

Defining Occupational Therapy

Occupational therapy aims to enhance participation in everyday occupations through a holistic approach focusing on the physical, cognitive, and psychosocial well-being of each client.

Occupation is a task with intrinsic value and significance in a person's life. It is different from "purposeful activity" in that an occupation does not need to have a defined purpose, or at least an apparent purpose. In fact, it does not need to be an "activity," at all. It is simply what someone does that he or she deems important. What people consider to be their occupations may vary greatly, as the multitude of occupations constitutes one's individuality.

Some values of the occupational therapy profession include:

Participation: It is through participation in our occupations that we gain self-efficacy and self worth. If a client is unable to perform occupations or roles independently, efforts must be made to ensure he or she can participate in some way, whether through modification of the task or environment or adaptation of the individual.

Client-centered: All interventions must be designed in accordance with the client's interests, goals, and experiences. Treatment is only effective if the client feels it is meaningful.

Holism: Occupational therapy considers how health affects the whole person. OTs examine all of the ways in which the client's functioning is limited and address them, whether through direct treatment, education, or advocacy. A good therapist identifies barriers and devises ways to break them so that the client can achieve optimal functioning.

Respect: All clients and family members, as well as colleagues and other professionals, must receive respect from the therapist. Personal, cultural, and religious beliefs need to be considered and appreciated during treatment.

The use of occupation in interventions has great value: it is what makes occupational therapy so successful. By using occupations that the client deems valuable, rather than implementing "exercises," the client takes a greater interest in the intervention and exerts more energy. By using occupation-as-an-ends, therapy not only remediates or rehabilitates the client to perform the targeted occupation, but it also instills confidence and demonstrates that the client will succeed on his or her own. Additionally, occupation-as-a-means engenders problem-solving of both the client and the therapist. In attempting various tasks, one can apply what is learned about the body and ways of moving, thinking, feeling. It is "practical practice."

The principles of occupational therapy do not apply to those with disabilities or illnesses only, but to all who want to engage in occupations at their best. Occupational therapy is about knowing how a body performs occupations so that it can do so successfully and efficiently. OT needs greater exposure as much as the public needs to benefit from it.

I strongly believe that many children presenting with mild academic problems could benefit from OT interventions. By educating teachers of typical students about sensory disturbances and proper body alignment, both students and teachers could optimize learning potential. The child who fidgets would not be admonished but provided the proper sensory stimulation needed to focus on educational tasks. Better still, the child could learn to recognize what he or she needs and meet these needs independently. Again, therapists need to emphasize that OT is for everyone.

I also feel there is a need for OT in the social services field. Individuals who access these services, such as homeless shelters, may need occupational therapy to foster positive changes. OTs could collaborate with social workers to identify which services best meet an individual's needs. They could help people determine which jobs are suitable for them and show them how best to perform the job with their skills or assist them in developing new ones. Also, occupational therapists could work with an individual or family as they make a fresh start to ensure success.

A third area that could benefit from occupational therapy is the workplace. While many companies have consulted OTs about injury prevention and ergonomics, people are still receiving injuries that could be prevented. OTs could provide inservices to employees at risk for work-related injuries and teach them how to prevent even minor yet prevalent injuries like carpal tunnel syndrome. People need to know that work-related injuries are not inevitable but preventable.