NATIONALLY SPEAKING

Taking Care of Ourselves as Health Care Providers

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As I begin my term as President of our Association and look to the future, I am excited about the opportunities for occupational therapy. The social forces shaping health care systems today provide an opportunity for creative action. As a profession, we are not helplessly dependent on environmental forces; rather, we can be part of those forces and have a major impact on the environment. Environment-profession is a transactional process that requires occupational therapy personnel to join together as professional partners and create opportunities that facilitate creative action. Through professional partnerships we can promote the expansion of our profession.

The present holds opportunities, and our Association’s state of well-being gives us the ability to grab hold of these opportunities and go forward. Our present actions and future outcomes are affected by the past, and our Association’s past has a tradition of excellence. A true tradition becomes the lifeblood to continue our development and strive both to surpass the past and create the future. Tradition is not static but a dynamic force that provides us with the security to change and facilitate professional and personal maturation.

During the past 30-plus years, I have “grown up” with occupational therapy. Through my past experiences with our profession, I have gained pride in being an occupational therapist and value in the tradition of excellence of AOTA. Our Association has grown remarkably in recent years. In 1985, we numbered more than 40,000 members and 123 educational programs, and just 10 years ago we had fewer than half that many members and 85 education programs. As we have grown, so have our accomplishments. We have had great success with our continuing education programs. Our legislative efforts have helped increase job availability and career diversity. We have purchased our own building and our own computer system, and together with AOTF we have had major successes in areas related to research and promotion of scholarly activities.

“Growing up” with occupational therapy has taught me the primary factors in maintaining a tradition of excellence and promoting a creative future: self-esteem and innovation. Self-esteem and innovation are also vital forces in maintaining our personal tradition of excellence. Therefore, self-esteem and innovation are vital forces in our self-caring process, both the caring of the profession and the caring of self.

Our profession’s tradition and growth will be sustained and our personal successes will continue only if our members become involved and if we can satisfy their needs. Our Association’s well-being depends on our members’ well-being. Our future depends on our ability to take care of ourselves both personally and professionally.

Taking care of ourselves is the positive force that promotes the ability to seize opportunities for the future. As much as we admire tradition, we must not be afraid to break with it and create new directions and new openings whenever we realize that those opportunities will mean greater satisfaction. Self-esteem and innovation provide the necessary ingredients for taking care of ourselves while achieving personal and professional maturity.

Self-Esteem

If taking care of ourselves can be equated with self-esteem, then
perhaps we should begin by understanding the concept of self-esteem. Self-esteem is a central human need—to experience ourselves positively, to feel pride in our accomplishments, to feel competent and effective at what we do, to feel cared for and valued. Self-esteem is not gained by working harder or longer; in fact, working harder is not always better. Frequently our feelings about ourselves at work and as professionals are feelings of being overwhelmed and struggling to get things under control. In our efforts to take care of ourselves, we sometimes become overwhelmed because we attempt to do it all without establishing priorities for the doing. We tend to believe that working harder or longer will help us to reach our goals. Instead, we need to determine the importance of the role or task in relationship to the environment and time. We need to establish priorities as to what is right for us at that time in our lives and in relation to our environment.

Self-esteem is a transactional process between self and the self’s doing. Self-esteem permits peak performance and facilitates positive responses to stress. The stress response within our body has been described as a mechanism that can be mobilized so that our minds and bodies adapt to change, pressure, and demands with efficient performance and creative achievements.

Innovation

Our adaptation to social forces and demands can spur us on and provide us with excitement and energy, or it can burn us out in bitterness, apathy, and frustration. The pace of change and the multiple sources of pressure on health care systems make our professional lives stressful and can lead to burnout. We can prevent burnout and allow ourselves to bubble with creativity without boiling over. The stress of today's environment can help us sort things out, determine priorities, and facilitate innovative action. AOTA can maintain a balance of innovative actions and a continuation of its tradition of excellence. To do so we need to:

- define our own priorities,
- assess the present situation and available resources,
- identify what actions are realistic within priorities and situations, and
- seize opportunities and go forth with them.

When we look closely at change, pressure, and demands, we can see that these stressors are not just something done to us; rather, stressors result from our own interaction with our environment. Pressure is a consequence of demands, our own perception of them, and our reaction to them. When pressure is perceived as being negative, people feel like pawns, controlled by external factors. As health care providers, we need to perceive ourselves as "origins," controlling our own actions (1). AOTA needs its members to be "origins," controlling Association actions. Our tradition of excellence can continue to develop through members' active experiences with the profession, actions that involve active control of our own destiny.

