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Zero Balancing and Occupational Therapy: Removing Restrictions to Life Flow

Deanna Waggy OTR, MSA and Loren Waggy, MS, OTR

Zero Balancing (ZB) is an effective mind body modality for use in Occupational Therapy (OT). ZB is based on a wellness model, to improve overall well-being and allow the body's innate wisdom to move towards greater health. This non-pharmacological approach helps the patient on multiple levels by releasing tension, promoting relaxation and improving ease of motion (The Joint Commission, 2017). The ZB technique uses safe, skilled touch (called fulcrums) with clear, respectful boundaries at all times. When used as a preparatory method, ZB improves overall occupational performance.

Releasing restrictions to restore balance

The Japanese Kawa model, used as an OT frame of reference in the 1990's, views treatment through the metaphor of a river for the life journey (Iwama et al., 2009). This model describes the importance of removing barriers that restrict the flow of water in the river. Using this eastern concept, the Japanese OTs applied the Kawa model to the whole person, working to remove restrictions in their life to restore harmony and balance. Patients experience well-being when their life flow is in harmony. This intervention enables the patient to "enhance balance in the life flow" (Lim & Iwama, 2006).

The language of the Kawa model gives a description of what happens in a Zero Balancing session. Blocks in the energy field (biofield), which shows up in the body as restrictions and tension, are released with the gentle pressure so the life flow can come back into balance. This allows the person to integrate physical, mental and emotional health while engaging in meaningful occupational performance. Guarneri and King (2015) offer a definition for the emerging terminology of biofield therapies:

Biofield therapies is a term coined by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM, known from 2015 onward as the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health [NCCIH]) to categorize therapeutic approaches within energy medicine that involve using the body's energy field (biofield) for therapeutic benefit (p. 89).

The Kawa model helps us understand the eastern principle of energy and flow. ZB integrates this understanding of energy with the western medicine principles of body structure. Dr Fritz Smith, originator of ZB, learned to engage life force (biofield) energy and body structure simultaneously with fulcrums (finger pressure) along the spine and key joints. The practitioner's touch helps the body remove restrictions to perform optimally.

What happens in a typical ZB session?

A typical Zero Balancing session is performed on a fully clothed patient on a massage table, but the protocol can be modified for a seated session or even in a hospital bed. The entire body is addressed, with special attention to the joints which transmit mechanical and energetic forces with limited voluntary motion, such as the joints between the bones in the spine or the foot which move as a unit instead of isolated motion between each individual joint. Stress, injury or trauma can impact the movement patterns in an attempt to protect the area, which eventually can result in a pain response. When the tensions around these joints are released, the body moves with less effort and greater ease, conserving the patient's energy for the things that they want to

do and need to do. The patient feels good and has the potential to re-engage with purposeful activities they once avoided.

Ongoing ZB research by the Zero Balancing Touch Foundation (2020) is documenting the ability of the ZB practitioner to synchronistically match the patient's state as the session progresses. The patient as well as the practitioner move from a state of held stress or sympathetic nervous system response of being on guard, into a parasympathetic nervous system response of feeling calm and grounded. This is evidenced by working signs of borborygmus (stomach gurgles), relaxed breathing patterns with an occasional deep breath, rapid eye movement or other signs of relaxation which the practitioner learns to follow.

How is ZB used in an OT setting?

ZB is easy to incorporate into OT treatment because it requires no special equipment. It can be performed while the patient is lying in bed or on a mat table or while seated in a chair or wheelchair. It is typically performed while fully clothed. A quiet space is preferred, but not essential. Individual fulcrums can be performed in under a minute prior to treatment. The typical 30-minute protocol can be shortened to 5 – 10 minutes during a treatment session.

Modifications to the protocol can be made based on the patient's endurance and symptoms, especially in a hospital setting. It is easy to incorporate the basic principles and ZB techniques when transferring a patient into bed or enhancing functional performance.

Once a patient experiences a ZB session, they often ask for it again, since it feels good for up to several days after a session as the body recalibrates. Occupational Therapists who use ZB in a treatment session find improved compliance with therapy, a willingness to participate in functional activities and enhanced movement following a session.

Zero Balancing can be used with any age groups. Those with fragile health in later years may require a softer touch. Children and infants typically receive a shorter session as their bodies have less layers of held stress and tension compared to an adult. Parents often notice the ZB sessions are calming while school aged children seem to perform better in school when incorporating ZB as part of the typical treatment sessions. Some OTs use the advanced ZB techniques including work with the skull and visceral organs, especially newborns who have birth trauma or latching difficulties when nursing.

Zero Balancing principles can be incorporated into any area of OT as long as precautions are followed. For example, only certified practitioners may work with those with a cancer diagnosis or with pregnant mothers in the 2nd and 3rd trimester – if it is within their scope of practice. Possible OT settings to use the ZB protocol may include Skilled Nursing Facilities, Assisted Living, Hospitals, Outpatient clinics, Home Health, Wellness Programs, Mental Health Centers, Integrative Medicine Centers, or Private Practice.

In work with patients, some of the benefits OT patients often notice include:

- Released tension and pain in body
- Reduced anxiety and symptoms of stress
- Enhanced concentration and mental clarity
- Deep relaxation response and improved sleep
- Less effort and energy needed to perform tasks
- Ability to move with greater ease
- Less fatigue and restlessness with activity
- Improved outlook and emotional stability

In the OT setting, ZB may assist with the following:

- Remove barriers that restrict movement or require greater energy expenditure
- Prepare patients for occupation-based treatment by helping them feel less tension
- Increase participation and greater ease in performing other OT interventions
- Reduce body aches and pain by promoting postural alignment and balance
- Enhance body-mind awareness, promoting self-actualization and health
- Enable the non-verbal release of emotional and traumatic imprints in the body
- Quiet the mind, accelerate spiritual growth and enhance transformational processes

ZB training for OTs

AOTA recommends OT practitioners who use Complementary and Integrative Health Therapies such as Zero Balancing should have proper training (Bradshaw, 2017). There are several levels of Zero Balancing training. A student of ZB starts with 25 - 50 hours minimum (ZB I & II classes) and can begin using the techniques within the guidelines in their training. OT practitioners often choose to complete ZB certification once they see the benefits of using this technique in their OT practice. ZB certification requires 100 hours of core classes, an exam and a faculty checkout session. Advanced practitioners often complete a variety of advanced level classes, retake core classes to refine their skills, become a ZB mentor to beginning students, participate in regional study groups or progress through teacher training in order to teach ZB.

ZB transforms the OT practice

The basic principles of Zero Balancing are congruent with the core practices of OT. ZB is an effective treatment tool for OT practitioners to help remove restrictions and restore balance to a patient's life flow. Zero Balancing transforms interactions with patients by releasing restrictions which limit occupational performance. For more ideas of how to use Zero Balancing in a treatment session with various types of patients, you can read the book *Experiencing the Power of Zero Balancing: Case Studies of Journeys to Health and Wholeness* written by various ZB practitioners, which is available online at ZeroBalancing.com.

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Loren and Deanna Waggy share a love of Occupational Therapy (35+ years) and Zero Balancing (10 years). Loren works in an inpatient rehabilitation unit and Deanna has a private wellness practice and consultation. Deanna teaches Clinical & Process Acupressure classes for Soul Lightening International and is currently in Zero Balancing Teacher Training. Both actively promote excellence in OT, Zero Balancing and Acupressure through public speaking, mentoring and study groups. They live in South Bend, Indiana where they enjoy music, reading and sharing their 3-acre property with a variety of wildlife and birds.

