

Occupational therapy

Occupational therapists are health professionals trained to assist people to overcome various limitations in order to live more independent lives. People may need assistance due to injury or illness, psychological or emotional difficulties, developmental delay or the effects of ageing. Occupational therapists work in many different environments including schools, nursing homes, hospitals and workplaces. Their goal is to maximise skills for living which enhance personal productivity, well-being and quality of life.

Occupational therapists adopt a holistic approach to healthcare and treatment. They work with the individual, their family and other health professionals and care providers, where necessary. People of all ages and abilities can be helped by occupational therapy.

Stages of treatment

An occupational therapy treatment program typically involves three stages:

- **Evaluation** - the abilities of the client are assessed in the context of their work, school, home, leisure, general lifestyle and family situation.
- **Consultation** - having made an assessment, the occupational therapist then consults with the client, other professionals and family members who may be closely involved in developing a treatment program.
- **Treatment** - this may take place in a clinic, hospital ward, residential care centre or at the client's home, school or workplace. The goal is always to maximise the client's skills for living.

Occupational therapy and children

Occupational therapy promotes normal development and stimulates learning in children with specific learning difficulties, physical disabilities, delayed development or those recovering from illness or injury. Working with children, their families and their teachers, occupational therapists aim to improve the child's quality of life by helping them to participate in play, preschool, school and home activities.

An occupational therapist may work with children in any of the following areas:

- **Prerequisite activities** - the child's physical abilities, such as motor control, hand-to-eye coordination, body awareness and sensation.
- **Functional skills** - the child's day-to-day living skills, such as eating, writing, going to the toilet, interacting with other children and playground skills.
- **The environment** - such as classroom furniture, classroom and schoolyard access and equipment for woodwork, art and physical education.

Occupational therapy and adolescents

Adolescence is often a challenging and difficult time for both young people and their families. Occupational therapy can help adolescents by facilitating personal growth which can help to improve self-esteem and develop independent social and communication skills. Teenagers with social and lifestyle problems, or disabilities resulting from an accident or disease, can maximise their independence and quality of life into adulthood with the help of an occupational therapist.

Occupational therapy for adults and the elderly

When an adult or elderly person is affected by an illness, accident or work place injury, an occupational therapist can help them on the road to recovery. They may assist with the return to home and work life through the development of new skills for daily living such as household tasks and personal care, return-to-work or leisure programs. They may also make or facilitate changes to the work or home environment to make life easier and safer.

Occupational therapy in psychiatry

Occupational therapists also assist adults who are experiencing psychological or emotional difficulties. They can help a person develop better ways to deal with mental illness in the context of day-to-day activities, managing work and emotional problems. They work in conjunction with other health professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and doctors.

Occupational therapy in the workplace

Occupational therapists play an important role in helping workers return to work following an injury or illness, including stress. Their role in the workplace covers:

- **Injury management and rehabilitation** - including worksite assessments, injury risk assessments, occupational rehabilitation counselling and early intervention rehabilitation.
- **Injury prevention** - including manual handling assessments, claims history reviews, ergonomic assessments, development of an alternate duties manual, work conditioning programs and the redesign of workplaces.
- **Training** - in areas like stress management, manual handling, back care, safe work practices, the introduction of new equipment, work-station adjustments and work pause exercises.

Where to get help

- Public and private hospitals
- Medical rehabilitation units
- Your local community health centre
- Occupational health centres
- Home care services
- Retirement homes
- Psychiatric clinics, hostels and hospitals
- Vocational rehabilitation clinics
- Tertiary education centres
- Independent living centres
- Private practice
- Schools, pharmacy and industry
- OT Australia (Victoria) Private Practice Register.

Things to remember

- Occupational therapists work in a variety of settings to help people overcome limitations and live independently.
- A school-based occupational therapy program is designed to help a child achieve their potential.
- Many people with mental or emotional difficulties can live independent lives with help from an occupational therapist and other health care providers.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Association of Occupational Therapists

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