

Psychotherapy Guidebook

# OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

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## Table of Contents

[DEFINITION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[TECHNIQUE](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

# Occupational Therapy

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## DEFINITION

Occupational Therapy is a health and rehabilitation profession concerned with helping individuals reach and maintain their maximum level of functioning. Clients learn modified ways of behaving as a result of participating in an activity directed by a qualified occupational therapist.

## HISTORY

The notion of activity as a therapeutic modality goes back in the history of civilization to the ancient Egyptians who “treated” the emotionally ill by assigning chores to them. Throughout the history of psychiatry, reference is made to diverting patients or keeping them busy. Early in this century, mental institutions employed staff specifically to occupy patients’ long days. In 1917, a group of nurses, psychiatrists, and therapists formed the American Society for Occupational Therapy. The two world wars increased the need and scope of Occupational Therapy. The American Occupational Therapy Association now represents over twenty-three thousand occupational therapists who work with emotionally, physically, and developmentally disabled clients of all

ages. The application of activity as a therapeutic modality has developed beyond “busy work” in the past several decades. Activities are used by occupational therapists to assess a client’s functioning and to change behavior and feelings.

## TECHNIQUE

Dysfunctional behavior often causes a client to seek psychiatric treatment. Frequently, for example, emotionally disturbed individuals cannot adequately care for themselves or their family. They may spend excessive amounts of time sleeping, be late for work, or be truant from school. Or, on the other hand, they may overwork, allowing no time for leisure. Such imbalance likely results in overall dysfunctioning which then affects the lives of their family and friends.

Occupational therapists assess the daily routines of clients so that new skills can be learned or adjustments in the personal and physical environment can be made. The assessment always involves the client’s participation in an actual activity. The client’s skills in executing various tasks are analyzed. An activity program is then assigned to allow the client to develop the skills necessary for living adequately and productively within the most practical environment.

The specific techniques employed by Occupational Therapy are

dependent upon a therapist's given theoretical orientation, the client's needs and interests, and the amount of time available for treatment. Although the specific activities used to evaluate and treat clients may vary, some type of activity is always used. Both evaluation and treatment occur in individual or group sessions.

Three examples of how Occupational Therapy techniques are applied are offered in the next section. Each example is based upon a different theoretical orientation to illustrate how and why some activities are used by occupational therapists.

## APPLICATIONS

- 1. Skill acquisition approach.** A program designed to help a client acquire new or different skills is based upon the assumption that by knowing how and being able to do basic life tasks, clients can change their behavior and function in a more satisfying way.

If, for example, a client were poorly groomed, socially remote, and unable to attend to any task with sufficient skill to secure and keep a job, the occupational therapist would use a battery of evaluative activities to identify existing assets. An interview and interest test would then help the therapist to match assets with possible job and leisure activities. The client would be instructed in specific job skills and perhaps assigned simulated work or referred to a

sheltered workshop. When the client learned to perform work tasks, the therapist would then teach grooming skills and help the client to find a job. Instruction would be given, for example, in using classified advertisements, employment agencies, preparing for an interview, and writing a resume.

The therapist using such an approach is not primarily concerned about why the client is, for example, socially remote. The emphasis is placed upon how the client should be functioning, given his position and responsibilities in life. Skill acquisition activity programs are usually graded at levels that maximize the chances for success.

**2. Sensory integrative approach.** A pattern of physical symptoms is observed in a specific group of psychiatric clients. The familiar symptoms are:

- a) an exaggerated 5-shaped spinal curve — head dropped forward with face downward,
- b) a shuffling gait,
- c) weakened flexor muscle tone,
- d) absence of eye contact, and
- e) a generalized clumsiness.

These clients respond favorably to simple activities that provide for nonjudgmental, noncompetitive gross physical movements, such as yoga. For some as-yet-unknown reason,

the stimuli provided by these types of activities help not only the above-mentioned symptoms, but improve self-care and interpersonal behavior. It is hypothesized that this type of treatment may facilitate neurosensory development.

**3. Psychoanalytic approach.** Psychoanalytic principles can be applied to therapeutic activities. A client's art experiences may be used to identify conflicting feelings through his finished product. Art media allow for the capturing of expressions that can be studied and discussed with the client. Projective techniques are valuable for clients whose dysfunctional behavior is caused by disturbed feelings and who are capable of engaging in insight-oriented treatment.

A group art project is sometimes assigned to several clients or to a family to help them to see and understand how they relate to one another. Not only is an opportunity provided to understand interaction, but a sequence of group art projects permits members to act upon their insight by experimenting with new behavior.

All Occupational Therapy programs are concerned with the client's total lifestyle. Each prescribed activity is part of a program that may also include recommendations to modify or change the environment. An occupational therapist may refer clients to instructional and vocational programs or to other community resources.

