

Occupational Therapy and Criminal Justice

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 criminal justice important?

The law affects nearly every aspect of our lives. We have laws that regulate common activities such as driving a car and renting an apartment and laws that deal with crimes such as robbery and other threats and challenges to society. The criminal justice system represents any interaction with the justice system from police officers, court rooms and prisons to state run rehabilitation programs, probation services and half way houses.

The average cost of incarcerating a federal prisoner per day is \$259.05, and, given that the length of stay in a federal penitentiary is a minimum of 2 years, each inmate costs the Canadian taxpayer \$189,106.50 annually.

How do occupational therapists help?

Occupational therapists work with those involved in the criminal justice system. They may work with individuals to help identify strengths, values, interests, resources and challenges in order to implement plans that address family commitments, employment and leisure activities.

Occupational therapists also work with organizations such as correctional facilities, policy makers, half way houses and community agencies to develop programs and resources. Occupational therapists work with other professionals to assess and help clients develop the skills needed to engage in healthy and meaningful lives.

What do occupational therapists do?

- Assess clients within the context of their health, social and physical environments.
- Work with clients and their families to identify the occupations and activities that are important for family, personal and work life.
- Assess skills, interests, values, strengths and challenges in order to help clients engage in appropriate activities.
- Help the client set realistic short and long term goals, evaluate outcomes and modify goals as appropriate.
- Teach practical work, life and social skills such as budgeting and child care; often with peer groups within correctional facilities and in the community.
- Teach practical, non-pharmaceutical ways of coping with adverse symptoms e.g. relaxation techniques, pain management
- Help replace unhealthy activities, such as substance abuse, by increasing engagement in healthy, meaningful activities.
- Advocate for clients in correctional facilities, the community, half-way houses and employment in order support meaningful activity, prevent occupational deprivation, reduce antisocial behaviour, facilitate the transition from prison to community and reduce recidivism.

Where do occupational therapists work?

Occupational therapists work with health care and other professionals in a variety of places such as correctional facilities, half way houses, community support services, family health teams, schools, workplaces, hospitals and clients homes.

Occupational therapy works!

Trevor has been in and out of jail since he was a teenager, and is now 35 years old. He has been diagnosed with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, schizophrenia, and antisocial personality disorder. He also has an acquired brain injury. While living in a halfway house, Trevor's occupational therapist helped him to gain employment through a supported employment agency for persons with mental illness. Trevor was able to develop a personal daily routine that included going for walks, reading scripture, and cooking for himself. The occupational therapist educated Trevor to help him better understand mental illness, and has taught him coping skills to help adjust to life outside of prison. With the help of the occupational therapist, Trevor has been able to adjust to his illnesses and has stayed out of prison longer than ever before.

