Occupational Disruption and Adaptation: A Study of House Fire Victims

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House fires are the most common disasters in our society. Disaster theorists acknowledge that complex daily living problems impede the recovery of victims. However, these problems have not been described in detail. The author conducted a qualitative study of the disruption to daily living routines caused by house fires and of the adaptation processes victims undertook to reestablish effective patterns of purposeful activity. The data-gathering methods included observation on the scenes of 15 house or tenement fires and in-depth interviews with members of 10 families displaced by fires. Disruption was found to occur in the victims' use of time and comfort in their personal environment. A data analysis revealed a new process of occupational adaptation. The roles of tasks and activities were determined to be important in recovery.

In earlier articles (1982, 1984), I proposed that disaster victims experience profound occupational disruption and that adaptation and recovery depend on the effective planning and performance of purposeful activities. I suggested that occupational therapists could make significant contributions to crisis theory and disaster relief programs. To further develop my theory, I undertook research to describe, in detail, the occupational disruption caused by environmental disaster and to identify elements of occupational adaptation and recovery. I chose victims of house fires, the most common disasters in American society, as the focus of this study.

Literature Review

Disaster literature generally acknowledges the negative impact that complex daily living problems have on survivors. Some writers recognize the adaptive value of tasks and activities (Tierney & Baisden, 1979). But theorists only superficially address this issue, concentrating instead on psychic trauma or the disruption of social systems.

Early research (Frankl, 1963; Lifton, 1967), stimulated by concern for victims of the Nazi holocaust and the atomic bombing of Japan, led to psychiatric studies of morbidity and psychological responses to traumatic events (Adams & Adams, 1984; Horowitz, 1986; Lifton & Olson, 1976; Lindemann, 1944; Shore, Tatum, & Vollmer, 1986). Tyhurst (1957) developed a stage theory of disaster response and recovery that he called "disaster syndrome." During the Impact stage, survivors are stunned and apathetic. During Recoil, which begins hours to days after the disaster event, people are highly altruistic and feel euphoric because they have survived. During this stage, victims and volunteers often overwork in a flurry of inefficient activity. The Posttrauma stage brings out strong feelings of loss and grief that must be worked through during the recovery process. Lifton (1967) found that less severely affected victims often felt irrational guilt about the suffering of others. Lindemann (1944) noted that many victims become angry at service providers because they need to blame someone for the disaster. These studies produced important documentation and a classification of disaster sequelae. Shore et al. (1986) established a dose-response relationship between the degree of loss caused by the disaster and the extent of depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorders experienced by the victims.

Another viewpoint, developed primarily by sociologists, emphasized the disruption of social systems and the importance of community organization to recovery (Bardo, 1978; Dynes, 1967; Erikson, 1976; Taylor, 1977). Quarantelli (1978) asserted that the social context is the most important factor in the determination of the impact a disaster has on human
beings. Dynes (1967) and Wenger (1978) suggested that disasters often have a positive effect on families and community organizations by mobilizing people to work together toward common, unambiguous goals.

A good deal of disagreement remains about the factors that contribute to the negative psychosocial effects of disaster on the one hand and to healing on the other. The American Red Cross and other disaster service agencies provide material assistance to survivors but do not help them to systematically reorganize and reassert a functional approach to the conduct of daily life.

Surprisingly, little research has been conducted on the problems and needs of house fire victims. I found only one citation specific to this topic (Krim, 1976) in a comprehensive literature search. This lack may be the result of the relative anonymity of fire victims, who change residences immediately and are difficult to locate. Moreover, fires usually affect only a few families, whereas major disasters displace large numbers of people and attract media attention and federal disaster assistance.

This paper will (a) describe the research methods employed in a study of displaced fire victims, (b) summarize the processes of occupational disruption and adaptation experienced by participants, and (c) propose directions for further research.

Methodology

Because the goal of this study was to examine occupational disruption and adaptation from the perspective of fire victims, qualitative research methods were chosen, as suggested by Bogdan and Taylor (1975). I employed participant–observer methods by undertaking periods of intense interaction with fire victims at fire scenes, in temporary shelters, at their homes, and at Red Cross headquarters. The Massachusetts Bay Chapter of the American Red Cross assisted with the study by training me as a disaster service volunteer and by facilitating my contact with victims. I was present at 15 house and tenement fires between January and May 1985.

