

Occupational therapy and post traumatic stress disorder

Occupational therapy works!

Soon after Jean returned from military service in Afghanistan, he started to have nightmares, had trouble sleeping, was drinking heavily and distanced himself from his wife and children. He was no longer the loving, attentive caring husband and father he had been. Jean began to recognize the signs of post traumatic stress disorder and sought out help from a medical team. The occupational therapist helped Jean to understand and acknowledge what he was feeling, took the time to find out what activities in life were important to both of him and his family and worked with them to plan and implement baby steps towards a return to family life and work. Jean still has a long way to go but at least he feels that he and his family are headed in the same direction.



What are post traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) and operational stress injuries (OSI)?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and operational stress injuries (OSI) are a complex conditions caused by traumatic and extremely distressing events such as crimes, natural disasters, accidents, war or other threats to life. Nightmares, flashbacks, or overwhelming and recurring thoughts of the event can interfere with normal life for months.

PTSD and OSI can make people feel very nervous or 'on edge' all the time. Many feel startled very easily, feel irritable, have a hard time concentrating, or have problems eating or sleeping well. At the opposite, some people feel numb and detached. They may feel like things around them aren't real, feel disconnected from their body or thoughts, or have a hard time feeling emotions. For some people, alcohol or drugs is the only way they found to cope with PTSD and OSI.

These conditions can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic background. A Canadian population survey found that almost 1 adult out of 10 will suffer from PTSD over a lifetime. Recognizing PTSD and OSI and getting the proper professional help can be difficult for many reasons. Survivors may feel guilty or abnormal, think they should cope on their own, they may have lost trust in others and feel the world is a dangerous place.

How do occupational therapists help?

Occupational therapists 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 therapy looks beyond the physical and mental disability and works with their clients and their family to help them engage in the meaningful activities of their lives.

What do occupational therapists do?

- Work with clients and their families to identify the occupations and activities that are important for family, personal and work life.
- Help to plan, initiate and track short and long term goals that enable participation in those activities.
- Perform assessments to help understand specific challenges (concentration, attention, anxiety, impulsivity, divided attention).
- Teach practical, non-pharmaceutical ways of coping with adverse symptoms e.g. stress, pain, and sleep disruption.
- Help replace unhealthy activities, such as substance abuse, by increasing engagement in healthy, meaningful activities.
- Use "hands on" approaches by: going to the individual's home or workplace, meeting with the individual's family and/or employer to facilitate engagement in target occupations.
- Advocate for clients.
- Conduct driving assessments and facilitate safe driving strategies.

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 and therapeutic communities.

What is occupational therapy?

Life is made up of meaningful everyday activities such as walking the dog, gardening, preparing a meal, painting, doing the laundry and playing games. When we can't participate due to injury, illness, disabilities or social and environmental circumstances, occupational therapists help find solutions to address and resolve our problems and to help us live life to our fullest potential.

Occupational therapy also helps prevent disability or illness and enhances the way we participate in our communities.

