

Occupational Therapy and Mental Health

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, disabilities 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 mental health so important?

Mental health problems can affect people of all ages, cultures, education and income levels. Mental illness varies from person to person and can include depression, anxiety, psychosis, bipolar disorder, and post-traumatic stress and personality disorders. According to Health Canada, nearly 6.7 million people have been diagnosed with a mental illness. This represents a total burden of nearly \$51 billion on the Canadian economy.

How do occupational therapists help?

Occupational therapy recognizes that everyday occupational engagement influences mental and physical health. Occupational therapists believe that occupational performance, organization, choice and satisfaction are determined by the relationship between persons and their environments. Occupational therapists approach mental health with this unique perspective that considers a person's needs within context of family and community. This client centred philosophy is consistent with Canada's mental health reforms.

What do occupational therapists do?

- Work with clients and their families to identify the occupations and activities that are important for family and personal life.
- Help to plan, initiate and track short and long term goals that enable participation in those activities.
- Teach practical ways to cope with the effects of mental illness e.g. relaxation techniques.
- Work with clients to better understand the impact of mental illness.
- Help replace unhealthy activities, such as substance abuse, with healthy, meaningful activities.
- Assess skills, interests, values, and strengths in order to help clients maintain, modify or find appropriate employment.
- Implement activities that teach valuable skills e.g. social skills training with a peer support group.
- Help structure lives and organize daily activities so that clients can balance everything they want, need or are expected to do.

Where do occupational therapists work?

Occupational therapists work with health care and other professionals in a variety of places such as communities, schools, workplaces, hospitals, private practices, residential homes and prisons.

Occupational therapy works!

Song experienced her first episode of psychosis when she was in her first year of university. She started to hear voices and was worried that the professors were conspiring against her. Her occupational therapist helped her develop and use strategies to improve her concentration and attention for school work, connect with campus accessibility services and access academic accommodations and plan and maintain a regular routine that included school work, taking care of herself and being with friends. She is now about to graduate from university with a degree in Health Sciences. Song's illness hasn't gone away, but she has the skills to cope with it and thinks she is a better student and person because of it.