On-the-scene experiences proved to be of great value in understanding the reality of being burned out. Fire scenes were not, however, the appropriate settings in which to conduct detailed interviews with victims. Therefore, in-depth, semistructured interviews were arranged with willing participants away from the fire scenes.

**Instruments.** Interviewing was a practical method of inquiry because disaster victims often have a strong desire to tell their story as they attempt to work through the threatening elements of their experience (Lifton, 1967). Interview questions had two purposes:

(a) to understand occupational disruptions experienced by victims and (b) to identify the importance of tasks and occupational patterns in recovery (see Table 1). In previous (1982) discussions with flood victims from Hamden, Connecticut, I had been able to identify areas of concern. I used this knowledge to formulate the interview questions.

**Procedures.** I followed the data collection and analysis methods described by De Rivera (1984) and Glaser and Strauss (1967). I conducted 1- to 2-hour interviews with victims, at their homes or at Red Cross offices, between 1 week and 6 months after their homes were burned. All interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants. Transcripts of the interviews and extensive field notes were prepared and analyzed. Central themes and experiences of the victims were identified and grouped in heuristic categories. Narrative sections from the interviews that were related to each theme were coded, grouped, and examined to develop an understanding of the essential characteristics of the disaster and recovery experience. Functional issues were viewed in terms of Kielhofner’s (1985) Model of Human Occupation.

I wrote brief summary statements that helped me develop a refined perspective of each category of disruption and adaptation. To review the adaptation processes, I composed a narrative about each of six interviewees, examining the conflicts, decisions, and occupational behaviors each person had described. A clinical psychologist, a social policy analyst, and a

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<td><strong>Interview Questions</strong></td>
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<td>1. Briefly, what happened at the time of the fire?</td>
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<td>2. How did you react?</td>
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<td>3. What is your attitude now about this incident?</td>
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<td>4. What emotions have been hardest for you to bear?</td>
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<td>5. How has your day-to-day life changed as a result of the fire?</td>
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<td>6. What has caused you the most difficulty since the fire?</td>
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<td>7. What concerns you the most right now?</td>
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<td>8. What have you let slide or been unable to do that worries you?</td>
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<td>9. How important is it for you to take charge, make decisions, complete tasks?</td>
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<td>10. What kind of help would be most valuable to you right now?</td>
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<td>11. Since the fire, what has happened to your social life, work/school life, leisure activities, household chores, childcare duties, and rest and sleep?</td>
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<td>12. Do you think that anything has changed permanently in your way of life?</td>
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<td>13. What have you done, what steps have you taken, that have helped you through this experience?</td>
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<td>14. How can you tell whether or not you are getting back to normal?</td>
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<td>15. What have other people done that has helped you?</td>
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<td>16. How well have you coped with this situation?</td>
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<td>17. How well might you do if you had to handle another situation like this one in the future?</td>
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<td>18. What would you do differently to be more effective in a similar situation in the future?</td>
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<td>19. How has this experience affected the way you view the world?</td>
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psychotherapist read the interview transcripts and monitored the data gathering and analysis process.

Subjects. I contacted approximately 50 families on fire scenes. These families were inner-city residents and reflected the diverse ethnic and sociocultural mix of people in the Massachusetts Bay region.

Interview participants were solicited in several ways. A letter was sent to 30 fire victims chosen randomly from those people who had received Red Cross services during the preceding 3 months. Red Cross caseworkers agreed to routinely ask victims to participate. Additional participants were found through word-of-mouth referrals.

Seventeen people, from 10 different households, were interviewed. All participants had been displaced by fires. The adults interviewed included nine women and six men whose average age was 37 years. Two boys, 12 and 13 years old, were interviewed as well. Ten of the adult participants were married, and 5 were single. Ten of the 15 adults were employed; of these, 5 were professionals, 3 were office workers, and 2 were blue-collar workers. Three women identified homemaker as their primary role. Three of the unemployed adults, including one of the homemakers, were disabled and were receiving public assistance. The ethnic backgrounds of the interview participants included Black, Latin, Italian, French, English, and mixed heritage.

Possible sources of bias. According to Ianni and Orr (1979), the use of qualitative, ethnographic research methods ensures that findings are “grounded” (i.e., they accurately represent the perceptions and experiences of participants). This approach makes the results highly valid with respect to the specific population studied but makes them less generalizable. Kielhofner (1982) stated that validity in qualitative research depends on (a) achieving a participant-observer role that allows access to the thoughts and actions of the subjects; (b) initiating and monitoring data collection methods and quality control of data; and (c) documenting collection, analysis, and interpretation procedures.

