This particular client would become very agitated being with the group, especially at mealtime. And he was not eating well. What we suggested doing was to bring him back into the office area where it's somewhat more quiet...And when he would be in a quiet, more controlled situation, he just did very well....He would actually sit down with his meal and bless himself and his food...he ate much better and he was even concerned, you know, if he would spill something, and just seemed to be much more in touch with reality. [Quoted from a staff person of a day-care center for persons with dementia.] (Hasselkus, 1998, p. 428)

As occupational therapy professionals, a prominent focus of our practice is on the habits and routines of daily occupation. Understanding a person’s usual daily stream of activity—the patterns, the sequences, the blocks of time, the rhythms—is believed to be important to being able to work effectively with that person in therapy. Habits are central constructs of many of our theoretical frameworks and occupational frames of reference. Enabling the person described above to eat his lunch in his usual, habitual way meant the difference between agitation and calmness, between inadequate and adequate nutrition.

At the American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF) Habits Conference in January 1999, Juliet M. Corbin, DNSc, noted author and lecturer in the School of Nursing at San Jose State University, said this about habits:

“They can be found in every aspect of our lives. They set boundaries, give predictability, regularity, tempo, and rhythm to everyday life...Though the actual ways and times that activities are carried out change as we grow older, it’s that inner sense of structure and order that we carry over in the form of routine.”

Winnie Dunn, PhD, OTR, FAOTA, professor and chair of the Department of Occupational Therapy Education at the University of Kansas and one of the planners for the conference, presented her conceptual model of a continuum ranging from “habit impoverishment” at one end to “habit domination” at the other. In the middle of the continuum is “habit utility,” a state in which the person’s habits offer just the right support for satisfying performance in daily life (Dunn, 1997). Graham Rowles, PhD, professor of Geography and Behavioral Science at the University of Kentucky, described the potential therapeutic “knowledge of habit” that we as occupational therapists have to inform our interventions with our clients.

An event that brought me squarely face-to-face with the meaning of habits in my own life was a 7-week stay in Australia as a visiting scholar in the School of Occupation & Leisure Sciences at the University of Sydney. During the first hours after my arrival in Sydney, I would say I was definitely “habit impoverished.” To arrive—plunk!—in a new country, new city, new place to live is to be flooded with a cacophony of all things unfamiliar. The moment I arrived, I began to carve out tiny niches of familiar routines. On my first day, I arranged my clothes and toiletries in the dresser drawers, closets, and bathroom; I located the classical music station on the radio and the PBS channel on the television (even Inspector Morse) that first evening; I followed my usual routine of reading in bed; and I turned out the light at my customary time. The next morning, I had my usual orange juice and cereal with sliced banana for my first breakfast.

As the days, then weeks, passed by, I sought the point on the continuum of habits at which my daily life would be nicely supported, yet I would remain open to new opportunities. Many mundane habits were maintained: I made the bed every day; I brushed my teeth twice a day; I did the laundry once a week. I had my main meal at night, purchased (I did no cooking) at one of the many nearby take-away food shops, and I ate it in front of the television, something we never do at home. I bought the Sunday newspaper and Time magazine, and poured over the news from the United States and around the world. About half way through my stay in Sydney, a thoughtful faculty member loaned me her boombox, and other friends loaned me CDs, and I felt rich with the sounds of glorious music washing through the
The absence of music, except for the radio station, had been a loss I felt keenly.

I was expected to be on campus 3 days a week. Upon arriving at the office each of those days, my normal back-home routine of immediately checking my e-mail emerged in full force. At the end of the day, a sort of “vacuum” greeted me on my arrival back at the apartment because I had no telephone answering machine and usually received no mail.

On the days when I did not go to campus, I worked on my academic tasks in the mornings and then took off for the rest of the day to see the sights. I learned about the culture and art of the aboriginal people of Australia. I learned about Australian foods, plants, birds, and marsupials. I tasted kangaroo meat one night in a restaurant. I read avidly about the history of Australia and Sydney and visited historic houses in the city. I was wined and dined, taken into the Blue Mountains for a spectacular day, and taken up the coast for a hike in the much-loved Australian “bush.” I learned to wrap my tongue around the lovely names of towns and places: Kirribilli, Burragorang Lookout, Parramatta, Lavender Bay, Darling Harbour.

My days had a freedom that I had not known for many years. I was on my own. A peculiar thought struck me after about 2 weeks. I wrote in my journal, “Who am I while I am here? Am I still Betty? Am I a different Betty? Am I the same Betty at work here as I am at work at home? If not, where is my ‘at-home’ Betty?” In a way, my musings were testimony to how strongly we define ourselves by the occupational patterns of our days. And when those patterns change dramatically, and the people we see and the places we inhabit are all totally new and different, we struggle to maintain those aspects of our selves and our daily routines that seem essential to our very being.

Chuck Christiansen EdD, OTR, OT(L), FAOTA, said in his 1999 Eleanor Clarke Slagle Lecture, “Identities are closely tied to what we do and our interpretations of those actions in the context of our relationships with others” (p. 549). In our therapy, do we recognize the importance of habits and routines to the clients with whom we work? Are we aware of the power of habits and routines to restore a sense of normalcy and meaning to daily occupations? For the day-care participant described previously, the occupations of sitting down to a meal, blessing himself, taking care of spills, and eating the food were all aspects of a remarkable moment of relative well-being (Hasselkus, 1998). They represent the enactment of the inner structure of this man’s being, a powerful reminder to himself, as well as to others, of who he is. If I experienced the life disruption that follows a major illness such as dementia or an injury, I would likely be asking the same kinds of questions that I asked of myself while in Australia: “Who am I now? Am I still Betty? Am I a different Betty?” Help in reestablishing the daily routines, occupations, and social relationships that have formed my identity all my life would be immensely appreciated.

As an aftermath to the AOTF Habits Conference, perhaps we can anticipate publication of new research on habits and on the relationship of habits to occupation and well-being in the not-too-distant future. AOTF is planning a second Habits Conference to be held in February 2001.

References