

# Occupational Therapy and Workplace 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 cannot 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 workplace mental health important?

There is increasing evidence that absenteeism, productivity and morale are intricately linked to the health of employees. Research concludes that every year, mental health issues cost Canada's employers billions of dollars in lost productivity. As well, employers who offer programs to support employees' mental health report substantial positive results for individual employees' performance.

## How do occupational therapists help?

Occupational therapists recognize that the health of the employee and the work environment are determined by a range of interacting factors. The choice, performance, organization and satisfaction in occupations are influenced by the relationship between people and their environment. Occupational therapists offer solutions to workplace mental health issues through programs and activities that can include nutrition and wellness, stress management, counseling, health and safety policies and life skills training.

## What do occupational therapists do?

- Work with clients to identify goals, aspirations, lead their care, and work towards recovery
- Work with the client to better understand the impact of mental health problems
- Assess skills, interests, values, and strengths
- Implement activities that teach valuable skills e.g. social skills training with a peer support group
- Teach practical ways to cope and minimize anxiety e.g. relaxation techniques, decision making strategies
- Address barriers to mental health by creating work environments that facilitate meaningful occupation
- Design and build daily schedules of graded, meaningful activities that increase physical fitness, reduce fear, improve sleep and detract from negative thoughts
- Facilitate an interprofessional approach that includes the client as part of the treatment team that works towards a common goal i.e. return to work

## 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 therapists also work with organizations, such as government, policy makers, care providers and community agencies to develop programs and resources.

## Occupational therapy works!

*Sam works as a human resources manager in an automotive parts company. Sam was advised that long-term employees were not happy and were beginning to look for new employment. He noticed that higher levels of absenteeism and low morale were getting in the way of productivity.. The company asked Sam to find a solution to raise morale and help retain employee. Sam hired occupational therapists for help. The occupational therapist evaluated the work areas for optimal ergonomics, worked with individuals to identify skills and ensure their best fit within the company while considering mental health or physical limitations, The occupational therapist took the time to understand the concerns of the workers and initiate changes in both home and work life that improve general health and job satisfaction. The occupational therapist helped to develop a workplace mental health program. The company is now a happier healthier place to be and, although our company had to spend some money initially, it has proved to be a good return on investment. Because of occupational therapy, our company is more productive.*