Racial, social, and cultural differences, in addition to the fact that victims were total strangers, made clear observation on the scene of fires difficult. I found myself in unfamiliar neighborhoods and in pressured circumstances, struggling to gain a realistic impression of people and events. Verbal communication with non-English-speaking victims was difficult. Nonetheless, the situation was brought into sharp focus by the powerful nature of the events themselves, and my service responsibilities made the urgent needs and concerns of victims clear.

The interview respondents may have been more open, verbal, and self-reflective than many fire victims, because they volunteered to be interviewed. My rapport with the victims was generally good, and my clinical skill in accepting and understanding emotionally charged material encouraged a continued flow of communication. In general, victims spoke candidly, and I gained a great deal of insight.

Based on an extensive review of my data gathering and analysis procedures, I believe confidence in the results of this study is justified.

Findings

People vary considerably in their ability to adapt to disaster circumstances. Heuristic categories of occupational disruption after house fires will be described first, followed by a discussion of adaptation processes (see Table 2).

Occupational Disruption

Respondents in this study identified both transient and lasting changes in their occupational behavior after the loss of their homes.

Task pressures. A house fire places tremendous short-term task demands on victims who are often upset and somewhat disorganized in the context of the disaster. A man whose home had been burned 3 weeks earlier said he was too busy to be interviewed. He cited doing laundry, filing insurance claims, going on shopping trips, working, transporting children, salvaging furniture, and meeting contractors as tasks that all required his energy and urgent attention. The man reported feeling harried, overtired, and on edge. Many victims face a multitude of tasks and decisions. This places intense demands on them and requires a clear understanding of family values and goals.

Temporal disruption. Many interviewees described profound disruption in their customary tem-

Table 2

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<th>Areas of Occupational Disruption</th>
<th>Elements of Occupational Adaptation</th>
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<td>Task performance (ADL)</td>
<td>Disruption of occupational functioning</td>
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<td>Temporal balance</td>
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Note. ADL = activities of daily living.
Mental balance and habit patterns. Although most people reported that chores took all their time, which left little opportunity for rest or leisure, an energetic 40-year-old woman described uncomfortable changes in the opposite direction:

I spend more time now doing nothing, which is strange. I'm the workaholic type. I work late. I've been known to work two jobs, Saturdays and Sundays. This past Saturday morning I did nothing but watch the cartoons. I was always in the office Saturday mornings, or shopping, running around buying groceries, or preparing Sunday dinner. But I don't have a kitchen anymore.

A 45-year-old woman reported that moving in with friends changed the ways in which her family spent time together. Her family had long-standing traditions of playing cards, going to the movies, and eating dinners together. For several months, while her family lived with another family, these traditions were discontinued. All family members reported a dilution of the family unit, a lack of family focus. Clearly, habit patterns are important but difficult to maintain after a disaster.

Future orientation, values, and goals. A major fire can undermine people's sense of security, diminish their personal causation, and leave them fearful and hesitant in their approach to daily life. A 35-year-old mother reported being more anxious in caring for her second baby, born a week before the fire, than she had been with her first child. This increase in anxiety was contrary to the usual parental pattern; anxiety usually decreases with the second child.

Terr (1983) found that people exposed to psychic traumas often minimize their future. In some instances, this pessimism causes an ongoing failure to lay plans and take effective steps to organize for the future. A 41-year-old woman, an Italian immigrant, burned out of her comfortable family apartment after 18 years of residence, described her reluctance to invest in the future. She admitted that the family now saved money in the bank rather than spending it on new furniture because they felt another disaster could befall them at any time.

A 35-year-old man noticed a change in his work values. He was a lawyer and continued to prepare carefully for his cases after the fire. However, he suffered less when he lost in court because he felt that the outcome was not so vital when compared with the life-and-death issues raised by the fire. Several other interviewees also reported changes related to work. A 29-year-old woman quit her factory job, feeling that she had to devote her time entirely to cleanup tasks. In contrast, a 34-year-old woman took a job after years as a homemaker. She felt too frightened after the fire to remain at home alone during the day. A 36-year-old woman, formerly a newcomer and self-described outsider at her job, was warmly supported and materially helped by her co-workers after the fire. This shift caused her to feel much more positive about her work setting than she had felt before.

