

“Good Morning, Mrs. Jones. My name is Elizabeth and I am here for your occupational therapy session this morning.”

It was 8:30 a.m. and I had just walked into the hospital room of a woman recovering from a hip replacement. She was sitting up in bed eating her breakfast and looked at me skeptically.

“Oh, honey, I don't need your help,” she replied. “I retired a long time ago.”

This was certainly not the first time I had a conversation that started like this. Many people have never heard of an occupational therapist.

Mrs. Jones's comment is completely understandable. The title “occupational therapy” is enough to confuse most people. Naturally we all think of “work” when we use the word “occupation,” but occupation also refers to “an activity in which a person is engaged,” per dictionary.com. An occupational therapist, therefore, is someone who helps you to improve and restore your daily activities. They are health care professionals requiring a master's degree and a license by the state to practice.

Occupational therapy has been a recognized profession in the United States since 1917 when five founders of the profession gathered together in Clifton Springs, New York to create what is now known as the American Occupational Therapy Association. The profession's roots are based on the “moral treatment” movement in mental health in which a humanitarian approach and “habit training” became preferred practice in mental health hospitals during the 19th century. Occupational therapy became a recognized profession during WWI and WWII when it was used to rehabilitate and reintegrate wounded soldiers into the community and work environments. The profession grew after the 1960s as it became research based and sought closer ties with the American Medical Association. Its practitioners began to specialize in physical disabilities, mental health or pediatrics. Today, occupational therapists may also specialize in vision, driving, ergonomics or hand therapy. No matter what area an occupational therapist specializes, the goal is always helping people to live life to its fullest.

Think of all the activities you do during the day to occupy your time, both fun and mundane. Did you get out of bed by yourself? Did you make your own breakfast and eat it? Did you take your medication correctly? Did you lift your child out of her crib and give her a kiss? Did you pay your



electric bill? Did you spend all day following the stock market on the computer? Did you play games with your grandkids? We do so many things every day without thinking about it. Add a new hip surgery, a stroke, a mental illness, chronic pain or an arm fracture to the mix and the things we take for granted become difficult. This is when your doctor may refer you to an occupational therapist.

Occupational therapists work with people of all ages and in almost any environment you can think of, including hospitals, homes, schools, outpatient centers, prisons, community centers and homeless shelters. They customize their treatments to fit the unique needs of each individual person. They do this by looking at the person needing the treatment, their environment, and the activities that the individual needs to accomplish. Some examples of occupational therapy practice include providing adaptive equipment recommendations and a home exercise program for a person with arthritis who wants to continue gardening and cooking, providing strategies to a person with schizophrenia for managing their symptoms and an apartment, helping a student with attention deficit disorder find ways to tolerate sitting in a busy class room and concentrate during a test, and teaching the family of a person with a stroke how to help with self care and arm exercises.

Occupational therapy is used to help people of all ages live life to its fullest by helping them promote health, prevent—or live better with—injury, illness, or disability. If you think you or someone you know might need occupational therapy services, consult with your doctor. For more information on occupational therapy, visit the American Occupational Therapy Association website at www.aota.org.



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