

POLICY E.16

Subject: **Occupational Therapy's Commitment to Sustainability and Climate Change**

Code:

PURPOSE: The purpose of this policy is to articulate the Association's commitment to addressing occupational needs in a manner that considers future generations and marginalized communities' ability to mitigate and adapt to the harmful health impacts of climate change through education, practice, research, policy, and advocacy.

RATIONALE:

Climate change is one of the major challenges impacting quality of life, and the mental, physical, social, spiritual, and economic well-being of individuals, groups, and populations on a global level. Environmental degradation, loss of habitat and biodiversity, food insecurity, overpopulation, poverty, wealth inequalities, extreme weather events, and unprecedented climate global refugees exacerbate occupational injustice and deprivation for present and future generations while threatening participation in meaningful, culturally relevant, and ecologically sustainable occupations.

As an occupation-based profession, occupational therapy practitioners have an ethical responsibility to support our clients (individuals, groups, populations) to sustain environments and the ecosystem to foster occupational justice.

- AOTA's guiding documents and professional standards place contextual and environmental factors within the profession's domain and scope of practice. The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework, Fourth Edition (*OTPF-4*; American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020b) broadens the understanding of these factors to include the collective impact on the natural environment: "Engagement in human occupation influences the sustainability of the natural environment, and changes to human behavior can have a positive impact on the environment" (p. 10).
- Climate change is a public health issue that impacts all populations, and as occupational therapy practitioners, we have an ethical and moral imperative to address it (Occupational Therapists for Environmental Action, 2021).
- Climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, as well as other factors, affect the emergence of infectious diseases. Increased drought, declining pollinators, and extreme storms threaten the ability to grow food, with some crops becoming less nutritious due to climatic changes, thereby increasing the prevalence of malnutrition and disease (Faerron Guzman & Potter, 2019).

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- Extreme weather events may expose individuals to traumatic experiences and chronic stress because of fear, economic challenges, and displacement (Goldmann & Galea, 2014). Displacement may result in disruption of routines that support engagement in meaningful occupations, and interruption of social patterns that foster resilience.
- A study conducted from 1991 to 2018 found that the rate of heat-related mortality is attributed to human-induced climate change (Vicedo-Cabrera et al., 2021).
- According to the American Lung Association (2022), 137 million Americans live in areas with an unhealthy ozone level or particle pollution. The high-risk groups include people of color, those living in poverty, children, and the 65-plus years populations, and people with underlying health conditions such as asthma, COPD, lung cancer, and cardiovascular disease.
- Pollard et al. (2020) suggests that loss of human and animal life, poor air quality, ocean warming and acidity, threats to arctic and low-lying regions, and the global economy due to cost of natural disasters threaten the sustainability of occupations, health, and well-being.
- Ikiugu & McCollister (2011) assert that global warming is not an isolated problem but interrelated with other issues such as poverty, diseases, material inequalities within and between nations, corruption, governmental and institutional dysfunctions, and overpopulation. To effectively address climate change, the previously identified problems need to be resolved in an urgent manner.
- The victims of extreme weather disasters and global unrest are often deprived of their livelihoods, identities, relationships, and memories, leaving them uprooted. This has an impact on their physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being, with toxic stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, and generalized anxiety disorders being common problems that are recorded under such circumstances (World Federation of Occupational Therapists [WFOT], 2019).
- Significant health risks associated with wildfires include burns, injuries, dehydration, respiratory complications, contaminated water, heatstroke, mental illness, heart conditions, and insomnia, which may contribute to occupational disruption (Chen et al., 2021; Kardas-Nelson, 2020; Xu et al., 2020).

THE FOLLOWING COMPONENTS CONSTITUTE THE ASSOCIATION'S POLICY IN REGARD TO SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE:

I TERMS AND DEFINITIONS:

Climate Change: "A change of climate that is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere, and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods" (United Nations, article 1)

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Mitigation: Refers to reducing consumption for resource conservation to ensure that the planet can support a growing population, and engaging in occupations that facilitate restoring the earth's ecosystem to support humanity (WFOT, 2018).

Occupational Deprivation: “[A] state of preclusion from engagement in occupations of necessity and/or meaning due to factors that stand outside the immediate control of the individual” (Whiteford, 2000, p. 201).

Occupational Disruption: [A] temporary disruption to a person's usual pattern of occupational performance and engagement that can negatively impact one's health and wellness (Whitney & Walsh, 2020, p. CE-2)

Occupational Justice: “[A]ccess to and participation in the full range of meaningful and enriching occupations afforded to others, including opportunities for social inclusion and resources to participate in occupations to satisfy personal, health, and societal needs (AOTA, 2020, p. 68).

Occupational Lifestyle: The way people choose occupations every day and pattern a repertoire of occupations over a significant period in their lives (Ikiugu & Rosso, 2006).

Sustainability: The ability of human beings to meet their current needs “without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43).

II. DEFINED OUTCOMES

1. As a profession, we affirm that human-driven climate change threatens not only our life-sustaining ecology but also meaningful and culturally relevant occupational participation, mental and physical health, and well-being, impacting populations locally and globally.
2. Occupational therapy practitioners and students are encouraged to expand the concept of natural and built contexts to include the ecosystem in alignment with the *OTPF-4*.
3. Occupational therapy practitioners and students are encouraged to increase individual, organizational, and community awareness and action related to sustainable occupational choices which threaten human, animal, and environmental well-being, and the importance of making occupational choices that preserve natural and built environmental/ecological resources in the United States.
4. Occupational therapy practitioners are encouraged to assist clients and communities, including climate refugees who are displaced or experiencing occupational disruption, to prepare and adapt to climate change and natural disasters.
5. Occupational therapy practitioners and students are encouraged to recognize the impact of climate change on marginalized and high-risk populations who are disproportionately affected, and in many cases unable to make sustainable occupational choices (e.g., people living in food deserts are unable to access healthy

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- food, often live in highly polluted communities, have limited budgets and transportation, and have challenging access to healthy food choices).
6. Sustainable occupational therapy practice should encompass the social, economic, environmental, and spiritual determinants of health integral to preventative health care approaches and promotion of occupational justice (WFOT, 2018).
 7. Occupational therapy practitioners are encouraged to address climate change in professional practice through promoting changes in our clients' habits and routines whenever possible, such as recycling, reusing resources, promoting alternatives to disposable consumerism, and assisting those most affected by climate change through adaptation strategies and evidence-based interventions utilizing nature.
 8. Occupational therapy curricula should include expansion of the concept of environment to consider the intersection between human-driven climate change and population health and provide opportunities for innovative fieldwork, capstone projects, and research in this area.
 9. Occupational therapy practitioners are encouraged to promote evidence-based, occupation-based interventions to facilitate individual and community occupational lifestyle changes to support population health and environmental sustainability.
 10. Occupational therapy practitioners and students are encouraged to advocate for and affirm the relationship between sustainability, ethics, and the profession's core values to ensure occupational and social justice are a central focus in alignment with the *OTPF-4* and the AOTA Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics (AOTA, 2020a).
 11. Occupational therapy practitioners and students are encouraged to advocate for providing sustainable health care, education, and research without harm to the ecosystem.
 12. Occupational therapy practitioners and students are encouraged to support legislation promoting climate change mitigation at federal, state, and local governmental levels.

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Effective: 03/22
Revised:
BPPC Reviewed:
Rescinded: