

Implications for Occupational Therapy Practice in Addressing Sexuality and Intimacy with Individuals with Multiple Sclerosis

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Introduction

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is an autoimmune inflammatory demyelinating pathology affecting approximately 2.3 million people globally (Sedighi, 2023). It disproportionately affects women three times more than men, typically between 20 and 40 years old (Daneshfar, 2017). MS significantly impacts the quality of life for patients, manifesting in various challenges such as spasticity, tremors, muscle weakness, sensory disorders, depression, cognitive problems, and bladder and bowel syndromes (Yilmaz, 2017). Among these challenges, sexual dysfunction (SD) is prevalent, encompassing disturbances in sexual response and pain associated with sexual intercourse (Kazemi, 2020). SD is categorized into primary, secondary, and tertiary types, each linked to neurological damage, physical changes, and psychosocial factors, respectively (Marck, 2016). Individuals also described the impact of physical and psychological changes on their relationships such as reduced intimacy with their partners or behavioral changes, for example, increased irritability toward their partner (Tabassum, 2022). Occupational Therapy Sexual Assessment Framework (OTSAF) informed the analysis of the research as it relates to occupational therapy practice. The OTSAF identifies 8 core principles that should be addressed by occupational therapy practitioners: sexual activity, sexual interest, sexual response, sexual expression, sexual knowledge, sexual self-view, intimacy, and sexual health and family planning (Walker et al., 2020). Despite its significant impact, sexuality and intimacy is often avoided in discussions of patient histories, leading to the underdiagnosis of SD (Calabrò, 2018). Healthcare professionals' lack of knowledge and reluctance to discuss sexual issues further complicate this problem (Egerod, 2018). This is attributed to insufficient education and the perception that sexual health, sexuality, and intimacy falls outside their expertise (Tzitzika, 2023).

