

Occupational therapy in perinatal and infant mental health: A natural fit?

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Abstract

Background

Mental ill health during pregnancy and postnatally is common and potentially serious. Both women and men are at increased risk of developing mental ill health during the perinatal period, particularly women with pre-existing psychiatric disorders. Perinatal Mental ill health may have an adverse effect on the consumer, his/her partner, family and, in particular, on the future development of her infant. Relational recovery and parenting are key themes in evidence-based practice, however the occupational therapy literature on parenting and mental health is limited and parenting is rarely prioritised within adult focused mental health services. This presentation will demonstrate a model which attempts to address this gap in OT practice.

Method

The primary aim of this presentation is to describe occupational therapy practice in perinatal and infant mental health (PIMH) by using the example of Northern Sydney Local Health District PIMH service. This is a multidisciplinary mental health service targeting parents who have severe and complex mental health issues who are pregnant or have infants up to two years. While early identification and intervention of perinatal mental ill health assists in mitigating risk to both the adult consumer and her/his infant, treatment of the illness alone does not sufficiently improve outcomes for infants.

Discussion

Both OT and contemporary mental health services have a strong focus on recovery oriented practice in which the consumer is empowered to develop a sense of autonomy and identify meaning and purpose in their own life. More recently the notion of relational recovery has emerged, acknowledging that relationships and occupational roles (e.g. parenting) influence all aspects of recovery. Hence, recovery must be viewed as a family-focused construct.

Conclusion

OT in this specialised field of perinatal and infant mental health integrates adult-focused therapy, infant mental health and family focused mental health care.