

# Occupational Therapy's Role in Empowering Survivors of Human Sex Trafficking

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## Background and Purpose

- Sex trafficking is defined as “a commercial sex act induced by force, fraud, coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age” (Twigg, 2017, p. 1).
- In the United States, 400,000 females are at risk for sex trafficking each year (Twigg, 2017).
- The purpose of this capstone experience was to create a program for survivors of sex trafficking supported by theory and therapeutic occupations to promote recovery, mental and emotional stability, and occupational performance.
- The capstone experience was completed at Rescue Houston, Houston TX.

## Methods and Activities

Theory, trauma-informed care, and client-centeredness were used to guide the methods and activities implemented in occupational therapy sessions. The initial evaluation process included the administration the Adolescent/Adult Sensory Profile, Sensory Modulation Tool, Pre-Occupational Assessment, and Leisure Interest Checklist. The assessments helped guide program interventions. The intervention sessions focused on improving the survivor's occupational performance and sensory needs.

## Theoretical Foundation

- The Occupational Adaptation (OA) model concentrates on the person, environment, and interaction of the two (Schkade & Shultz, 1992). The person pursues mastery, presenting an occupational challenge, while the occupational environment seeks a demand for mastery from the person. The two come together to form a press for mastery (Schkade & Shultz, 1992). Victims of sex trafficking often adapt to their chaotic environment and form skills to survive, disrupting their ability to master meaningful occupations (Cerny, 2016). Thus, occupational therapy can address the skills needed once removed from the chaotic environment (Cerny, 2016).
- The recovery model strives to promote health, wellness, and resiliency in the community through client-centered decision-making processes (AOTA, 2016). The recovery model was used to guide evaluations and interventions to promote recovery from past trauma.
- Dunn's Model of Sensory Processing highlights the interaction of an individual's neurological threshold and behavioral response (Brown & Dunn, 2008). This model was used incorporate sensory-based activities into interventions and adapt the environment to improve occupational performance.
- Trauma-informed care was incorporated into occupational therapy intervention sessions to promote self-identity and healing (Purkey et al., 2018)

## Implications For Occupational Therapy

Due to traumatic physical and psychological experiences, survivors of sex trafficking often suffer from mental illness, disease, and other physical and psychological complications which impact their daily lives. The areas of occupation identified as being difficult for survivors of human trafficking experiencing a mental illness include: choosing appropriate clothing and accessories, obtaining and utilizing appropriate supplies for hygiene and grooming, using transportation to access the community, establishing healthy routines, managing finances, finding safe housing, identifying reliable employment, participating in education activities, selecting appropriate activities for leisure, and forming meaningful relationships (Cerny, 2016; Cerny, Maasen, & Crook, 2019). Occupational therapy can play an integral role in helping survivors improve occupational performance, promote a healthy lifestyle, and enhance quality of life.

## References

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## Results and Conclusion

The results from the Pre- and Post-Occupational Assessments indicate that the occupational therapy program had a positive impact on the participant's overall perceived performance. The AASP was administered during the evaluation and re-evaluation processes. The results indicated that the occupational therapy program positively impacted the participant's neurological response to sensory information. Surveys completed by the program participants and Rescue Houston's case manager indicated that the program was successful at improving the participants' occupational performance skills and ability to self-regulate.