

# DOMESTIC ABUSE ACROSS the LIFESPAN

**The Role of Occupational Therapy**

Christine A. Helfrich, PhD, OTR/L  
*E d i t o r*

# **Domestic Abuse Across the Lifespan: The Role of Occupational Therapy**

*Domestic Abuse Across the Lifespan: The Role of Occupational Therapy* has been co-published simultaneously as *Occupational Therapy in Mental Health*, Volume 16, Numbers 3/4 2001.

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Editor

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# **Domestic Abuse Across the Lifespan: The Role of Occupational Therapy**

## **CONTENTS**

About the Contributors xiii

Introduction: Domestic Abuse Across the Lifespan:  
The Role of Occupational Therapy 1  
*Christine A. Helfrich, PhD, OTR/L*

### **PART I**

Domestic Abuse Across the Lifespan: Definitions, Identification  
and Risk Factors for Occupational Therapists 5  
*Christine A. Helfrich, PhD, OTR/L*  
*Mary Jean Lafata, MS, OTR/L*  
*Shannon LaEace MacDonald, OTR/L*  
*Ann Aviles, OTR/L*  
*Lara Collins, OTR/L*

Knowledge and Attitudes of Occupational Therapy Practitioners  
Regarding Wife Abuse 35  
*Jennifer L. Johnston, MS, OTR/L*  
*Ralph Adams, MS, OTR/L*  
*Christine A. Helfrich, PhD, OTR/L*

### **PART II**

Occupational Therapy's Role with Victims of Domestic  
Violence: Assessment and Intervention 53  
*Christine A. Helfrich, PhD, OTR/L*  
*Ann Aviles, OTR/L*

Assessing Needs and Developing Interventions with New Populations: A Community Process of Collaboration	71
<i>Deborah Walens, MHPE, OTR/L</i>	
<i>Christine A. Helfrich, PhD, OTR/L</i>	
<i>Ann Aviles, OTR/L</i>	
<i>Lisa Horita, OTR/L</i>	
Occupational Therapy and Victim Advocacy: Making the Connection	97
<i>Mark Koch, OTR/L</i>	
PART III	
Shaken Baby Syndrome: Assessment and Treatment in Occupational Therapy	111
<i>Shannon LaEace MacDonald, OTR/L</i>	
<i>Christine A. Helfrich, PhD, OTR/L</i>	
Child Witnesses of Domestic Violence: A Case Study Using the OT PAL	127
<i>Jonathan Nave, OTS</i>	
<i>Christine A. Helfrich, PhD, OTR/L</i>	
<i>Ann Aviles, OTR/L</i>	
The Occupational Therapy Elder Abuse Checklist	141
<i>Mary Jean Lafata, MS, OTR/L</i>	
<i>Christine A. Helfrich, PhD, OTR/L</i>	
Index	163

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Dr. Helfrich holds baccalaureate degrees in both Spanish and occupational therapy from Cleveland State University and a Master's of Science degree in occupational therapy from UIC. Her doctoral degree from UIC is in Public Health Community Health Science.

Dr. Helfrich has worked in mental health as both a clinician and as a consultant. Her interest in domestic violence as an issue for occupational therapy originated in her doctoral dissertation, and ethnographic study of homeless, abused women. She is currently the Principle Investigator on a field-initiated grant from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research that seeks to explore the relationship between domestic violence and disability.



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**Deborah Walens, MHPE, OTR/L**, received her Masters in Health Professions Education from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is currently Clinical Assistant Professor and Academic Fieldwork Coordinator at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She also works in two community agencies supervising level I and II fieldwork students in the areas of psychosocial rehabilitation and older adults. She is a Fellow of the American Occupational Therapy Association and chaired the AOTA-SIS Mental Health Education Task Force from 1992-94. Her interest in domestic abuse centers on the abuse of older adults and the education of occupational therapy students to work in settings that provide services to victims of abuse.

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# Introduction:

## Domestic Abuse Across the Lifespan: The Role of Occupational Therapy

This volume, *Domestic Abuse Across the Lifespan: The Role of Occupational Therapy*, was written to introduce a compilation of articles related to domestic violence. The profession of occupational therapy is poised to assume a position of leadership in working with victims of domestic abuse; however, many practitioners lack the skills and confidence needed to be effective with these emergent populations. This special publication provides a comprehensive overview of domestic abuse across the lifespan as well as theoretical and practical roles for occupational therapists.

The articles in this book cover a broad spectrum of domestic abuse including child abuse, intimate partner domestic violence and elder abuse. Most of the authors completed their work while graduate students in occupational therapy. All of the contributors provided feedback to each other during the development of this publication, which aided in consistency and comprehensiveness. Their articles overlap and the reader will find frequent references between individual articles. For educational purposes this document may be used in its entirety or each individual article may be used separately for specific populations. For that reason, the reader will notice occasional repetition of factual material between separate articles. Every attempt has been made to keep this repetition to a minimum.

