

Encouraging Independence Among Elderly Patients in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Strategies

¹Aseri, Yasir, ²Alharbi, Malak, ³Khafagi, M

^{1,2}Senior Occupational Therapist, ³Senior Physical Therapist
NGHA- Riyadh

Abstract-

This article examines the challenges and strategies associated with promoting independence among elderly patients in Saudi Arabia, specifically within the context of the MNGHA Riyadh Occupational Therapy Clinic. Cultural norms, familial expectations, and a preference for compensatory equipment create unique barriers to fostering self-reliance among elderly individuals. By understanding these cultural dynamics, occupational therapists can develop effective, culturally sensitive strategies to encourage independence. Key challenges include familial expectations of providing hands-on care, reluctance to adopt adaptive techniques, limited awareness of occupational therapy benefits, and infrastructural barriers. Strategies to overcome these challenges include culturally sensitive education, collaborative goal setting, empowering families, gradual introduction of adaptive techniques, and leveraging technology. Success stories from the clinic illustrate the potential positive outcomes of these approaches. The article concludes with recommendations for further research and policy development to support elderly independence in Saudi Arabia.

Introduction

Promoting independence among elderly patients is a core objective in occupational therapy, particularly in outpatient settings such as the MNGHA Riyadh Occupational Therapy Clinic. However, in Saudi Arabia, cultural norms, familial expectations, and the preference for compensatory equipment present unique challenges. This article explores these challenges, cultural patterns observed in our clinic, and strategies for encouraging independence among elderly Saudi patients. By examining the cultural context, identifying the specific challenges faced by occupational therapists, and presenting effective strategies, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of promoting independence in this unique setting.

Cultural Context and Dependency Patterns

In Saudi culture, there is a strong emphasis on familial care and respect for elders. This cultural norm often translates into a preference for familial assistance over promoting self-reliance among elderly individuals. Many families feel it is their duty to provide care, which can inadvertently encourage dependency (Al-Kandari & Crews, 2014). This deep-seated cultural value stems from Islamic teachings that emphasize the importance of caring for one's parents, as well as traditional family structures where multiple generations often live together. Understanding this cultural backdrop is essential for occupational therapists working to foster independence, as interventions must align with these values to be effective.

Challenges Faced by Occupational Therapists

Familial Expectations

Families often prefer to provide hands-on assistance rather than encourage independence, viewing it as a sign of respect and care. This expectation can create a challenging dynamic for occupational therapists, as patients may feel that striving for independence conflicts with family expectations. Elderly patients may also expect

and prefer assistance from family members, viewing independence as unnecessary or even disrespectful. This perspective can hinder the adoption of therapeutic interventions aimed at promoting self-reliance.

Reluctance to Use Adaptive Techniques

Many elderly patients are reluctant to adopt adaptive techniques or participate in therapeutic activities that promote independence, favoring compensatory equipment or familial help instead (Al-Shehri, 2015). This reluctance may be rooted in a lack of familiarity with adaptive techniques or a fear of appearing weak or incapable. Additionally, some patients may have had negative experiences with adaptive equipment in the past, further reinforcing their preference for traditional forms of assistance.

Limited Awareness and Education

There is often a lack of awareness about the benefits of maintaining independence and the potential for improved quality of life through occupational therapy. Both patients and their families may not fully understand how occupational therapy can enhance physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being. This gap in knowledge can lead to resistance to therapeutic interventions and a reliance on compensatory equipment or familial assistance.

Accessibility and Infrastructure

In some cases, the physical environment, such as home layouts, may not be conducive to promoting independence without significant modifications. Homes in Saudi Arabia are often designed with traditional family living in mind, which may not accommodate the needs of elderly individuals striving for independence. This can include barriers such as stairs, narrow doorways, and bathrooms that are not equipped with safety features.

Patterns Observed in Our Clinic

At the MNGHA Riyadh Occupational Therapy Clinic, several patterns have emerged that reflect the cultural and familial dynamics influencing patient behavior:

- High Dependence on Family Members:** Many elderly patients arrive at the clinic with family members who actively participate in their care, often taking over tasks that patients could potentially perform independently. This high level of family involvement, while well-intentioned, can impede the patient's progress towards self-reliance.
- Preference for Compensatory Equipment:** There is a noticeable preference for wheelchairs, walkers, and other compensatory equipment rather than engaging in exercises or activities designed to improve functional independence. This preference can be attributed to the immediate convenience and perceived safety of such equipment.
- Resistance to Change:** Elderly patients often exhibit resistance to change, showing hesitation or skepticism towards new techniques or activities aimed at promoting self-reliance. This resistance may be driven by fear of failure, discomfort with new routines, or a lack of understanding of the benefits of these interventions.

