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Dating as an Occupation: Swipe Right for OT

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Is dating an occupation? Yerxa (1993) states that occupation is “self initiated, goal directed, experiential as well as behavioral, socially valued or recognized, constituted of adaptive skills or repertoires, organized, essential to the quality of life experienced, and possesses the capacity to influence health” (p. 5). These essential characteristics of occupation are inherent in dating and warrant the attention of occupational therapists (OTs).

“Dating” can be defined as the process of finding a romantic partner(s), which might involve many occupations such as: dressing, social activities, online dating, meeting someone for coffee, etc. Dating is personally defined, unique to the individual and their values, and imbedded in a socio-cultural context.

The culture that surrounds dating in Ireland is in a state of change with increased choice, multiple avenues to pursue dating (e.g. online dating), and increasing acceptance of different lifestyles, sexual orientations, and gender roles.

As OTs we can appreciate the form, function and meaning of occupations. We can evaluate the underlying skills, strengths, and challenges our clients might have in order to perform the occupation of dating to their satisfaction. Despite research indicating the importance of addressing sexuality (White et al, 1992, Northcott & Chard, 2006), sexuality is often ignored in occupational therapy (Sakellariou & Algado, 2006, p.350). This poster aims to address this gap in practice and detail how dating can be imbedded in the OT process.

Client Occupational Profile: Matt is a 34 year old financial analyst living in a suburb of Dublin and would like to have a girlfriend. Little history of relationships - one significant relationship lasting six months when he was 19. Spends a majority of his time working and states that he is often too tired to “go out” or make social plans on the weekends. Enjoys going out but does not go out often and his other occupations are quite solitary: playing video games, watching movies, reading. States he can be a “bit shy” and nervous to “approach” women when he is out. Many of Matt’s friends have started to get married and have families, leaving him with less friends to go out with socially to meet women. Started online dating in the past 4 months, with 3 dates thus far. Would like to improve on his communication skills while chatting online and would like help on how to go from online to offline and actually ask them out on a date. Matt shared that when he does meet someone from an online site, she doesn’t know where to take them or which places/activities might make a good date.

OT Process:
Matt completed an initial interview questionnaire over email and sent to the OT in advance of their meeting. During the first session in a hotel lobby over coffee, Matt and the OT discussed his responses to the questionnaire and clarified Matt’s goals and priorities. The OT observed that he was friendly with great sense of humour and positive social skills.

Long Term Goals:
1. Matt will identify and practice online and offline conversation skills to improve communication, with minimal assistance from OT.
2. Matt will research and visit new venues/activities for dating to improve social occupations, with moderate assistance from OT.
3. Matt will identify one new leisure occupation to engage in to improve lifestyle balance, independently.

Intervention:
1st Session: Matt researched online about places he could take a potential date. The OT prompted Matt to look for activities or environments that provided unique interactions. Matt discovered a wine bar that had an interactive wine tasting machine that would be a fun activity, as well as a coffee shop with a good atmosphere, a reasonably priced dinner venue, and a bowling alley (Goal 2).
2nd session: Matt and the OT visited the different venues as part of the session (Goal 2). While at the venues, Matt and the OT discussed strategies to improve communications on and offline (Goal 1). Matt identified powerful questions that he could ask that related more to the client’s values and traits he wanted in a potential partner. As a take home goal to work on lifestyle balance, Matt decided to look into Meetup.com for social activities happening in the community. He hoped this might spark an interest in a new leisure pursuit (Goal 3).

Implications for OT Practice
Dating as an occupation: When identified as important to a client, cannot be ignored in OT practice. OT’s in traditional areas can address issues related to dating and sexuality as part of their existing practice. OT’s may also choose to specialize in the occupation of dating, as dating coaches. Dating coaching is a possible role emerging area of practice for OTs and an opportunity to extend practice into a wellness and preventative approach. When someone is struggling with dating and wanting help- they might just “swipe right” (say yes) to OT.

References