

Occupation-centred practice briefing

Introduction

Occupations give our lives meaning, purpose and structure (RCOT 2023). We advocate the use of occupation-centred practice by occupational therapists. This briefing highlights how important occupation is in occupational therapy and gives guidance on how to keep a focus on occupation in your practice.

Engagement in occupation is the central means for therapeutic change and the goal of intervention (Wilcock 2006).

The importance of occupation to health and wellbeing is the core and unique tenet of occupational therapy (Hocking 2014). Active engagement in occupation promotes, facilitates, supports and maintains health and participation (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2020). The focus of the practitioner in any setting, with any service user group is to maximise occupational engagement and performance (World Federation of Occupational Therapists 2012).

Occupation has been valued as the primary therapeutic agent as well as the goal of intervention. Occupation-based interventions are those where occupational therapists use engagement in occupation as the therapeutic agent for change (Fisher 2013).

Definitions

There is an inconsistent use of terminology within the profession (Ford et al 2022) but Fisher (2013) argues that occupational therapists should be clear in the language they are using. Occupational therapists are the experts in occupation. Occupations refer to everything people do during daily life. Fisher (2013) further defines:

- **Occupation-centred** describes an approach where occupation is at the core. It is made up of occupation-focused and occupation-based practice.
- **Occupation-focused** describes practice where information about the person, environment and occupation relates closely with occupational performance.
- **Occupation-based** describes practice where the 'doing' of occupation is the main ingredient in assessment, intervention and measure of outcomes.

An initial **occupation-focused** interview is used to understand the important occupations that make up a person's routine.

Questions might include:

- Tell me about your typical day/week?
- What can you manage and what are you finding challenging to do?

We should keep the discussion centred around occupation, focusing on how illness, disability, events and the environment impact it. For example, we should explore how depression impacts a person's ability to get their children ready for school.

An **occupation-based** assessment involves a person doing an occupation (like making a cup of tea at home). The intervention adapts/changes how the person is doing that occupation to improve their performance (by providing a kettle tipper and memory prompts). The evaluation then measures how well the person can now perform that occupation (can they make a cup of tea when they want to).

An occupation-centred process

For occupational therapists, occupation-centred practice is where assessments, interventions and evaluations are based and focused on occupation (Fisher 2013, Ford 2021).

This means that, in collaboration with the person, group or community, and with an appropriate awareness of risk:

- occupational strengths and needs are identified (along with relevant background information);
- priority occupations (as identified by the person, family and relevant others) are assessed;
- goals are set in collaboration with the person and relevant others;
- reasons for problems of occupational performance are clarified (considering the person, environment and occupational influences on performance);
- intervention enables occupational engagement and performance; and
- outcomes are measured in relation to satisfaction, engagement, occupational performance, participation and wellbeing.

The importance of occupation at the core of occupational therapy

We can reinforce our professional identity by keeping occupation central to all occupational therapy practice. Impairment-focused approaches overlap with other professions, which can cause confusion about roles and responsibilities.

Evidence for an occupation-centred perspective is accumulating and focuses on outcomes such as improvements in; activity participation, performance of activities of daily living, health, sleep, mood and social relationships (Beisber et al 2020, Durocher et al 2021, Laverdure et al 2021, Ng et al 2023). Practicing from an occupation-centred perspective has also shown improvements in job satisfaction (Bolt et al 2022).

Reflecting on occupation-centred practice

What do you do now?	Ask yourself...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you explain your role? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does occupation feature in this?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When doing assessments and interventions, what are you considering? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How closely is occupational performance impacted by each of these elements?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What influences your decisions about assessment and interventions? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How closely does this relate to what occupations the person wants to, needs to, or is expected to do?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are you measuring and recording outcomes? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is a person's occupational performance and/or satisfaction with occupational performance captured?

Putting occupation at the centre of your practice

1. Do what you say you do

- Review your information, workshops, leaflets etc. used by your service. Make sure the core concept is occupation (for example, dressing, going out with friends, shopping, working). Where possible, also ensure that the material refers to occupational therapy rather than OT.
- Reinforce your role when communicating with individuals, groups, communities and other professionals. Highlight that your role involves helping people engage in the occupations they want, need, or are expected to do.

2. Focus on occupational outcomes

- In all assessments and interventions, keep occupation as close as possible to what you are doing.
- Ensure your documentation reflects your focus on occupational outcomes.
- Measure achievement through recording changes in occupational performance.

3. Promote occupation-centred practice

- Develop communities of practice where occupational therapists can learn, debate and support each other in promoting occupation-centred practice.
- Influence decision makers by doing and sharing research and good practice case studies with RCOT, service managers, researchers and politicians.
- Educate occupational therapy students through university curriculum and fieldwork opportunities to focus on occupation as the core of occupational therapy.

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