Environmental loss and dislocation. The loss of a home and possessions is a profound environmental change. People create lives at home, acquiring and arranging possessions in ways that make them comfortable. Wallace (1957) suggested that human beings regard their physical environment as a beloved maze that presents the cues and rewards for behavior. Many victims watch the life space they have created being consumed by flames, charred black, melted, inundated with smoke, broken and strewn by firemen's axes, and soaked with water. Even months later, people report becoming depressed when driving on their former streets. Their losses include their home, their possessions, and their social surroundings. The 41-year-old woman described the loss of her home:

We loved our house. Our children were born there. After 18 years, we had everything there. Now we gotta start all over. I feel lost. I don't feel comfortable in this [new] place. We knew everyone on our old street. Now I don't see nobody. It's strange.

The 40-year-old woman made a distinction between the loss of functional and personal possessions, which Erikson (1976) referred to as the furniture of the self:

The first thing you feel is displacement, as though you don't belong anywhere. Not just because your home is destroyed, but because you have lost things. And material things are important only if you have an emotional attachment to them.

She sadly described photographs of dead relatives and the bureau refinished by hand as examples of deeply missed possessions.

In contrast, the 36-year-old woman stressed the loss of important functional items:

When I went to stay in someone else's house, I found that he didn't have a needle and thread. He didn't have an ironing board or a lint brush, all those things I did have. I didn't have any personal checks. That was the biggest hassle. The bank would only give me five at a time. I don't have any dress clothes now, so I can't get dressed up for work. Little things add up. Bottles of perfume, lotions, things that I use every day, that I just didn't have anymore, my earrings and jewelry. I feel irritated because these things were part of my routine.

This woman also said that she found it difficult to relax after work without her prints, knickknacks, and furniture around her.

A 30-year-old woman found that her values and goals regarding life space shifted after a fire destroyed the apartment she had shared for years with close friends:

I'm in the process of looking for a place to live alone. I love my roommates dearly. But I need my own space and privacy. I need to be in control of my own space now. This might have happened anyway, but I think it has a lot to do with the fire.

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Relocation. Relocation presents a multitude of problems for fire victims. Most people live temporarily with relatives or friends. A hotel or shelter seems to be a less desirable option. Moving to a new location causes transportation problems for family members who must travel to school or work. Children lose contact with neighborhood playmates. Family members must often crowd together with their hosts in an inadequate space, and they commonly feel guilty for intruding and burdening those who have taken them in. They remain uncomfortable in their surroundings, overly careful with household items and space conflicts emerge in close quarters, which causes transportation problems for family members who must often crowd together with their hosts in an inadequate space, and they commonly feel guilty for intruding and burdening those who have taken them in. They remain uncomfortable in their surroundings, overly careful with household items that are not their own, and unable to truly relax. Role and space conflicts emerge in close quarters, which increases the pressure to find a new home.

Of his 2 months living with another family, the 12-year-old boy remembered:

I felt sorta guilty. I couldn’t do anything for them. And they were doing everything for us. Every time I wanted to do anything at all, I would feel funny, cause it wasn’t my house. With so many of us living there, you’d have to wait 20 minutes just to get in the bathroom. There were 10 people at dinner every night. It was just impossible!

A 29-year-old mother of a 5-year-old described the tensions of living temporarily with her mother-in-law:

For 2 months our 5-year-old daughter was in the room with us. She was always there. There was no time for me and my husband. She was like a little raving mania because she wasn’t getting enough sleep. His mother wasn’t bad. A couple of times we had our little spats. She’d go to my husband and complain that I had moved her pots and pans around, things like that.

The 40-year-old woman explained:

My aunt doesn’t want me in her kitchen. Yesterday she made eggs, sausage, pancakes. I’m sitting there saying, “Let me do this.” She said no. Before, she would let me do little things, but not now. It’s her way of protecting me. But I don’t need that. I need to be busy.

The search for a new home can take several months, but when it finally occurs, moving brings a universal and profound sense of relief. At this point, thoughts of the disaster may begin to recede as people become busy creating a new home.

Importance of finance. Financial circumstances are a critical factor among the practical issues related to a disaster. Bolin and Trainer (1978) concluded from their cross-cultural study of disaster victims that lower socioeconomic status correlated with greater difficulty in recovery. For families, it is extremely expensive to rent temporary lodgings and to reestablish a household.

A 48-year-old man, who was disabled and living on public assistance, described his loss in financial terms:

All the expenses put us in debt. We had to live in a city shelter. Now we pay back a little each month to the people we owe.

