Otibho Edeke-Agbareh is the humanitarian services manager at Kenyon International Emergency Services. Here she discusses how she utilises her OT skills in her role and what responding to disasters has taught her about the occupation of living.

Disaster Preparedness and Management

I integrate my OT training and experience into every element of my work as a humanitarian services manager at Kenyon International Emergency Services. Kenyon is an organisation with over 100 years of responding to some of the world’s largest disasters, such as the attacks on 9/11, the Boxing Day Tsunami, the Haiti earthquake, Grenfell Tower and the COVID-19 pandemic, to name a few. At Kenyon, a holistic approach is taken when it comes to incident response. For this reason, we provide everything from the recovery of human remains and family assistance to crisis communications support.

As the head of Kenyon’s family assistance programme, I incorporate every element of the WFOT’s position statement on an OT’s role within this sector. This is because OTs—due to our training and clinical experience—have so many transferable skills. Skills that I use everyday. I liaise with organisations and international and local authorities to review emergency plans, ensuring they meet the needs of everyone who might be impacted by an incident. I provide training and advice so that resilience is built within communities.

Lastly, when called upon, I deploy with a group of international team members (TMs) to provide family assistance after an incident. I lead special assistance team members (SATs) to provide direct and timely support to families and those directly affected. Normally, family assistance is provided within a Family Assistance Centre where routines are set via meal times and scheduled meetings with their SATs, dedicated rooms where children who are impacted can play, family briefings which help to keep families informed on the incident, and practical help with day-to-day needs. OTs lend themselves to the SAT role as we understand the use of normalising routines and meaningful activities in order to help ground people to deal with life ahead of them.

How can OTs, who typically work in hospitals and communities, turn their hand to responding to global disasters? The answer is woven into the story of a mother who lost her son unexpectedly in a country in which she did not reside. In this instance the answer is simple. It is to see the mother and this incident in a holistic manner that reaches far beyond bereavement support. It is facilitating her travel to the country where her son died, organising a site visit so she can go and pay her respects at the place where he passed away, organising a memorial service, providing her and those directly involved with mental health support and liaising with authorities in order to have her son repatriated home for his funeral.

All the skills we honed as OTs, completing complex discharge plans and liaising with a multi-disciplinary team, just used on a global scale. That’s the thing about OTs in the field of DPM—OTs still use all their taught skills. This time it may not be a patient but a family who has lost a loved one, or a survivor of an incident. Our role is to look at them and ask what they need and how we can provide the light to guide them to what will be their new normal.

Ots Time to Shine

With the establishment of long COVID-19 and the mental health impact of living through a pandemic lasting far into the future, OTs must see themselves as part of the solution. Working with international organisations, local authorities and healthcare systems to provide a unique type of rehabilitation—not just to patients but to humanity in general. We will all need to learn how to find new meaning in life as we adjust to our new normal.

I would like to end this article with a call to action to all OTs. There are few professions that tailor their whole premise to helping people holistically, leaving no aspect of a person irrelevant. It is our job as OTs, no matter what our work setting, to be that light that reminds people that everyone deserves to live a life that is full of meaning and purpose. That this is not just a necessity but a human right. This, above all things, is what responding to disasters has taught me about the occupation of living.

About the Author

Otibho Edeke-Agbareh (MSc, BSc) is the humanitarian services manager at Kenyon International Emergency Services. Before this she served both the NHS and the private sector as a specialist occupational therapist in major trauma and orthopaedics. She has significant humanitarian experience, deploying to different countries throughout her career. She is a member of the UK Emergency Medical Team (UKMET) and was deployed to Gaza in 2014 as part of a rehabilitation-led team.

If responding to disaster and supporting families sounds of interest you can visit kenyoninternational.com