

Well-being and occupational rights

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Introduction

One of occupational therapy's core assumptions is that engagement in occupations influences well-being: a central element of human rights that is inadequately analysed in theories or addressed in practice. Currently, occupational therapy appears preoccupied with dysfunction, not well-being.

Objectives

To explore well-being and human rights and their relationships to occupation and to occupational rights; and to encourage occupational therapists to embrace their political role in enabling occupation.

Description

Principles of human rights assert that all people are entitled to the necessary conditions for achieving well-being. This paper addresses the necessary conditions for enhancing well-being through occupation.

Discussion

Well-being is described as a personal state of contentment or harmony with one's: physical/mental health; personal and economic security; self-worth (sense of being capable and valued); sense of belonging (including the ability to contribute to others and to maintain valued roles and relationships); opportunities for self-determination (ability to enact choices); opportunities to engage in meaningful and purposeful occupations; and sense of hope. Evidence supports the premise that multiple dimensions of well-being are impacted by engagement in occupations. However, because opportunities for well-being are severely compromised for people who are disabled by social and political responses to their illnesses or impairments, who are marginalized and disempowered, who experience poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, powerlessness, exploitation or inequitable access to resources and opportunities, well-being is recognised as a political concept: an issue of human rights.

Conclusion

The well-being of those who experience inequitable conditions cannot be enhanced solely by enhancing individuals' abilities and skills. Addressing well-being requires a commitment to occupational rights: "the right of all people to engage in meaningful occupations that contribute positively to their own well-being and the well-being of their communities" (Hammell 2008).

Contribution to the practice and evidence-base of occupational therapy

This paper adds to occupational therapy's evidence base concerning the relationships between people, their occupations, their environments and their well-being. In so doing, it advocates professional engagement in those socio-political environments sometimes named in theories but rarely addressed in practice.

Hammell KW (2008) Reflections on...well-being and occupational rights *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy* 75:61-64