And we keep worrying about how much we still owe them. Can’t go to the bar for a beer and some laughs anymore. By the middle of the month we’re broke. We’re eating worse too. And our car broke down. That’s from all the running around we did after the fire.

For many people, it is difficult to come up with rent and security money and to replace furniture and other necessities. Often, a home and possessions have increased greatly in price. Interviewees frequently stressed the importance of insurance as a factor in recovery, and many vowed that they would never again be without sufficient fire coverage. Only one family reported that they expected to gain financially from their insurance claims.

Occupational Adaptation

In a crisis, there is both danger and opportunity. New data, new perceptions, and new responses are often available. According to Cohen and Ahearn (1980), the survivor must formulate a new self-concept with respect to a profoundly altered reality; in short, the survivor must begin life anew.

A 24-year-old man described his effort to emerge from a fire mobilized and in charge:

I am a victim of circumstance. Being a victim is a powerless place. So I felt a great desire to even out the balance of power by making an equally bold move on my own. I have been bored in my job the last few months, but I haven’t done anything about it. Since the fire, I have found more energy in myself to do things to change my job. Some of this energy comes from a desperate attempt to restore order. I have an image of a bird trying frantically to rebuild its nest. A little bit of it is me wanting to make a new beaver dam, to structure things and get them under control. With me it’s about work, not a new home.

Based upon an analysis of the interview data, it seems that disaster disruptions can (a) mobilize victims to express strong feelings and to take action and (b) crystallize important personal, familial, and developmental issues and conflicts. Disruption and loss often lead to a new and clear recognition of the intricate occupational patterns and ecological configurations that weave the fabric of life. With many options suddenly open to them, victims examine these patterns and configurations in a revaluation process. This revaluation may begin with the earliest decisions of salvaging, discarding, and mourning possessions. Revaluation leads to decisions and actions that reassert former life patterns or to ones that represent an occupational shift. A consolidation of occupational functioning seems likely to occur as the fire and relocation experiences wane. In the following section, the elements of this adaptation process will be described in detail.

Disruption. Although disruption has been previously addressed, it is important to note that some
victims experienced positive effects from disruption. A 39-year-old man felt that staying with another family after the fire broke up his family’s pattern of living and exposed them to new possibilities for leisure occupations, household rules, and chore assignments. The 24-year-old man said that the fire had destroyed obsessively collected and maintained correspondence, tax records, and clothing. He hoped that the disaster would free him from stultifying habits and help him learn to “travel light” in the future.

**Mobilization.** Victims are mobilized to feeling and to action. Several people, though, identified themselves as doers rather than feelers. Doers are often quite effective in handling intense and complex tasks and decisions. They strive to restore the sense of mastery and control that was undermined by the fire. The feelers, in contrast, often report being overwhelmed by emotion and having difficulty performing tasks.

Interestingly, the doers often wished they could have attended to their feelings sooner, although they had commonly sought the busy refuge of activities. Victims generally used the balance of emotion and action as a criterion for evaluating their own effectiveness. A lack of this balance between members of a family can cause friction and lingering resentment. In one family, the 39-year-old man had been brought up in a British military tradition. As prescribed by his upbringing, he enjoyed the challenge of the crisis, steeled himself against his feelings, and moved quickly to purposeful activity. His live-in partner, a 42-year-old woman, however, deeply felt the grief of their losses and resented her partner’s insensitivity.

Lifton (1967) suggested that victims unconsciously seek to avoid overwhelming emotions through an attenuation of emotional life he called *psychic numbing.* Although many of those interviewed reported seeking the “aspirin effect” of activity, balance-seeking seems a more accurate description of their behavior than does numbing.

Wright (1978) found that different tasks become important and subsequently fade in the period following a disaster. This study suggests that families must mobilize themselves to address salient feelings and thereby restore the sense that their basic needs can be met.

**Crystallization.** Personal, familial, and developmental conflicts become more prominent in the functioning and awareness of fire victims. These conflicts assert greater importance as the family faces vital decisions and actions after a disaster. Both the effective coping abilities and the weaknesses of victims are readily observable, crystallized by the crisis.

A personal conflict was described by the 40-year-old woman. She described herself as “the strong one,” the caretaker in her family. She valued this role, but the disaster intensified her unmet need to be nurtured:

> I feel like running away sometimes, putting on my hat and coat, getting on a plane and going home to my mama. . . . I’d feel more comfortable, cause a mama doesn’t care if you impose on her. . . . I’m always gonna be mama’s firstborn. And I want to put my head on her lap, let her pat me and stroke me and say ‘I’ll be alright, baby.’ She’s the only person I get my feelings out with. Not my husband or my son. And I’ve got to develop somebody else, cause when she goes I’ll be in trouble.

