Introduction to adaptive hiking

I have recently had the opportunity to be involved as an occupational therapist in enabling a community organization to work towards developing an adaptive hiking program in Calgary, Alberta. This experience has strengthened my belief in adaptive hiking’s potential for creating opportunities for health promoting occupations within the community. Using adaptive hiking to involve clients in meaningful occupation offers visions of possibility for improved health and a more inclusive community. This paper encourages readers to consider how adaptive hiking can be used in occupational therapy to enable involvement in hiking as a meaningful leisure or spiritual occupation that promotes health.

“Adaptive hiking involves people with disabilities accessing park or mountain trails using assistive technology or other personal supports.”

Adaptive hiking involves people with disabilities accessing park or mountain trails using assistive technology or other personal supports. Personal supports might include using a guide for people with visual deficits or cognitive disabilities. Assistive technology in adaptive hiking includes specialized hiking chairs, such as the TrailRider. The TrailRider can be propelled over rugged terrain by able-bodied assistants using handles in the front and back, as shown in Figures One and Two.

Health promotion and adaptive hiking

Health promotion enables people to influence their health through opportunities for improved social, mental, and physical well-being (World Health Organization, n.d.). Occupational therapy focuses on promoting individuals’ health and well-being through opportunities for involvement in occupations (Law, Steinwender & Leclair, 1998). Equal opportunities for involvement in occupations is believed to promote a more inclusive society (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). Occupational therapy values of meaningful involvement in occupations and active participation within the community are compatible with health promotion tenets (Thibeault & Hebert, 1997).

The benefits of outdoor adventure activities for clients with disabilities support the use of a health promotion framework when enabling involvement in hiking. Outdoor adventure activities have been shown to contribute to social well-being by creating opportunities for community inclusion and positive social experiences (Cairin-Levy & Jones, 2007). Involvement in outdoor adventure activities contributes to mental well-being through improved self-concept and self-esteem (Beringer, 2004; Levack, 2003). Skill acquisition resulting from outdoor adventure activities can contribute to physical well-being (McAvo, 2001). Finally, outdoor adventure activities are believed to impact clients’ spirituality by influencing the meaning life has for them (Levack, 2003).

About the author –

Tamara Thicke MSc(OT – Post-Professional), BScOT, OT(C), Reg. AB, lives in Calgary and recently completed her MSc (OT – Post-Professional) as a distance education student at Dalhousie University with a focus on hiking for people with disabilities. Tamara works as an occupational therapist at the Alberta Children’s Hospital in Calgary. She can be contacted at Tamara.Thicke@albertahealthservices.ca.

Figure One: Ishan Manerikar experiencing hiking in the TrailRider with the help of Colin Matthews and Rob Braun during an event hosted by Community Recreational Initiatives Society near Canmore, Alberta. Photo credit: Troy Becker
Occupational therapy and adaptive hiking

Occupational therapy has a role in creating opportunities for involvement in hiking occupations that promote health. Physical, mental, and social well-being through occupation includes enhancement of individual capacities, community support, and social integration (Wilcock, 2006, p. 192). Occupational therapy health promotion involves promoting healthy lifestyles, including occupation in health promotion initiatives, community development, and linking individuals with environmental supports (Brownson & Scaffa, 2001; Trentham, Cockburn, & Shin, 2007). The role of occupational therapy in health promotion can involve interventions at the individual, organizational, community, and population level (Brownson & Scaffa, 2001).

Individual intervention

Occupational therapy includes consultation with individuals who are exploring lifestyle changes (Brachtesende, 2005). Occupational therapists can present adaptive hiking as an option for occupations that promote a healthy lifestyle. Occupational therapists can identify adaptations to the environment or activity, according to clients’ preferences and needs, that will promote meaningful involvement in hiking occupations. Adaptations could include determining the appropriate duration, terrain, or type of group for hiking as well as recommending appropriate assistive technology. Occupational therapists can train clients and their assistants in the use of hiking chairs, such as the TrailRider, using their background in body mechanics, lifts and transfers, and seating and positioning.

Organizational development

Occupational therapists have the skills to collaborate with an organizational client to create opportunities for individuals to access occupations (Brachtesende, 2005). Occupational therapists’ skills in enabling occupation can enhance organizations’ use of adaptive hiking in health promotion. Occupational therapists are able to take on a role of specifying the organizational requirements for adaptive hiking, according to people with disabilities’ needs, such as assistive technology and staff training. This role can also include advocacy and education within an organization to enable it to attain the requirements for an adaptive hiking program. Occupational therapists’ ability to engage organizational representatives in a process of program planning and evaluation can also support the organization’s ability to create opportunities for hiking occupations.

Community development

Community members with a common interest in creating opportunities for adaptive hiking have the potential to contribute resources for a shared adaptive hiking initiative. Occupational therapists can strengthen networks among community members in order to promote their ability to determine goals and action (Trentham et al., 2007). They can also facilitate development of community partnerships that create new opportunities for occupations that meet the needs of the community (Restall et al., 2005). Occupational therapists’ role in community development can enable community members to network and form partnerships that will generate support and resources for a community adaptive hiking initiative.

Population health

Occupational therapy population health initiatives view health from a socio-environmental perspective in relation to societal barriers (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007). Adaptive hiking can influence population health because of its impact on societal determinants of health, including social support and disability. Approaches to promoting health within a population can

“Occupational therapy has a role in creating opportunities for involvement in hiking occupations that promote health.”

Figure Two: Diane Mokelky, in a TrailRider powered by Colin Matthews, enjoying nature up close in a Calgary park during an event hosted by Community Recreational Initiatives Society. Photo credit: Troy Becker
include addressing environmental and psychosocial risk factors (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007). Occupational therapists involved in promoting population health through adaptive hiking, can develop environmental supports, such as accessible transportation to the trailhead, and psychosocial supports, such as social policies that are inclusive of people with disabilities.

**Future directions for adaptive hiking in occupational therapy**

Adaptive hiking can be used by occupational therapists in individual, organizational, community, and population level interventions. Adaptive hiking presents new possibilities for involving clients in occupations that promote health and a more inclusive community. Although more research on adaptive hiking in occupational therapy is needed, it is an area of practice that has great potential for promoting the health and well-being of people with disabilities within their local communities.

**References**


**Editor’s Note:**

For practical resources on Community Development, please see the CAOT’s ‘HOT Topic’ on *Occupational Community Development* found at http://www.caot.ca/pdfs/community%20Dev.pdf