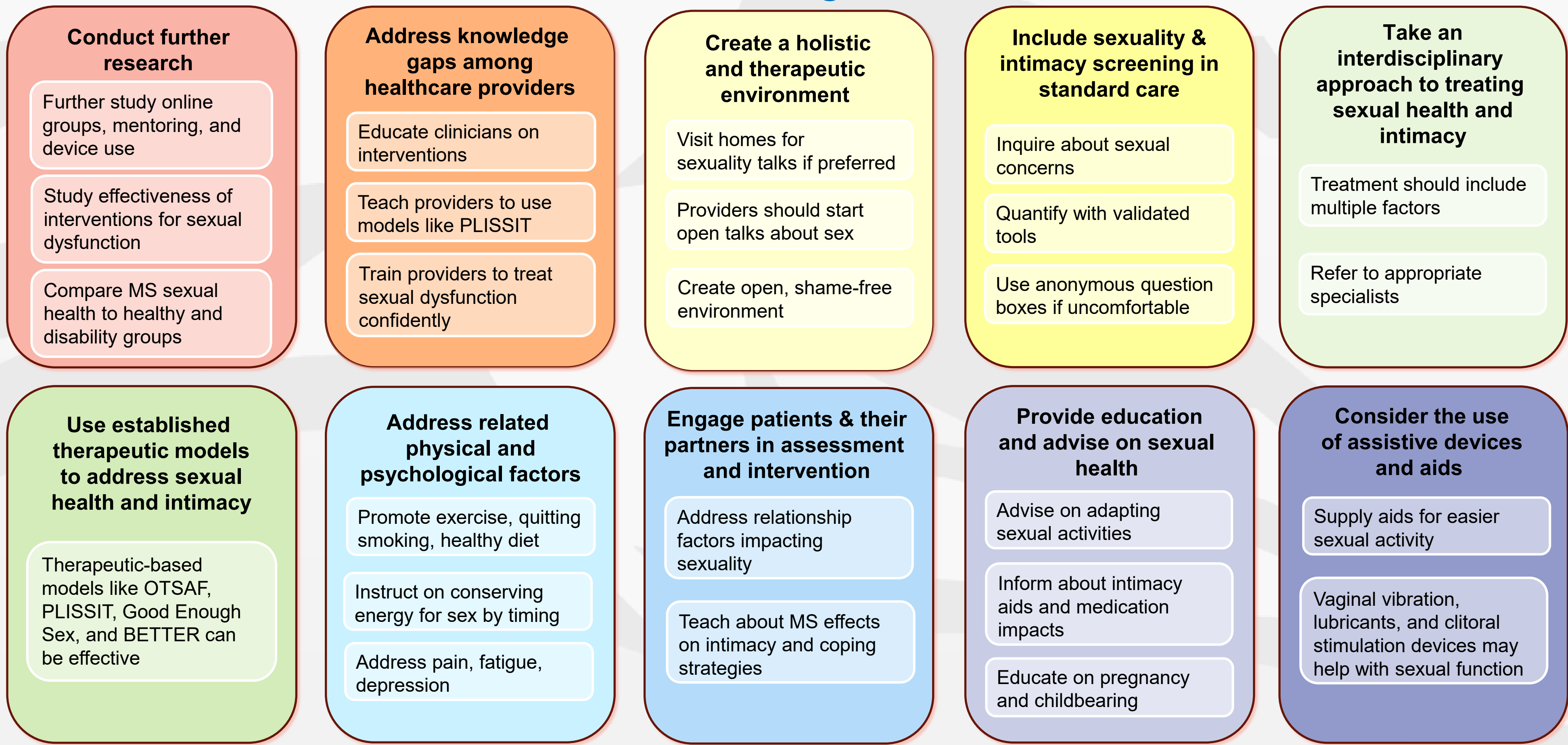
Objective

The purpose of this study was to conduct a thematic synthesis of the implications for practice extracted from relevant evidence related to addressing sexuality and intimacy in individuals who have MS.

Methodology

A thematic synthesis of the literature was performed to determine implications for occupational therapy practitioners to address sexuality and intimacy with individuals who have MS. EBSCOhost and Google Scholar was used to examine biomedical, nursing, and allied health databases to obtain relevant articles associated with elements of the OTSAF. Articles had to include the terms "sexuality", "intimacy", and "MS", and be a scientific report of research. The search term "OT" or "occupational therapy" was used; however, this did not result in any articles that met all criteria. Articles were excluded from this analysis if they did not have implications for practice, the article was not written in English, and it did not relate to sexuality and intimacy. There were 43 articles collected and analyzed for inclusion criteria with 25 fitting all inclusion criteria. Implications were highlighted from each of the 25 articles and verified by research group members. Implications were then presented to the research instructor for approval. Then, extracted implications were inserted into Claude.AI using the following prompts: 1) "Analyze the following literature in the document in themes based on the needs listed. List themes as action items. Include in-text citations that support the action items", 2) "Analyze the following literature in the document about implications for occupational therapy practice addressing sexuality and intimacy with individuals with multiple sclerosis in themes based on the need listed. List themes as action items. Include the in-text citations used in the document to support the action items", and 3) "Analyze the following literature in the document about implications for occupational therapy practice addressing sexuality and intimacy with individuals with multiple sclerosis in 15 themes based on the needs listed. List themes as action items. Include the in-text citations used in the document to support the action items." Repeat implications from Claude were eliminated and similar themes were combined resulting in 10 implication actions as shown in the findings below.

Findings



Discussion

Occupational therapists are healthcare practitioners who can play a vital role in addressing sexuality and intimacy with individuals who have multiple sclerosis (MS). Practitioners should conduct further research (Hocaloski et al., 2016) to determine which interventions provide the best outcomes, and training should be provided to address knowledge gaps among healthcare providers (Egerod et al., 2018). A holistic and therapeutic atmosphere should be created to establish an open and shame-free environment so that patients can feel more comfortable discussing their sexuality and intimacy concerns. Sexuality and intimacy issues should be screened routinely in order to ensure the topic is addressed (Calabrò et al., 2018). The use of an interdisciplinary team helps address the diverse range of factors impacting sexual health (Esteve-Ríos et al., 2020). Practitioners should use established therapeutic models to address sexual health and intimacy (Esteve-Ríos et al., 2020). Many factors affect an individual's sexual and intimate potential (Domingo et al., 2018) which makes OT the ideal profession to address related physical and psychological factors and engage patients and their partners in assessments and interventions (Valvano et al., 2018). Practitioners should provide education and advise on sexual health and intimacy, and consider the use of assistive devices and aids to enhance individuals' experience (Tesla et al., 2020). Overall, occupational therapists are essential team members in providing exceptional care to individuals with multiple sclerosis, especially in the realm of sexuality and intimacy.

Conclusion

We analyzed implications for occupational therapy practice as it relates to sexuality and intimacy with individuals with MS. The OTSAF guided the analysis and identification of important themes relevant to OT practice. The 10 key implications identified in our findings section should be implemented by OT practitioners when addressing sexuality and intimacy within this population.

References

See Handout

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