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The Role of Occupational Therapy within Primary Care: A Multidisciplinary Weight Management Program

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Introduction

Primary care is a major topic across the United States right now as health care costs and the number of individuals diagnosed with chronic diseases continue to rise. Primary care is considered the front line of the health care system, meaning primary care providers are the first to interact with patients from across the lifespan. There is a need to reform primary care to ensure that all individuals have access to services and receive holistic, client-centered health care, as well as provide support to current primary care providers. To fill this gap, occupational therapists have investigated their role in primary care settings since occupational therapy's foundational values and beliefs align with primary care. Only a handful of occupational therapists in the United States are working in primary care clinics or on primary care teams. The literature has identified that occupational therapists have the skills and values needed to treat primary care patients effectively.

Community Site Overview

Forte Well Being offers an 18-week lifestyle weight management program. This program was created and led by an occupational therapist. Other providers apart of the multidisciplinary team include: an internal medicine physician, a physician assistant, a physical therapist, a yoga instructor, and a nutritionist.

Project Overview

This project was broken up into two phases:

- 1.) Participating in the lifestyle management groups
- 2.) Developing supplemental modules to delve further into topics covered during the program
 - Topics covered were stress management, relationships/communication, and sleep hygiene

Additional assignment completed throughout this project included:

- Creating an assessment to determine an individual's readiness for change
- Researching and analyzing various reimbursement avenues
- Examining other weight management programs in the United States

Project Aims

- Investigating an occupational therapist's role in primary care programming
- Collaborating with an occupational therapist apart of a multidisciplinary primary care team
- Participating in primary care programming

Project Outcomes

The data collected was used to determine the effectiveness of Forte's Lifestyle Weight. The objective outcome measures used include the *Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM)*, *Rand's 36-Item Short Form Survey (SF-36)*, and *participant's weight*. Additional information reviewed included the number of participants on weight loss medication and participant's adherence to tracking in the nutrition tracking app.

Key Findings:

- Average weight loss for participants who completed the program: 17.1 lbs
- Average weight loss for participants still in the program: 9.2 lbs
- Average improvement in COPM scores:
 - Performance: 3.5
 - Satisfaction: 3.3
- Rand SF-36 scores fluctuated throughout the program
 - Area with most improvement: Change in health
- 14 out of 18 participants were prescribed weight loss medication
- Using the nutrition tracking app regularly appears to correspond with weight reduction

	Number of Participants	Average Weight Loss	Average Improvement in COPM Scores	Average Improvement in Rand SF-36 Scores	Average Number of Days Using Tracking App
Group 1	1	7 lbs.	Performance: 7.2 Satisfaction: 7	19%	101/118
Group 2	4	16.2 lbs.	Performance: 3.8 Satisfaction: 3.3	13%	52/113
Group 3	4	20.5 lbs.	Performance: 3.9 Satisfaction: 4.1	21%	82/113
Group 4*	5	2 lbs.	Performance: 2.1 Satisfaction: 2.9	2%	18/57
Group 5*	4	18.3 lbs.	Performance: 3.8 Satisfaction: 2.3	15%	43/57

*Groups were still progressing through the program. Data was collected up until their 10-week progress report.

Discussion

The Forte Lifestyle Weight Management Program has proven to effectively reduce participants' weight, improve their social and mental health, and ensure long-term wellbeing by targeting their behavioral health. This project has confirmed the benefits of occupational therapy in primary care and has demonstrated that occupational therapists have the skills to develop effective programming focusing on chronic disease management. The main benefit identified in the research that the Forte program addressed was behavioral health. The Forte program mainly addressed participants' behavioral health by focusing on habits, routines, and roles. Reimbursement is the primary area that restricts occupational therapists from entering the primary care field. Occupational therapists are extremely limited in the number of billing codes they can use to reimburse for services in a primary care setting even though it directly connects with an individual's occupational health and wellbeing.

Implications for OT Practice

- Occupational therapists have the knowledge and skills to create effective chronic disease management programming
- Advocacy for occupational therapists to be qualified mental health professionals in all 50 states and U.S. territories is needed for proper reimbursement
- Individuals benefit from weight management programming focused on behavioral health
- Occupational therapists can take on various roles in a primary care setting from working one-on-one with patients to creating group programs

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Community Mentor: Melissa Clark, DHSc, OTR, CHT

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References

See references provided