

## **Enabling Citizen Participation of Older Adults Through Social and Political Environments**

Every day there is an increase in the population of older adults and their roles are shifting and changing due to experiencing limitations that are affecting their participation in different occupations. These limitations can be caused by personal factors, such as health conditions and illness, or social factors, such as unemployment and lack of access to resources. Despite all these limitations, there has been a decrease in the length of hospital stays and a lot of these older adults wanted to age in their own homes. As a result, the practice of occupational therapy emerged to help these people fulfill their wishes while being independent and safe. The traditional practice of Occupational Therapy (OT) in the community with older adults focused mainly on modifying physical built environment and social environment but only at the level of family. With time passing by, older adults wanted to participate in their roles as citizens and engage within their communities. Therefore, OT practitioners started to incorporate the political and social environments to ensure that older adults have the opportunities to be active members in the community.

Citizen participation is an area of occupational performance which includes participating as a voter, a volunteer, and a member of an interdependent community. Moreover, it consists of formal and informal social contact through many activities such as participating in organized group hobbies/sports or participating with community groups with social and civil purposes. The role of OT in citizen participation tends to focus mainly on education and advocacy to make sure that the political and social environments enable older adults to successfully be part of the community.

Occupational therapists can help these people by providing support and educating them on the importance of group work. Furthermore, they have an important role in group facilitation where they help the participants to successfully organize the work and be able to develop a system in which they can discuss their ideas and try to implement them.

### **Application**

Unfortunately, in our Arab environment in general and in Kuwait in particular elderly people are not given much opportunities to participate in civic environment. The current practice of occupational therapy in Kuwait regarding the older adults tends to focus mostly on personal factors. Current interventions consist of advising on assistive devices and fall prevention. There is not any focus towards interventions that target social participation in a way that helps older adults to fulfil their roles as citizens and be a big part in community. This might be due to a lot of factors. One factor is the increase in the needs and waiting lists of older adults in hospitals which might make occupational therapists prioritize the personal factors in treatment sessions. It might also be due to systemic and organizational obstacles in which the institutional culture is not viewing the social participation as a health issue. A lot of changes must be applied in order to promote healthy aging and optimize older adults' participation in society.

Occupational therapists should start prioritizing interventions that target community environments, as studies have shown that it has more potential in promoting social participation than those targeting personal factors. In addition, studies have shown that greater social participation is associated with reduced isolation and increased performance in ADLs and IADLs, which in turn leads to improved health and wellbeing as well as improved quality of life.

Many steps can be taken by occupational therapists in Kuwait in order to help older adults meet their role as citizens and participate in community:

A simple yet highly effective way is by **partnerships with community organizations or advocacy groups** while engaging the older adults in the process as well. Since older adults are the ones who are experiencing the difficulties in the community, it would be beneficial to incorporate them in the process to discuss their issues, concerns, and priorities. This type of intervention requires good organization and planning, and this can be facilitated by the help of an occupational therapist as they have the skills and the potentials.

Another possible approach is the **age friendly communities (AFCs)** in which the policies, services and structures of physical and social environments are designed to help older adults live safely and get involved in community. In this intervention, older adults can take part in all community activities such as taking courses or volunteering for charities and this is achieved by making the physical environment accessible.

**Occupational therapists can be incorporated in senior centers in Kuwait.** Senior centers are important community resource as it helps in promoting health and independence in older adults by allowing access to programs and services. Occupational therapists can help in addressing role transitions associated with retirement and widowhood. In addition, they can help them explore work or volunteer opportunities and create a program to help those individuals redesign their lives to improve wellbeing and quality of life. Serving as a consultant is one of the roles an occupational therapist can take part in to improve the client's access in community.

The services that occupational therapists can provide in each of the above-mentioned future plans can either be individualized and provided to a single person, or on a group level. Choosing the right type would depend on the preference and ability of the individual who is receiving the services. However, a lot of studies proved that group-based interventions were more effective in promoting social participation in elderly people than individualized ones.

Above we have covered the future plans that can be applied in Kuwait. Now we will take a closer detailed look on the strategies and ideas on how an occupational therapist can assist these individuals to be more engaged in community.

In individualized interventions an OT can set a mentoring program where they can meet with the older adult either face to face in a scheduled time or by a regular voice / video call. During this type of intervention stimulating activities can be applied and these include:

- Reading
- Exercising
- playing cognitive games

The aim of this would be to provide support to the individual and enhance their sociability and self-esteem.

In group-based Interventions an OT can establish different types of clubs for elderly people such as:

- Reading club where they share their books, read, and discuss about the topics together

- Walking club where they plan for walking trips in the good weather days and walk together
- Gardening club where they visit each other as a group and cooperate in taking care of their houses' gardens
- Cooking club in which they can gather in their houses to cook and learn from each other
- Grand-parenting club which is a club for elderly people and their grand-children to spend time and participate in activities

Moreover, an OT can provide educational and training programs in which older adults can be trained on safety measures, ergonomic concepts and the use of high technology and internet for advanced socialization, for example, Socializing with elderly in other countries.

An occupational therapist can also establish volunteering activities for older adults since they are retired and have a lot of free time. This would help them in exploring and establishing new roles. Some examples include:

- Volunteering groups to visit needed and disabled elderly
- Volunteering groups to visit children in hospitals
- Volunteering in training clubs is which elderly with knowledge in any area can give training classes for younger people depending on their abilities. For examples, an older adult is a master in gardening and has a huge knowledge about plants and planting, will volunteer to give classes for people and share his knowledge with them.

Finally, as mentioned earlier an OT can advocate and provide working opportunities for older adults in different settings such as working for a clothes shop or with a tailor by knitting and selling their products, working for a restaurant by making specific dishes, or working for a fish market. This would depend on the interests and hobbies of each individual.

## **Conclusion**

Occupational therapists can work with older adults to help them engage in community and participate in their roles as citizens. A lot of older adults have identified citizen participation as an important area of occupational performance for them. Citizen participation includes informal social contact, social contact through activities in public places, participation in organized group hobbies or sports, participation in individual or group civic activities and participation in community groups with social and civic purposes. These roles are considered important and viewed as productive ones to the older adults because they add purpose to their lives since they have a lot of free time due to retirement. An occupational therapist has a lot of skills and potentials that can be used to incorporate older adults in community. This can be done by different types of interventions that can be applied by working directly with the individual or by working with other organizations and institutes. Occupational therapists in Kuwait should start incorporating interventions that target the social and political environment to optimize older adults' participation in community.

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