Three weeks after the fire, this woman had not traveled to see her mother and had not found adaptive ways to address her grief and her need for emotional support. Instead, she performed many tasks and used alcohol and painkillers to dampen her constant headache.

Heightened familial conflict was experienced by a family that had moved in with friends. Although the couple (the 39-year-old man and the 42-year-old woman) had been together for 6 years and owned a home, they had not married and reported not quite feeling like a real family. The 12- and 13-year-old boys were the woman’s sons from a previous marriage. After the fire, conflicts related to family unity were described as follows: (a) imbalance and subsequent tension in the doing and feeling styles of the couple; (b) dilution of family feeling and discontinuity of activities in the temporary housing situation; (c) disharmony about the decision to live with friends; and (d) resentment by the boys about their mother’s performance of chores for the host family. The first two problems were discussed earlier. The third and fourth problems reflected the adolescent boys’ developmental conflicts. They wished to be included in family decisions and felt angry that their preference to live temporarily in a hotel was not considered. They were annoyed at their mother’s suggestion that, as children, they needed special attention after the fire destroyed their home. Yet they also resented the loss of their mother’s attention and the disruption caused by the fire. These conflicts are quite normal for adolescents. However, the boys also brought to the disaster a heightened sensitivity to family disruption, which could be traced back to the divorce of their parents when they were both quite young. The couple reported ongoing efforts to reestablish family activities and to work on these goals in their new home.

**Recognition and revaluation.** In the context of disruption and loss, fire victims can often clearly see the activity patterns, relationships, and environment that made up their lives before the fire. Profound upheaval brings daily life into sharp focus, placing attention on mundane issues and efforts previously pursued automatically. This phenomenon of recognition is critical to the recovery process because it stimulates the revaluation of occupational patterns as fire.
victims seek a reordered and self-determined daily life.

May (1978) defined creative courage as the discovery of new forms, symbols, and patterns around which to organize a new society. The fire victims in this study consistently reported that their experiences stimulated a reshuffling of priorities. Illustrations of this reevaluation process include: (a) the 24-year-old man's new attitude toward vocational change; (b) the Italian family's shift to saving money in the bank rather than spending money to replace household furnishings; (c) the 35-year-old attorney's more relaxed perspective about defeat in the courtroom; and (d) the 36-year-old woman's new appreciation for coworkers from whom she had previously felt alienated.

Revaluation involves a strengthening of the commitment to certain life-style values and an alteration of others. Attitudes are the precursors of actions because it is the volition subsystem that energizes and directs changes in occupational behavior (Kielhofner, 1985). Therefore, revaluation leads to the reassertion of occupational patterns or to an occupational shift.

Reassertion and occupational shift. The reassertion of shift of occupational patterns has both a symbolic and a realistic significance for victims. Despite her stated need for nurturance, the 40-year-old woman strongly desired to reassert her former patterns of behavior:

I'll be back to normal when I've got my own kitchen, when I'm working 40 to 50 hours a week again, and when I buy myself a new kitten. As soon as I can cook and invite someone over for dinner, as soon as a cat is clawing up my furniture, and when I'm back working heavy hours again, then I'll know I'm OK.

Several examples of occupational shifts have already been described. On the basis of her revaluation of needs and values, the 30-year-old woman moved into her own place after years of enjoying life with roommates. The 24-year-old man made rapid changes in his work and avoided establishing a home and collecting new possessions.

It seems that specific reassertions and occupational shifts can have functional or dysfunctional results, depending on the unique life contexts of the individuals and families who choose them. The formation of a productive pattern of daily life depends on the victim's ability to mobilize effectively, face conflicts crystallized by the crisis, and make choices for action based on thoughtful revaluation.

Because of the limited time frame of this study (6 months), no conclusions can be drawn about the length of the adaptation and recovery process. I suspect, however, that in most cases, the intensive period of disruption and adaptation I have described eventually gives way to a calmer period of consolidation in which daily life patterns are stabilized.

Conclusion

Occupational disruption and adaptation is a valuable perspective from which to view the victims of house fires. Further research is necessary to build a database related to the losses and recovery efforts of these victims. Principles of occupational therapy intervention could then be developed and tested quantitatively.

Acknowledgment

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References


