



OT PRACTICE DOCUMENT: CHRONIC PAIN

WHAT IS CHRONIC PAIN?

Pain is an unpleasant sensory and/or emotional experience typically associated with physical damage to the body, and it is the most common reason why people seek health care. Pain becomes chronic when it lasts longer than three months. It can occur without a known cause, after an injury has healed, or after a condition has been treated.

The World Health Organization recognizes chronic pain as a global public health problem. More than a symptom, chronic pain is recognized as a disease in the International Classification of Diseases¹. In most clinical guidelines, non-pharmacological treatments (such as participating in meaningful life activities), are recommended as first-line interventions for the management of pain².

COMPLEX/PERSISTENT PAIN are other terms often used in practice when referring to chronic pain.

THE ROLE OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY IN CHRONIC PAIN

People living with chronic pain may experience difficulties participating in different aspects of their life including their activities of daily living, work, and leisure occupations. The primary role of occupational therapy in chronic pain is to restore a person's ability to participate in daily activities by:

- Using a holistic approach to thoroughly assess and address the physical, cognitive, emotional, environmental, and spiritual factors that influence a person's experience of pain, as well as a person's functional ability to participate in daily activities.
- Providing self-management strategies and helping clients integrate them into their particular life context. Strategies include:
 - Energy conservation/joint-sparing techniques;
 - Stress management/relaxation training; and
 - Sleep hygiene.
- Empowering clients by providing accessible information about their condition, including education about pain (e.g., what causes pain, different types of pain, symptoms) and body mechanics/postures and positioning.

Additionally, occupational therapists can support clients living with chronic pain by^{3,4,5}:

1. Supporting the implementation of non-pharmacologic therapies and interventions for the self-management of chronic pain.
2. Supporting vocational rehabilitation and return to work processes (e.g. co-creating a return-to-work plan with the employee and employer).
3. Enhancing and building social support and connection to community support.
4. Adapting tasks and support with pacing.
5. Addressing the mental health impact of living with chronic pain, and/or addressing psychological factors that contribute to the experience of pain.
6. Teaching coping skills and strategies to manage pain, including mindfulness and meditative practices.
7. Facilitating chronic pain management groups which aim to help participants understand their condition and how to manage their pain.
8. Restoring occupational identity (Note: chronic pain can significantly impact a person's life resulting in changes to routines, leisure, and vocational occupations).
9. Providing functional splinting and braces.
10. Assessing and modifying the environment.
11. Using ergonomic or adaptive equipment.
12. Supporting with edema management.



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Additionally, acceptance and commitment therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy have been found to be beneficial for the management of chronic pain². Occupational therapists with training in these psychotherapeutic modalities use them to support clients living with chronic pain.

Notably, occupational therapists support clients across the life course experiencing chronic pain. When supporting children and youth who experience chronic pain, the same strategies listed above apply, while considering developmentally appropriate occupations and routines.

USEFUL RESOURCES

- [The Canadian Pain Society - canadianpainsociety.ca](http://canadianpainsociety.ca)
- [Pain Canada - paincanada.ca](http://paincanada.ca)

REFERENCES

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All Occupational Therapy Practice Documents have been developed and reviewed in collaboration with diverse occupational therapists with lived experience and expertise in the respective areas of practice. For any feedback, contact practice@caot.ca.