The enhancing of the capacity and quality of relationships inside the groups sometimes helped relationships outside the therapeutic setting. Setting goals in terms of life projects were considered salient in the therapeutic process, helping the users to identify their interests and to face the difficulties of life. The interviewees also noticed that their self-esteem improved, which helped them overcome their sense of inferiority.

The occupational therapy was recognized as important in the process of social inclusion, contributing to the mentally ill improving relationships and overcoming their sick identity, occupying other places in society where new life experiences can be savoured.