

Fighting a Battle Against the Opioid Epidemic with Occupational Therapy

Emily Best, OTAS, Douglas Milke, OTAS, Teresa Vega, OTAS, Sara Loesche, MS, OTR/L, CHT
Thomas Jefferson University Occupational Therapy Assistant Studies Program

Defining the Problem

The opioid epidemic is one of the biggest health concerns within the last two decades. Death via drug overdose was at its highest in 2014 and continues to be a problem.

Mortality Rates

- Opioid overdosing is the leading cause of accidental death in U.S.
- 6 out of 10 accidental deaths are caused by opioids

What are Opioids?

“Powerful drugs that produce a sense of well-being and pleasure” (Costa, 2017, p.13). Induces a sense of wellbeing and relaxation, but also depresses the respiratory system. As tolerance builds, more is needed to reach a “high” which causes a higher risk of overdose.

- Increase of prescribed opioids since 1999
- Examples of prescription opioids: Oxycodone (Oxycontin), Hydrocodone (Vicodin), Morphine, Codeine...

Who's at Risk?

- Adolescents - 3-7% reported nonmedical prescription drug use obtained from friends and/or relatives
- Ages 18-25 are the highest prevalence
- Individuals with chronic pain
- Regular usage of opioids (several times per day, per week)
- Users eventually switch to heroin because of low street price

(Costa, 2017)

Drug Use as an Occupation

The term “occupations” is defined as...

“an activity or set of activities that is performed with some consistency and regularity, that brings structure, and is given value and meaning by individuals and a culture” (Stewart & Fischer, 2015, p.460)

NOT ALL OCCUPATIONS ARE POSITIVE AND PROMOTE WELL BEING

- Drug usage (the routine) is technically an occupation, but NOT addiction (the extent of activity)
 - Example of other addictions include: sex, shopping, exercise, and eating, among many others
- For individuals who are addicted to opioids, they likely consider obtaining and using drugs more important than any other occupation, so this falls within the scope of occupational therapy (OT)
- OT can help someone who is addicted to opioids, or recovering from addiction, by reinforcing healthier occupations and teaching alternative ways of coping

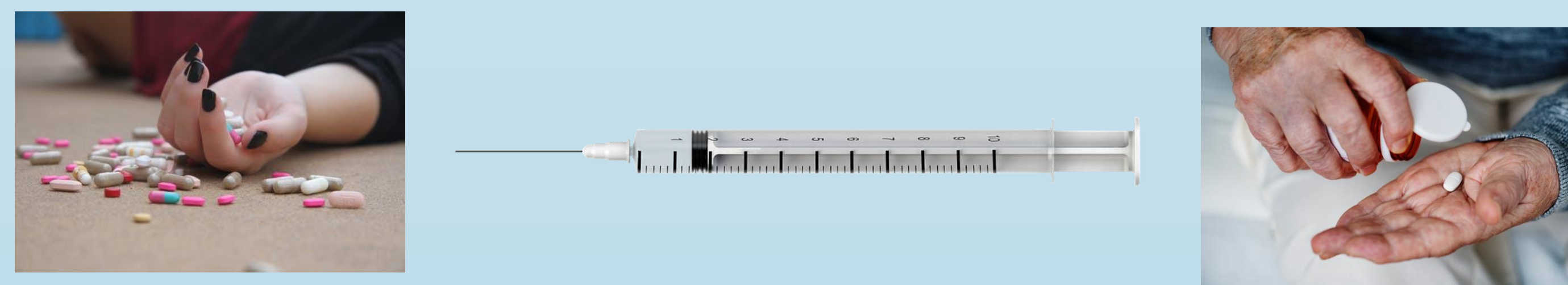
(Stewart & Fischer, 2015)

Role of Occupational Therapy - Prevention

OT is a viable preventative method through non-pharmacological pain management techniques such as:

- Addressing and understanding chronic pain
- Establishing alternatives to pain medication:
 - Education on ergonomics and body posture
 - Stress management
 - Goal setting
 - Exercise
 - Healthy sleep and rest patterns
 - Self-managing pain flare-ups
 - Psychologically based management strategies
 - Cognitive behavioral therapy
- If medication is needed, preventing addiction by:
 - Medication management and health literacy education - understand the expectations and requirements for medication (proper dosage, etc.)