Part I of this volume presents background knowledge necessary to

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understand domestic abuse and the challenge of occupational therapists working with this population. The prevalence and demography of child abuse, partner violence and elder abuse are discussed in the first article. Discussion of the results of a research study, which surveyed occupational therapists to determine their knowledge and attitudes about domestic violence, follows.

Part II presents three articles discussing the role of occupational therapy working with victims of domestic violence. First, a framework for assessment and intervention is presented with case illustrations. Next, a student program developed to provide services to children who have been raised in abusive families is described. Finally, the role of occupational therapy as advocate for victims is illustrated through a case example provided by the director of a rape and domestic violence coalition.

Part III consists of three case applications illustrating the role of occupational therapy. The first article discusses and illustrates the role of occupational therapy on an inpatient rehabilitation unit with the child victim of Shaken Baby Syndrome and his family. Next, a case is presented illustrating the Occupational Therapy Psychosocial Assessment of Learning (OTPAL) with a child witness of domestic violence seen during a fieldwork rotation in a Before and After School Program for homeless abused families. Finally, the Occupational Therapy Elder Abuse Checklist is introduced with a case study demonstrating how the checklist was used to uncover elder abuse in a home health setting.

Together, this collection of articles provides the reader with a primer on domestic abuse across the lifespan. It is my hope that these articles will challenge therapists to examine their own beliefs and attitudes towards victims of abuse. The material and cases should raise readers' awareness of their attitudes and biases related to violence in our society. Through this awareness, therapists can change their practice to encompass the vast numbers of individuals who have been victimized. This victimization impacts their ability to function and to participate in desired, necessary and valued roles. These are certainly the concerns of occupational therapy. Occupational therapists must embrace these concerns and develop the skills needed to effectively empower individuals to engage in restoring function and involvement in life roles. It is only through empowerment that survivors of domestic abuse will develop the skills needed to live independently and to teach their children to communicate through non-violent means.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This volume on domestic violence is a demonstration of the collaborative work of many individuals. I would like to especially acknowledge all of the women and children survivors of domestic violence who have shared their lives with my students and myself to help us understand the effects of violence in their lives. Next, I wish to thank the staff that works with victims of abuse for indulging all of us by allowing us to observe and question their work while we were learning ourselves.

While I have advised students on projects and theses related to domestic violence I did not envision a work such as this being published. Gary Kielhofner provided the encouragement to approach The Haworth Press about the idea of publishing a special collection on domestic violence. Mary Donohue and Marie-Louise Blount were open to this proposal and have provided much support and guidance as the publication came to fruition. Mary Donohue's availability and constant encouragement were invaluable. Each individual contributor provided collaborative feedback to each other and myself throughout the months prior to completion. Ann Aviles, Mary Jean Lafata, Shannon LaEace MacDonald and Deborah Walens participated in a writing group with me over several months to support the development of many of the articles in this collection. Ann Aviles, Meagan Cade, Lara Collins, Mrugaya Gorde and Carrie Schlosser worked endless hours editing, typing and formatting manuscripts to assist the authors. Their hard work, support, patience and humor made this document possible. Finally, the support and encouragement of my colleagues, friends and family encouraged me to bring this work and these ideas to publication for others to implement and critique. It is my hope that this document will encourage therapists to explore, question, critique and develop the role of occupational therapy with victims of domestic abuse.

*Christine A. Helfrich, PhD, OTR/L*



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## PART I

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# Domestic Abuse Across the Lifespan: Definitions, Identification and Risk Factors for Occupational Therapists

Christine A. Helfrich, PhD, OTR/L  
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**SUMMARY.** Domestic abuse has reached epidemic proportions in the United States. Occupational therapists working in many different settings will encounter children, adults, elders and individuals with disabilities who have experienced intimate violence and abuse. This article presents common definitions and illustrative examples of each type of violence. Issues related to the difficulty inherent in identifying victims of abuse are discussed with an elaboration of indicators that are likely to be seen by an occupational therapist in the clinical setting. Risk factors for becoming a victim or an abuser for each population group and the effects of violence on victims are presented. A brief discussion of the legal and ethical implications of identifying and treating abuse victims concludes the article. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS.** Domestic abuse, child abuse, domestic violence, elder abuse, occupational therapy and ethics

## INTRODUCTION

Violence is a public health epidemic that impacts the field of occupational therapy. Of special concern within the larger problem of violence and injury are domestic violence against women and children, abuse of the elderly, and abuse and neglect of those with a disability. While no accurate estimate of the scale of domestic violence is available, imputations based on available evidence suggest a problem of considerable magnitude. For example, approximately half of all homicides involve individuals known to each other (Reiss & Roth, 1993) and abuse is the leading cause of death among infants and children (Peterson & Brown, 1994; Bethea, 1999). According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, approximately three-fourths of all violent events (e.g., rapes and assaults) involve an intimate or relative (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994). Injury is more likely to be sustained when assault involves an intimate, underscoring that domestic battery is a major vector for injury among women (Rosenberg & Mercy, 1991). Women, children, and the elderly appear to be at heightened risk for violent injury and a principal dynamic appears to be domestic abuse (U.S. Department of Justice, 1997). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimated that 34% of American women are assaulted each year (CDC, 1993).