

How do you bring occupation into your practice?

Occupation is the core domain of occupational therapy and can serve as both a therapeutic medium and an outcome for fostering good health and wellbeing (Gray, 1998; Townsend & Polatajko, 2013). However, being occupation-centred in our work as occupational therapists can be challenged by medicalization (Di Tommaso, Isbel, Scarvell, & Wicks, 2016; Whiteford, Townsend, & Hosking, 2000), use of mechanistic approaches (Gillen & Greber, 2014), de-centering of occupation in educational programs (Wilcock, 2005), logistical constraints (Pereira, 2013), workplace policies, and other stakeholders' (clients, healthcare providers, general public) understandings and expectations of occupational therapy (Aiken, Fourt, Cheng, & Polatajko, 2011; Di Tommaso et al., 2016; Gillen & Greber, 2014). Barriers to occupation-centred practice are significant and result in threats to professional identity and related burn-out (Edwards & Diresettes, 2010; Lloyd & King, 2001), role confusion (Fortune, 2000), and a "meaning gap" where occupational therapists may lose meaning in their work when occupation is lost (Aiken et al., 2011).

Bringing occupation back as the central force in your practice has the potential to strengthen your professional identity, enhance your confidence in your work, positively transform the way we work with diverse clients, and improve client outcomes.

Here is a list of easy actions you can take to help bring occupation into your practice:

1. Change the culture around expectations of occupational therapy

- a. Find allies to partner with and encourage broader engagement in occupation-centred practice.
- b. Educate colleagues, clients, and other stakeholders to support a change in culture that acknowledges how vital occupation is to health and wellbeing.
- c. Educate and collaborate with colleagues to ensure clients' are viewed as occupational beings, where clients have choice around their occupations and daily routines, through a culturally safe approach.

2. Focus on enabling occupation (occupation-as-ends)

- a. Make it your priority to identify clients' meaningful occupations. Avoid making assumptions around what occupations are of value to the client. Rather, collaborate with clients, families, communities, and colleagues to get a full occupational history.
- b. Focus your efforts on enabling occupation through modifying the occupation and/or environment; enlist the help of the client, colleagues and other stakeholders. Use occupational therapy conceptual models (e.g. Canadian Model of Occupational Performance and Engagement, the Model of Human Occupation, the Kawa River Model) to inform your reasoning.
- c. Challenge yourself and your colleagues to find meaningful occupations with clients that support full participation and engagement, over disengaged, passive or minimal participation in occupations.
- d. Strive to understand your clients experience of occupation within their natural environments, not just within a clinical environment.

3. Treating through doing (occupation-as-means)

- a. Remember that using actual occupation in practice helps connect us to the unique and useful value of occupational therapy and is our therapeutic speciality.
- b. Make an effort to use occupation or real meaningful activity in a session, rather than talking about it, or doing skill/component based tasks. Consider that doing occupation is actually what's important to clients.
- c. Create space for clients to bring in their interests and valued occupations. Collaborate with clients on planning treatment and engage them in decision making.
- d. Meet clients in their own environments to engage in their occupations: communities, homes or favourite places because it will help facilitate their chosen occupations. Challenge yourself to move beyond the treatment room, or your typical practice environment.
- e. Remind yourself and clients that often the most direct way to achieve an occupational goal is to engage in that occupation. It is your job as the occupational therapist to work with the client and others to ensure a "just-right" fit given where the client is at in their functioning.

4. Know and use occupation-centred language

- a. Always ensure your communications around occupation-focused therapy are clear and easily understood by diverse stakeholders.
- b. Aim to use occupation-centred language in all communications (charting, reporting, speaking with clients and stakeholders) to emphasize meaningful occupation. When needed, translate occupational concepts and language to make sense to you and others in your context, while aiming to retain their key meanings.
- c. Use occupation-centred language with team members. Take time to explain the terms with the long-term goal that it will create greater understanding and clarity around your role and enhance your value in the team. This also supports a change in workplace culture.

5. Educate ourselves and others about occupation-focused practice

- a. When working with students, emphasize the importance of occupation-centred practice to the students to get them thinking about this early on and engage in conversations around promoting and maintaining an occupation-centred practice.
- b. Spend time reconnecting with the core values of our profession, through self study, join a practice group, etc.
- c. Take or ask for time to reflect on your work and how it could incorporate more occupation.
- d. Read occupational science and occupational therapy literature on a regular basis.

Resources

- [Occupation in Practice, CAOT-BC Practice Network](#). No matter where you are in having an occupation-centred practice, join us to talk about occupation! It's a great place to get support, resources, and problem solve with fellow occupational therapists who share your passion.
- Follow [@OTalk](#) and [#OTalk](#) on twitter for occupational therapy themed discussion. Past discussions have focused on the use of occupation in practice.
- [The Occupied Podcast](#). Brock Cook, an Australian occupational therapist who transformed his acute-care practice to be occupation-centred, explores all things occupation.
- [OT potential club](#) is an occupational therapy driven forum for discussing relevant literature, assessments, documentation and networking with other therapists internationally.
- [Sense of Doing](#) is a column in our Canadian professional practice magazine Occupational Therapy Now. This column is a space where occupational therapists and other contributors speak to the value of occupation in practice. It can be a great resource for your practice, as stories are shared of integrating occupation into practice, overcoming barriers in doing this, and the use. They have an open-access link to some issues for those who are not members of CAOT and CAOT-BC.

Further Reading

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