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Role of Occupational Therapy in Disaster Planning

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Major disasters affect tens of thousands of individuals around the world each year. Occupational therapists possess the knowledge and skills to engage in disaster planning at the level of the individual as well as at the level of nations.

By the end of this presentation, attendees will:

1. Understand the need for occupational therapists to engage in disaster planning with many if not most of their clients prior to any hint of a looming disaster.
2. Have a framework that they can use to engage in disaster planning with their clients.

Each year we hear about the devastation to the lives of individuals and their communities due to disasters. Disasters can vary from those of nature like hurricanes, tornados, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, landslides, earthquakes, wildfires, to those created by humans like wars, industrial plant explosions, bombings, plane crashes, and levee breaks.

While it is not possible to prepare for all potential disasters, it is possible to prepare for those with higher probabilities. Disaster planning should be done, and regularly discussed and updated by most individuals and families. Occupational therapists are positioned to assist individuals in their disaster planning, particularly when the safety and well-being of those with disabilities or chronic conditions are at stake.

During this presentation, a disaster planning framework will be presented that will allow occupational therapists to: 1) identify the most likely disasters that could impact a given individual, 2) list the factors of major concern with particular disasters, 3) plan the steps needed to protect the individuals from such factors, and 4) discuss the preparations and rehearsal needed with established disaster plans.

While disasters are usually unpredictable, and the participation of occupational therapists in disaster recovery is usually voluntary, disaster planning is not. Occupational therapists need to educate their clients as to safety measures that can enhance their well-being not only in the case of slippery floors, a house fire, or home invasion, but also in the case of major disasters. Planning and preparations to ensure the safety of their clients are already within the realm of occupational therapy. This framework will assist therapists in addressing safety concerns related to disasters.