



OT PRACTICE DOCUMENT: MENTAL HEALTH

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health issues can impact individuals of all ages, cultures, education, and income levels. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.”¹ Mental health is an integral component of health and underpins our abilities to make decisions, build relationships, and participate in meaningful activities.

Mental illness varies from person to person and often involves changes in behaviour, mood or thinking. Mental illness can include depression, anxiety, psychosis, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and personality disorder. Poor mental health and mental illness can be associated with distress and/or decreased occupational functioning, with symptoms varying from mild to severe.

It is important to know that it is possible to have good mental health even if you have a mental illness. Many individuals with mental illness can experience tough times and have periods of good mental health.

THE ROLE OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY IN MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health practice is a core part of the occupational therapy profession². Occupational therapists offer a range of mental health services in a variety of different practice contexts, such as community, inpatient and outpatient settings, forensic mental health, assertive community treatment teams (ACTT), long term care, homeless shelters, school, and workplaces³. These services span across the age spectrum including children, adolescents, adults, and older adults; and in diverse roles such as case managers, consultants, managers, educators, clinicians, and program developers³.

Occupational therapy recognizes that everyday occupational engagement influences mental and physical health, and that occupational participation, organization, choice, and satisfaction are determined by the relationship between persons and their environments (and sociopolitical factors impacting occupational opportunities). Occupational therapists approach mental health with a unique perspective that considers a person's needs within their social environments including family, friends, and community.

Occupational therapy is a core component of an integrated mental health system. Occupational therapists use evidence-based interventions to adapt environments, modify tasks, teach skills, and support clients to participate in meaningful occupations in life.

In addition, the role of the occupational therapist in mental health may include:

1. Working with individuals, families, and communities to identify the occupations and activities that are important for community, family, personal life, and wellbeing.
2. Facilitating psychoeducational groups. In these groups, the occupational therapist provides education about mental health and illness, symptom management and strategies to continue engaging in meaningful and necessary activities while living with a mental illness. Topics covered with the group may include:
 - a. Education about their diagnosis
 - b. Self-care and relaxation
 - c. Emotional regulation
 - d. Social and relationship skills and communication
 - e. Instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs)
3. Engaging clients in experiential learning with occupational engagement and participation and using occupational experiments to participate in the activities that matter most to people in their lives.
4. Helping to plan, initiate, and track short- and long-term goals that promote participation in activities of daily life including instrumental activities of daily life.
5. Teaching practical ways to cope with the effects of mental illness (e.g., relaxation and stress reduction techniques).



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6. Working with individuals to better understand the impact of mental illness.
7. Helping replace or reduce potentially harmful activities, such as substance use, with meaningful activities.
8. Assessing skills, interests, values, and strengths to help clients maintain, modify, or find appropriate employment or to engage in educational opportunities.
9. Implementing activities that teach valuable skills (e.g., social skills training with a peer support group).
10. Helping structure lives and organize daily activities so that individuals can balance everything they want, need, or are expected to do.
11. Using and applying trauma-informed approaches to build therapeutic relationships and support individuals to engage and participate in meaningful activities.
12. Collaboratively build upon people's existing coping or survival strategies and promote engagement and participation in activities and occupational balance for health, healing, and wellbeing.
13. Collaborate with individuals, both individual and in groups, to use meaningful occupations as modalities for healing (e.g., nature-based activities, hiking, physical activity) and to support connecting with self, loved ones, and community.
14. Using psychotherapy modalities (individually and in group format), such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), acceptance commitment therapy (ACT) and dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT).

For details regarding provincial psychotherapy regulations, consult your [regulatory organization](#).

REFERENCES

1. World Health Organization [WHO]. (2022, June 17). Mental health. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>
2. Marshall, C. A., Murphy, M., Marchiori, K., Aryobi, S., Wener, P., White, C., ... & Moll, S. (2022). Psychotherapy Within Occupational Therapy Literature: A Scoping Review. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy, 89*(4), 376-394.
3. Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists [CAOT]. (2017). *CAOT Position Statement: Occupational therapy and mental health care*. Ottawa, ON: CAOT.

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.