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On behalf of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) representing the interests of more than 140,000 professionals including students, researchers, educators, and practitioners of occupational therapy, I am writing to address the proposed Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or DSM-5. AOTA applauds the development of this new version of this critical tool. Changes such as the clustering of Neurodevelopmental Disorders may be helpful in correctly diagnosing problems of children. Other changes will likely have a positive impact on diagnosis and treatment.

AOTA particularly wants to comment on how the proposed DSM-5 addresses the issue of Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) and sensory problems.

AOTA is commenting on issues related to sensory processing and integration because of the emphasis on these issues in occupational therapy. Occupational therapy is an important intervention for individuals with sensory processing and integration challenges, including those whose main diagnosis is autism, pervasive developmental delay, or another condition. We applaud the explicit reference to sensory input and environments within the proposed criteria as a factor impacting individuals with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

We are aware that the DSM-5 Task Force has reviewed and considered the establishment of a separate and distinct sensory processing disorder during its several years of deliberation. The Task Force has publicly asked for more information during its deliberations. The APA has decided not to include this in the proposed DSM-5. AOTA believes that the APA should continue to monitor and evaluate ongoing research in sensory processing issues. This is a very dynamic area for research, especially in occupational therapy.

The practice of occupational therapy can be defined as "the therapeutic use of occupations, including everyday life activities with individuals, groups, populations, or organizations to support participation, performance, and function in roles and situations in home, school, workplace, community, and other settings." "Occupational therapy practitioners are concerned with an individual's ability to engage in and perform all activities that are required of him or her and any that he or she desires to do in the course of daily life" (p. 5). As a discipline, occupational therapy is steeped in the sciences that provide knowledge and understanding of human development, behavior and function, and the many variables that influence all aspects of human life. Occupational therapy recognizes that the registration, processing, and integration of sensory information can both support and inhibit an individual's ability to function in everyday activities.

AOTA recognizes that sensation is inherent in all aspects of life, and when neurophysiological processing and integration of sensation is inefficient or ineffective an individual may experience functional challenges across all areas of occupational performance. These challenges may include psychosocial behavior as well as daily life skills, motor performance, attention and behavior organization, and self-regulation, among others. Therefore AOTA believes sensory processing disorders and integration may not be exclusively considered a mental health issue, but additional research and analysis are necessary to ensure a classification that ensures access to interventions



including occupational therapy that address sensory challenges, the behaviors resulting from such challenges, and the associated functional limitations. Occupational therapy practitioners have been evaluating and treating sensory processing and integration challenges in individuals for more than three decades, and the occupational therapy domain of practice includes all areas of occupation that can be influenced by sensory processing and integration. Occupational therapy practitioners, scientists, and researchers with expertise in sensory processing and sensory integration should contribute to a team approach regarding diagnosis and treatment of these challenges and possible underlying conditions that may result in the sensory problems.

Recognizing the importance of evidence to inform and guide practice, systematic reviews on various topics related to children and adolescents with challenges in sensory processing and sensory integration have been conducted by AOTA. The findings were used to develop an AOTA evidence-based practice guideline on this topic.³ This publication is currently included in the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality National Guideline Clearinghouse (http://www.guideline.gov/). In addition, results of the systematic reviews on a variety of sensory processing and sensory integration topics were published the May/June 2010 issue of the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy (AJOT)*.⁴

There is emerging evidence to support occupational therapy using a sensory integrative approach, including recently published randomized controlled trials (RCT).^{5–7} AOTA updates its evidence resources on a regular schedule and a new review of the latest research is underway in regard to issues, including sensory, for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders.

AOTA believes that more rigorous studies of sensory integration and sensory-based conditions and therapies are needed, including the development of manualized treatment protocol tied to a fidelity measure to assure practice follows current research findings. AOTA welcomes future opportunities to study benefits and measure outcomes with a team of scientists including psychiatrists and occupational therapy researchers.

In conclusion, AOTA urges the APA to continue its work to promote proper diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders by keeping the DSM in line with contemporary research and thinking. AOTA urges continued analysis regarding clarifying the identification of SPD as a diagnosis as well as continuing to include references to sensory issues in other diagnostic categories where appropriate. AOTA and the profession of occupational therapy remain dedicated to the improvement of function and performance regardless of the cause and look forward to continuing to work with the APA and provide comments critical to people with sensory processing challenges that impact their function and quality of life.

Sincerely

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Chief Professional Affairs Officer

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