

# Occupational Therapy, Alzheimer's disease and Dementia

## What is Occupational Therapy?

Life is made up of meaningful everyday activities or occupations such as walking the dog, gardening, preparing a meal, painting, doing the laundry and playing games. Occupations are part of life; they describe who we are and how we feel about ourselves. Occupations help bring meaning to life.

When we can't participate in daily occupations, due to injury, illness, disability or social and environmental circumstances, occupational therapists help find solutions to address the meaningful everyday activities of life. Occupational therapy also helps prevent disability or illness and enhances the way we participate in our communities and lives. Occupational therapy helps us engage in the occupation of living.



## Why is Alzheimer's and dementia so important?

Alzheimer's disease is a fatal, progressive and degenerative disease that destroys brain cells. It is the most common form of dementia, accounting for 64 per cent of all dementias in Canada. Symptoms include difficulty remembering things, making decisions and performing everyday activities. These changes can affect the way a person feels and acts. There is currently no way to cure the disease, but research is improving the way we provide care.

Currently there are 500,000 Canadian living with Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia, 72% are women. Within 25 years, it may reach up to 1 to 1.3 million people. The Alzheimer Society of Canada estimates that the total annual economic burden is expected to increase from \$15 billion in 2008 to \$153 billion by 2038, including the direct and indirect health costs.

## How do occupational therapists help?

Occupational therapists help clients and families understand the impact of Alzheimer's disease on the person's day-to-day function. The occupational therapist works with clients to develop ways to compensate for limitations and maintain independence. Having an understanding of the dynamic relationship between the person, occupation, and environment can uniquely position occupational therapists to provide client centred, evidence-based services for this growing cohort.

## What do occupational therapists do?

- Facilitate opportunities for independence and personal control while supporting self-esteem,
- Work with families to identify needs and provide opportunities to engage with their impacted family member
- Develop a schedule for regular daily activities in order to maintain a routine activities such as personal care, taking medications, meals, leisure, walking, and going to sleep,
- Adapt and modify homes to ensure a safe and secure environment, including installation of grab-bars in the bathroom, thermostatic shower controls and shut of switches on stoves and ovens,
- Assist family members and caregivers to adapt to changing roles,
- Advocate for the health and well-being of clients living with Alzheimer's and dementia.

## Where do occupational therapists work?

Occupational therapists work with health care and other professionals in a variety of places such as long term care facilities, community support services, family health teams, hospitals and clients homes.

## Occupational therapy works!

*Sarah has always been the organizer. She runs the house, pays the bills, and plans vacations. Over the past year, she has become quite muddled. Her husband has noticed that Sarah has difficulty with planning and problem solving. She has difficulties completing familiar tasks at home and playing card with their friends. Sarah has been experiencing memory loss and has even had problems speaking and writing lately. Sarah recently visited the doctor and was told she has Alzheimer's disease. Sarah and her husband were both very frightened but have been receiving lots of help including from their occupational therapist who worked with them to figure out what household jobs need doing and how they can best do them together, made sure that each takes the time for their own interests and is even helping them plan ahead for any changes they may need to make in the future. Life doesn't seem quite so overwhelming now and they are managing fine. Because of occupational therapy, Sarah and her husband can continue to live at home together.*

