

Occupational Therapy and the Care of Individuals With Spinal Cord Injury

Spinal cord injury (SCI) is a catastrophic, life-changing event that results in severe sensory, motor, and other neurological impairments. There are approximately 276,000 individuals currently living with SCI in the United States, with an estimated 12,500 new cases annually (National Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center, 2014). Individuals with paraplegia and tetraplegia experience diminished physical capacities and face life-long challenges such as pain, fatigue, depression, and anxiety, all of which influence their ability to lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

Occupational therapy practitioners (occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants) enable people with SCI to return to productive lives. Fundamental to the philosophy and practice of the profession is the concept that every individual has the desire and right to engage in meaningful activities (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2014). Occupational therapy practitioners have the education and skills to facilitate collaborative goal setting and achievement by considering physical, psychosocial, occupational, and contextual factors that impact occupational performance. They have expertise in analyzing activities and adapting tasks to help individuals develop the skills needed to accomplish their goals. As essential members of the health care team, occupational therapy practitioners help individuals with SCI return to their home and community and successfully engage in meaningful occupations (AOTA, 2014).



Occupational Therapy's Role in Facilitating Participation in Meaningful Activities

- Identify, explore, and practice activities that are meaningful and unique to each individual, and modify activities and environments where needed.
- Teach individuals to perform activities of daily living such as feeding and dressing, and provide adaptations and equipment as needed (e.g., grab bars, reachers).
- Optimize upper extremity function and prevent deformities (e.g., fabricate an orthosis to enable the use of a keyboard; fit mobile arm supports to support weak muscles).
- Evaluate and recommend wheelchair seating and positioning systems to optimize function, mobility, and engagement in the community.
- Provide training in the use of low- and high-tech assistive technology (e.g., adapt a smartphone for use by a person with limited hand function; train an individual to use voice recognition software).
- Evaluate physical and environmental barriers in the home and community and recommend modifications (e.g., specialty bathing and toileting equipment).
- Facilitate the identification and development of leisure activities, and explore community resources (e.g., participating in a photography course at a local community center, joining a wheelchair basketball team).
- Facilitate the return to gainful occupations and/or explore potential vocations (e.g., work with individuals and their employers to create a safe and accessible work station).

- Consult with educational systems to adapt the school environment to maximize the individual’s experience (e.g., conduct school site visits, participate in individualized education program meetings, provide in-services to faculty and students).
- Conduct driving evaluations and training, and recommend adaptations to vehicles to ensure driver and passenger safety (e.g., hand controls, lift access).
- Support the individual in developing intimate and/or sexual relations (e.g., select a sling to allow a person with tetraplegia to maintain a sexual position).
- Provide training, adaptations, and resources for parenting with a SCI (e.g., adapt a baby bottle for an individual with limited hand function).
- Empower and teach individuals who require assistance from caregivers to direct care effectively (e.g., practice with a person with high tetraplegia to verbalize care needs in a clear and assertive manner).
- Re-evaluate, problem solve, and help those with SCI identify and incorporate new routines as they age (e.g., recommend a power wheelchair instead of a manual wheelchair to preserve shoulder function).
- Teach pain management and energy conservation strategies (e.g., practice alternative reaching patterns to decrease pain).
- Educate in peer resources and self-advocacy (e.g., lead classes on topics such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, alternative transportation, or assertiveness techniques).
- Promote healthy behaviors and help prevent complications by teaching and practicing self-management skills (e.g., skin inspection with mirrors and lamps for optimal viewing; cooking low fat, low sodium tasty meals).

Occupational therapy practitioners provide services throughout the continuum of care for individuals with SCIs. Occupational therapy begins in the Intensive Care Unit and lasts throughout acute hospitalization. Individuals typically receive therapy services most intensely in a rehabilitation setting. Therapy continues in outpatient settings, enabling individuals to further refine their newly acquired skills; explore new routines; and broaden their participation in school, work, home, and leisure activities. Additionally, occupational therapy practitioners provide services in private or group homes, enabling individuals to increase their independence and decrease barriers toward full engagement in life roles.

Living well with SCI requires a lifelong commitment to maintaining healthy routines and engaging in meaningful activities. Occupational therapy practitioners specialize in enabling individuals to explore and practice desired activities in safe and supportive environments so they can maximize their ability to achieve their goals and live life to its fullest.

References

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O C C U P A T I O N A L T H E R A P Y

Occupational therapy enables people of all ages live life to its fullest by helping them to promote health, make lifestyle or environmental changes, and prevent—or live better with—injury, illness, or disability. By looking at the whole picture—a client’s psychological, physical, emotional, and social make-up—occupational therapy assists people to achieve their goals, function at the highest possible level, maintain or rebuild their independence, and participate in the everyday activities of life.

