

A Career in Occupational Therapy: A Rewarding Choice in Health Care

What does an occupational therapist do?

Occupational therapists help people of all ages regain, develop, or master everyday skills in order to live independent, productive, and satisfying lives.

Occupational therapists assess clients with physical and mental challenges in order to develop activities of daily living (ADL) that work best for those clients. For a client with a physical disability, the first focus is on performing critical daily routines, such as dressing, grooming, bathing, and eating. Once these skills are mastered, a program is then built around the skills needed to perform tasks such as participating in education, caring for a home and family, or seeking and maintaining employment.

For a client with mental illness, the goals are also based on the ability to function independently. In treating mental or emotional challenges, the occupational therapy program focuses on areas such as managing time, working productively with others, and enjoying leisure.

Which qualities or personal traits are useful in practicing occupational therapy?

Occupational therapists need patience, understanding and compassion when dealing with clients facing health problems. Patience is important because many clients may not show rapid progress and practitioners must be prepared for that challenge. Being understanding and having compassion is also vital when working with clients who have disabilities that require them to undergo extensive and sometimes painful treatment in order to improve their function. And finally, occupational therapy is a field that calls for a certain amount of passion for the beneficial and life-changing work that therapists perform.

Where do occupational therapy practitioners work?

Occupational therapists work in a variety of job settings. Public schools, hospitals, mental health centers, nursing homes, physician practices, and home health agencies are all job settings that may employ occupational therapy practitioners. With career advancement, occupational therapists may move into management, specialization, teaching, research, or private practice positions.

What are the educational requirements for a career in occupational therapy?

Educational requirements for an occupational therapy career may take place at either the professional or the technical level. The professional level education prepares one to become an occupational therapist, while the technical level education prepares one to become an occupational therapy assistant.

Preparing for a career as an occupational therapist requires a student to complete either a bachelor's degree or postbaccalaureate degree (i.e. professional master's degree or entry level doctoral degree). **Beginning January 1, 2007, all new occupational therapy candidates will need a postbaccalaureate degree.** Preparing for a career as an occupational therapy assistant requires completion of a 2-year associate degree. In addition to these degrees, all candidates will be required to complete a period of supervised fieldwork and pass a national certification exam.

Other Requirements: If you are interested in applying to an occupational therapy program, you must obtain specific requirements, prerequisites, and program content from the schools to which you are applying. Both occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant candidates will be required to fulfill a number of prerequisites, which may include biology, psychology, and sociology. Most programs also require volunteer or paid work experience with persons with disabilities.

How can I learn which colleges and universities offer occupational therapy education programs?

Visit the Schools link under Students on the AOTA Web site for a list of more than 300 accredited occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant education programs offered by colleges and universities.

What is the job outlook for occupational therapy?

According to the 2000 AOTA Compensation Survey, full-time occupational therapists earned an average annual salary of approximately \$48,000 and full-time occupational therapy assistants earned approximately \$30,132.

Does occupational therapy offer opportunities for individuals of culturally diverse backgrounds?

Yes, the occupational therapy profession is actively seeking to increase the number of practitioners representing culturally diverse backgrounds. Target populations include African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, and Pacific Islanders. Other underrepresented groups include people with disabilities and men.

Who are some of the people who are helped by occupational therapy?

- Infants with developmental problems
- Older persons facing health challenges
- Persons with disabilities
- Persons with mental illness

As an occupational therapist, what tasks would I be performing during a typical workday?

Depending on your employer or the setting in which you work, your tasks may include:

- Aiding the growth and development of premature babies
- Improving learning environments for physically or mentally challenged school children
- Adapting home environments for people dealing with the effects of stroke, reduced vision, or other conditions
- Analyzing job tasks and equipment to prevent future injuries for an injured worker
- Measuring the effectiveness of treatment activities

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