(Costa, 2017; Rowe & Breeden, 2018)



Role of Occupational Therapy - Treatment

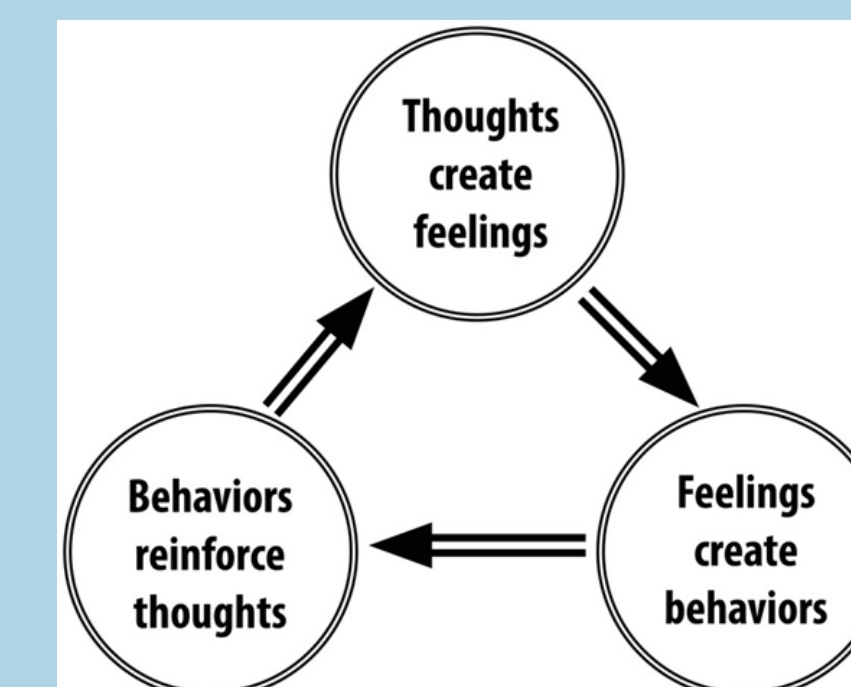
One of the primary goals of an OTP is to help patients engage in meaningful occupations.

Another role of OT in decreasing opioid addiction is medication management. Many cases stem from a person being prescribed opioids as a pain reliever, and quickly finding themselves dependent on the drug. OT can help by:

- Manage client's prescription via education
- Help with alternate ways of pain prevention

Use of the “Biopsychosocial” model

- Bio – Relaxation techniques
 - Breathing, Visualizing, & muscle relaxation techniques
- Psycho – Coping strategies such as mindfulness
- Social – Training, education, & stress reduction



We must also remember that OTPs work as a team. Collaborating with colleagues, such as doctors, nurses, physical therapists, speech therapists, etc. can help us give better care and recovery for clients with addiction

(Recovery Ways, 2017)

Case Example: Sensory Integration Intervention

Recovery Ways Addiction Rehab Center in Utah utilizes sensory integration therapy to teach coping skills that promote overall well-being to individuals who are in recovery. Sensory integration rooms provide a controlled environment:

Use of sight, sounds, music and sensation

Healthy coping mechanisms

Identify feelings that enable drug use

“Wellness as a whole picture [can be] even more [vital] than sobriety, because you can be sober and not be well.”

– Stormy Hill, Recovery Ways Occupational Therapist
(Recovery Ways, 2019)

Conclusion

- The opioid epidemic is an opportunity for occupational therapy practitioners to help promote health and wellness within communities, populations, and individuals.
- Occupational therapy practitioners are trained to understand unique learning styles by looking at a person's habits, roles, routines, environments, performance skills, client factors, etc.
- Occupational therapy's client-centered and holistic values provide an advantage in adapting intervention strategies to what works best for a particular client or population

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