



# OT PRACTICE DOCUMENT: DEMENTIA

## WHAT IS DEMENTIA?

Dementia is a broad term that describes a set of symptoms that may include memory loss, changes in mood and behaviour, and difficulties with thinking, problem-solving, and language<sup>1</sup>. As a result, the person will experience changes in their functional abilities and participation in occupations. Dementia is a progressive condition – as the disease progresses the person will need support to engage in activities of daily living. In the absence of a cure, non-pharmacological interventions, including occupational therapy, are recommended to support people living with dementia throughout the progression of the disease.

## THE ROLE OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY IN DEMENTIA CARE

When a person starts experiencing dementia symptoms, occupational therapists support the health care team by conducting assessments, such as cognitive assessments, which are used to inform the diagnosis process. When a diagnosis has been made by a physician (or when dementia is suspected), occupational therapists help people with dementia continue living independently in their place of choice and engage in occupations that are meaningful to them by<sup>2,3,4</sup>:

- Conducting environmental assessments and modifications to support safety and independence;
- Conducting assessments of the person's ability to participate in activities of daily living (Note: This also informs decisions about the level or type of care that the person needs to support their participation in occupation);
- Teaching the person strategies to help them complete their activities of daily living (e.g., personal hygiene) and/or modify the activity to support participation and independence;
- Prescribing assistive devices;
- Providing caregiver education regarding the symptoms and the impact of dementia;
- Supporting caregivers, family members, and the person living with dementia in adapting to changing roles;
- Providing caregiver skills training;
- Educating the person on fatigue management;
- Providing memory strategies to help manage memory difficulties;
- Helping with routine planning;
- Helping with community access;
- Supporting connection between persons in the advanced stages of dementia to their environment by using sensory interventions; and
- Conducting capacity assessments as the person's ability to make their own decisions diminishes (Note: this requires additional training).

Occupational therapists can also support with the management of behavioural symptoms of dementia. In this capacity, occupational therapists<sup>5</sup>:

- Identify the underlying needs/issues that give rise to the behaviour(s);
- Develop strategies to manage the behaviour(s); and
- Support capacity building in long-term care homes and in the community by educating formal and informal caregivers on the prevention and management of behavioural symptoms of dementia.

## OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY AND BRAIN HEALTH

Research shows that some dementia cases could be prevented or delayed by addressing 12 risk factors<sup>6</sup>: low education, hypertension, hearing impairment, smoking, obesity, depression, physical inactivity, diabetes, low social contact, excessive alcohol consumption, traumatic brain injury, and air pollution.



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To promote brain health, dementia experts in Canada recommend for clinicians to focus on addressing 1) nutrition, 2) physical exercise, 3) hearing loss, 4) sleep, 5) cognitive training and rehabilitation, 6) social engagement and education, 7) frailty, and 8) medications<sup>6</sup>. Occupational therapists are well positioned to implement several of these recommendations:

- At the individual level, occupational therapists can help clients address barriers that may be preventing them from engaging in occupations that are good for their brain health, such as participating in physical activities and working on their sleep hygiene.
- At the systems/community level, occupational therapists can advocate for environments and policies that support participation in occupations that are good for our brain health, such as advocating for affordable and accessible transportation to support community engagement.

## 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](mailto:practice@caot.ca).