Cultural Sensitivity and Education

Educating both patients and their families about the benefits of independence, using culturally sensitive approaches that respect familial values and traditions, is crucial (Al-Kandari & Crews, 2014). This involves providing information on how maintaining independence can enhance dignity, self-esteem, and overall quality of life. Culturally sensitive education can include discussions on Islamic teachings that emphasize self-reliance and the dignity of the elderly, thereby aligning therapeutic goals with cultural and religious values.

Collaborative Goal Setting

Involving both patients and their families in setting realistic, meaningful goals that promote independence while respecting cultural preferences is essential. By focusing on small, achievable milestones, therapists can gradually build patients' confidence and capability. Collaborative goal setting ensures that both the patient and their family are committed to the therapeutic process and understand the long-term benefits of increased independence.

Empowering Families

Training family members on how to support their loved ones in achieving greater independence is another effective strategy. This includes guidance on safe home modifications, encouraging participation in daily activities, and emphasizing the role of family in providing support without fostering dependency. Empowering families to be active participants in the therapeutic process can help shift their perspective from one of total care to one of supportive facilitation.

Adaptive Techniques and Gradual Transition

Introducing adaptive techniques gradually, ensuring they are culturally acceptable and tailored to individual patient needs, can make the transition smoother and less intimidating. Combining the use of adaptive equipment with exercises and activities that promote functional independence helps patients see the practical benefits of these techniques. Gradual transitions can reduce resistance and build trust between patients and therapists.

Use of Technology

Leveraging technology to engage patients in therapeutic activities that are both enjoyable and beneficial can significantly enhance patient engagement. This can include apps for cognitive exercises, virtual reality for physical activity, and telehealth for remote guidance and support (Miller et al., 2016). Technology can provide interactive and stimulating ways for patients to participate in therapy, making it more appealing and accessible.

Community Engagement and Support Groups

Establishing support groups and community programs that encourage social interaction and the sharing of experiences can provide motivation and peer support for elderly patients working towards greater independence. Collaborating with local organizations to create awareness campaigns highlighting the importance of elderly independence can further reinforce these efforts. Community engagement can help reduce the isolation that many elderly patients feel and provide a network of support and encouragement.

Occupational Therapy Interventions

Focusing on interventions that integrate daily activities and promote functional skills, such as cooking, dressing, and personal care, is crucial. Using task-specific training helps patients relearn or improve their ability to perform everyday activities independently. These interventions should be practical, relevant, and directly related to the patients' daily lives to ensure they see the immediate benefits.

Holistic Approach

Addressing the physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects of patient care involves exercises to improve strength and mobility, cognitive activities to enhance problem-solving skills, and emotional support to build confidence. A holistic approach ensures that all aspects of the patient's well-being are considered, leading to more comprehensive and effective therapy.

Case Studies and Success Stories

At MNGHA Riyadh, several case studies illustrate the success of promoting independence through culturally sensitive and collaborative approaches:

- Case Study 1: An elderly woman initially dependent on her daughter for daily activities gradually regained independence through a combination of family education, adaptive techniques, and personalized exercises. Her daughter learned to support her mother's efforts towards independence, leading to significant improvements in the patient's self-reliance and quality of life.
- Case Study 2: An elderly man resistant to change and heavily reliant on a wheelchair began participating in a gradual exercise program. With the encouragement of his family and the use of technology to track his progress, he transitioned to using a walker and performing daily activities independently.

These success stories highlight the potential for positive outcomes when cultural sensitivities are respected, and families are involved in the therapeutic process.

Future Directions and Research

Further research and development are essential for optimizing strategies to promote independence among elderly patients in Saudi Arabia. Areas for future exploration include:

- Best Practices:** Identifying best practices for culturally sensitive interventions and family involvement to ensure that therapeutic approaches are both effective and respectful of cultural values.
- Technology Integration:** Exploring the potential of new technologies in enhancing patient engagement and independence. This includes investigating the efficacy of telehealth, virtual reality, and other technological innovations in occupational therapy.
- Policy Development:** Advocating for policies that support home modifications and community programs to facilitate elderly independence. Policy changes can create an environment that is more conducive to promoting independence among elderly individuals.

Conclusion

Promoting independence among elderly patients in Saudi Arabia requires understanding the cultural context and overcoming significant challenges. At MNGHA Riyadh Occupational Therapy Clinic, a collaborative and culturally sensitive approach has proven effective in encouraging independence. By educating patients and families, setting realistic goals, and leveraging adaptive techniques and technology, occupational therapists can enhance the quality of life for elderly patients. The continued commitment to research, community engagement, and holistic care will further advance these efforts, ensuring that elderly patients can achieve and maintain greater independence.

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