Breakthrough

Stressors can enhance "breakthrough performance." Breakthrough is like magic—it is when we do more than we expect of ourselves. Having self-esteem lets you know you can do it, and breakthrough facilitates innovative actions that reach beyond our own expectations. When we encounter stressors, the needed behavior is there. As an Association we can pull the needed action out and interact with the environment with creative action. It is the calling up of an acquired behavior from our tradition of excellence that lets us react to the situation. The integration of action with the environmental situation becomes an innovative new performance—a breakthrough. Breakthrough becomes the clear target in which creativity is stimulated.

Stressors should promote the use of environmental resources, particularly each other. Our interpersonal relationships become an energizing environment, and professional partnerships provide us with the security to act on social forces and create opportunities for ourselves and our profession. Association meetings and conferences serve as an opportunity to seek out people who are resources, people who are energizing for us. Our interpersonal relationships with other occupational therapists become professional partnerships that result in creativity and innovation.

Other people help us to enhance our self-esteem, because interpersonal relationships are communication. The main function of communication is to generate ideas, and with energizing people, we can call up ideas from our inner speech, bring out our inner thoughts, and verbalize them for our own sake. Our interpersonal relationships, as resources for idea generation, promote innovation. Professional partnerships are the key to breakthrough performance.

Creative Partnerships

Taking care of ourselves may
require that we develop a new view of ourselves, a new awareness. The new energizing view begins with an awareness that, in addition to reacting to pressure and demands, we also have the ability to modify ourselves and respond to demands in creative and novel ways. The new view emphasizes the unique human ability to be creative, to adapt by reorganizing and redefining the situation, to become self-determining, to exercise choice, to be motivated by intrinsic values and goals, and to react with action that is meaningful to ourselves. The new view of our Association is also a new awareness of the value of creating partnerships between the Association and its members, partnerships that are mutually beneficial and that will continue to support the organization and our profession’s growth and well-being.

The new view of taking care of ourselves emphasizes personal interactions, uniqueness, creativity, adaptability, self-determination, intrinsic motivation, choice, and meaningful activity—the components of our professional value system. For decades we have promoted these values, as well as self-esteem, with our patients. In taking care of ourselves, all we have to do is include this philosophy in our everyday lives.

The use of purposeful activity to enhance a patient’s self-esteem is the basis of occupational therapy. Likewise, purposeful activity is the basis for cultivating and enhancing personal and professional self-esteem and innovation. Purposefulness and the meaningfulness of our actions are highly individualized perceptions that depend on our own personal experiences. Self-perception of activity can be equated with purpose or meaning. Meaning provides the practical direction for goal achievement. According to Sharratt (2) meaning is the social confirmation of values and reality. The literature suggests that people’s perceptions of what is meaningful or of value influence their subsequent actions. The idea that a person’s self-perception of the meaningfulness of an activity can promote innovation and effective action is consistent with motivational theories. Motivation theory attempts to explain why action is energizing. From White’s (3) concept of competence, effectance motivation is intrinsic, because people perform for the value of the action itself; it requires no external reward or gratification. Someone with great wisdom once said, “There is no limit to what a person can do or where the person can go in life if he or she doesn’t mind who gets the credit.” As health care providers, we perform for the value of our actions; reward or gratification is not the primary motivating force. As members of our Association, our performance also must be directed for the value of the action. Through our Association—member partnerships, there is no limit to our future success, as long as we do not focus on who gets the credit; rather, our functions must focus on the value of the action.

The literature suggests that creative activity that allows the doer choice in the process can influence mood and affective meaning more positively than imitative activity. The purpose of choosing is to make a difference in one’s own interest. Choosing implies making a commitment to the course of action chosen, and it results in a sense of personal responsibility for the outcome. There are constraints on everyone that make free choice impossible in all situations. But we are free to choose much of the time. As a profession with a tradition of excellence, we have freedom of choice, and our choosing directs our own course of action.

Choice of activity may be related to the chooser’s perception of self-competence and achievement. Thus, one’s self-esteem is cultivated through meaningful interactions with the environment. Meaningfulness of actions are our own perceptions and become a quality of inner experience. When a person exercises choice in selecting activity, intrinsic rewards can be attained. When an organization exercises choice in selecting its actions, innovation and professional esteem can be attained.

I believe that taking care of ourselves and of the profession is action that is unique to each of us. Members’ uniqueness becomes the essential metal from which we forge creative partnerships for future achievements. Self-esteem and innovation are necessary factors for creative growth. Our own profession has provided us with the philosophy for achieving self-esteem and innovation. We just need to listen to ourselves, and each of us will contribute to our tradition of excellence. Together we can create our own future.

REFERENCES