The Use of Needle Crafts in Occupational Therapy

By Stephanie Bergmann, OTR

Occupational Therapy began around the “Time of Enlightenment” / 18th century with the treatment of mentally ill patients. Having someone engage patients in purposeful activities that are of value, enables them to once again become a useful part of society. From the Revolutionary War to the present wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, occupational therapists have been there every step of the way rehabilitating wounded individuals to become independent in their everyday lives through individual activities that are patient specific. These activities have ranged from wood working, weaving, to needlework.

Needle crafts have not only been used as a means to engage a patient into performing difficult tasks, but also to determine a patient’s ability to function in everyday life. Claudia Allen, who has worked extensively with the mentally ill, developed a test using three sewing stitches on a square piece of leather: the running stitch, the whip stitch, and the cordovan stitch. This “testing” test would help determine a patient’s ability to adapt to changes, perform simple tasks independently, problem solve, as well as self correction. While not obvious to most, these tests directly relate to a person’s daily life. For example, if a patient is not able to maintain the flow of a running stitch and remember the sequence of the stitching steps, then he or she will probably not be successful in making a simple need or dressing for inclement weather without assistance.

Occupational therapy is in rehabilitation, in any setting and at any age, is to allow a person to be as independent as possible. This is done through evaluations by a skilled therapist that focus on a patient’s abilities and limitations given their diagnosis. In addition, leisure activities that are motivating to the patient need to be addressed. Therapy is not always patient in order to regain independence, but if therapy can coincide with what a patient enjoys doing in their leisure such as sewing, knitting, or quilting, then they are much more likely to perform the required tasks.

The key to the therapist is to find what motivates an individual and combines this with therapy for the patient’s benefit.

For example, I once had a right handed stroke patient who loved to needlepoint. But, due to his painful paralysis, he was no longer able to stitch. I constructed a table top with brackets that would hold his needlework loom as well as a dental floss box for cutting the yarn. While he was working on his needlepoint, I was able to help him perform range of motion exercises, as well as use his right arm to act as a support for his project. Over time, the patient was able to dress himself independently, cook a meal, drive, and continue his needlepoint with right arm acting as an assistant. More importantly, he was able to go home to live by himself without the help of others, as well as continue his hobby, both of which were important to him.

It has been noted numerous times throughout my career as a therapist, feel if I do in color, play and make things. I am known as the craft lady. Even when evaluating a new patient the typical response to the question of, “what goals do you have for therapy?” the answer, more often than not, is “walking”. This is a great goal, its gets a person from A to B. But when pressed for who is going to help them get dressed, go to the bathroom, perform personal hygiene, bath, cook, answer a check book, garden, plan a meal, or driving, etc...the role of an occupational therapist is to ask!), then I usually have a patient’s attention. To relearn and gain all the skills it takes to achieve independence can be accomplished in many ways; the use of needle crafts is just one means to an end.

The use of needle arts to gain independence in the area of dressing, might not seem to have any correlation, so let me explain. The hand is able to perform over 200 different types of grip, pinch and feel manipulation techniques. In order to fasten a 1/4“ button at least 5 pounds of force must be exerted onto the tips of the first three fingers, depth perception must be intact to align the correct hole, visual scanning, depth perception, visual memories are all elements used for any needle craft. Remember looking for that perfect color, pattern or material to complete your last project? For persons who are depressed, a simple whip stitched wallet project to hold change for a vending machine task can evaluate the individual with a sense of accomplishment and motivation to seek out other acts of independence. Senior citizens who live alone and have no family, often have their sense of purpose and usefulness to society. Knitting, sewing, or quilting baby blankets can evoke memories, for many of us, of our parents or grandparents doing such stitching on a nightly basis. Needle work evokes memories, for most of us, of our parents or grandparents telling such stories on a nightly basis. Needle work can be calming for persons who are anxious and require a task that is repetitive and non-threatening, but that has a beginning and an end. Needle work can be calming for persons who are anxious and require a task that is repetitive and non-threatening, but that has a beginning and an end.

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In conclusion, you can call me the “Craft Lady,” as well as an Occupational Therapist. I can smile because I know that by using crafts, they have a common thread that winds its way into people's lives to enrich them, allow them to become independent and finally give them a sense of purpose.