
CAOT Position Statement: Enabling Health Literacy in Occupational Therapy (2013)

The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) acknowledges that health literacy is a resource for daily living. Health literacy influences life's occupations as it enables optimal access to and utilization of relevant and meaningful health information and services, and allows informed health decision making and action. Occupational therapists are in a privileged position to enable clients' health literacy through their professional expertise and focus on supporting clients in occupations that are meaningful to them.

CAOT recognizes the major impact of health literacy skills on health for individuals, families, groups, communities, organizations, and populations and supports increasing health literacy skills as a mean to achieve a just and inclusive society.

Recommendations for occupational therapists

1. Occupational therapists understand the concept of health literacy and its impact on people's health.
2. Occupational therapists utilize effective communication strategies to enable clients' understanding of and access to health information.
3. Occupational therapists contribute to knowledge transfer initiatives to facilitate clients' access to accurate, personally relevant health information and support its use in life's daily occupations and roles.
4. Occupational therapists advocate with interprofessional teams on ways to increase a clients' participation in shared decision-making.

CAOT Initiatives

To enable occupational therapists to develop and deliver health literacy best practices, CAOT will:

1. Promote and disseminate principles, frameworks and toolkits that facilitate knowledge transfer of health literacy best practices.
2. Foster entry-level and continuing professional development opportunities related to health literacy.
3. Raise awareness about the links between literacy and health through collaboration with stakeholders such as the Canadian Public Health Association's National Literacy and Health Program (NLHP).
4. Collaborate with stakeholders to support and strengthen research, policy and knowledge translation in health literacy.

Background information

Health literacy is a necessary life skill for everyone in several contexts

Health literacy is defined as: "The ability to access, understand, evaluate and communicate information as a way to promote, maintain and improve health in a variety of settings across the life course" (Rootman & Gordon-El-Bihbety, 2008). Concretely, a high level of health literacy enables people to understand health information related to a health condition (such as risk, diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment), make informed decisions and informed consent to health care options, engage into preventive activities, make informed but personal lifestyle choices, feel empowered and respected during the various encounters with health professionals.

Health literacy is an essential component of an efficient participation in a decision-making process which requires knowledge and skills for learning new information, thinking critically about how information applies to personal circumstances, values and beliefs, navigating the healthcare system and interacting with health professionals.

Health literacy skills enable individuals, families, groups, organizations and populations to take decisions that consider health in a variety of situations, be it at school, work, leisure or self-care.

Amidst a continually changing and increasingly complex healthcare environment, health literacy and the ability to make informed decisions is an important skill for everyone (Kickbusch, Wait, & Maag, 2005) and a skill that requires a continuous development of one's knowledge. Emerging research suggests health literacy as a personal resource has potential to be developed as part of lifelong formal and informal learning process from such activities as self-study and participation in occupations irrespective of people's age or formal level of education attained (Wister, Malloy-Weir, Rootman, & Desjardins, 2010).

Health literacy is an important element of citizenship, social capital and community participation (Rowlands, 2012). For instance, limited health literacy skills was found to co-exist and interact with other social factors of vulnerabilities at individual and community levels (Paasche-Orlow, Schillinger, Greene, & Wagner, 2006). Low health literacy skills were found to be associated with reduced participation in social and occupational roles and

difficulties in achieving life goals (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008; Clark et al., 2008).

Occupational therapy and the enabling of health literacy

Occupational therapists are in a privileged position to enable clients to develop their health literacy skills. Occupational therapists have a professional expertise and focus on client-centered enablement of occupations that foster health and well-being. Client-centered enablement is based on a collaborative, power sharing relationship aiming to support clients to choose and engage in occupations that are meaningful to them and that achieve their potential (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007).

Occupations refer to the activities or tasks in which a person engages in everyday life. Health literacy provides situation-specific knowledge and skills allowing people to understand, process and act on health information. In a diverse context of daily occupations health literacy is an essential component to promote, maintain and improve health.

Occupational therapists in fostering health literacy can enable clients in making lifestyle choices, navigating the health care system or managing a chronic disease. Using the Occupational therapy lens, health literacy can be viewed as a factor of empowerment and self-determination emerging from transactional and dynamic person-environment-occupation relationships that develops across the life span.

Occupational therapists work collaboratively with clients, from all age groups, cultures, geographical areas and socio-economic levels, their interventions can have a considerable impact on health literacy skills of the Canadian population. Occupational therapists can support the development of health literacy skills in different contexts such as health promotion, healthcare and chronic disease self-management.

Occupational therapists can also use their expertise to tailor their health information communication and their interventions in such a way as to support and empower clients in acquiring better health literacy skills (Levasseur & Carrier, 2010). For instance, occupational therapists can provide clients with relevant and personalized health information, support their problem-solving skills and tap into the knowledge and skills they gained from previous experiences. Occupational therapists can also educate clients about criteria that help judging the credibility and adequacy of health information sources (Levasseur & Carrier, 2012).

Resources

Health Literacy Connection

Patient Education Services, Hamilton Health Sciences, Hamilton Ontario.

www.healthliteracyconnection.ca

In addition to offering resources, Health Literacy Connection is a place for health professionals to share ideas and actions that help people use information for better health.

Health Literacy Canada

<http://healthliteracy.ca/>

This website provides health literacy information, resources and tools for the public and professionals.

Health Literacy Portal, Canadian Public Health Association

www.cpha.ca/en/portals/h-l.aspx

This internet portal offers key information about health literacy in Canada for health professionals, researchers and interested individuals.

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