
Occupational Therapy (OT) and Its Role in Psychiatric Treatment

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Occupational therapists (OTs) play a pivotal role in inpatient treatment settings. While the title "occupational therapy" might initially seem puzzling, its roots are deeply intertwined with the history of psychiatric treatment. In the era before modern psychiatric care, wards primarily served as containment facilities, offering basic necessities but little in terms of holistic treatment. The revolution arrived in the form of occupational therapy, founded on the belief that mental illnesses arose from imbalances between work and leisure.

Johns Hopkins department of psychiatry was among the early pioneers of this approach, creating a "Habit Training" program where patients engaged in activities like basket weaving and bookbinding to restore balance. Over time, occupational therapy expanded beyond psychiatry, offering patients across medical fields a pathway to reengage in meaningful life activities after illness.

Training

Occupational therapists are required to complete a master's degree in occupational therapy, which includes coursework in medical and psychological sciences, as well as at least 24 weeks of fieldwork. Graduates must pass the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT) exam and obtain state licensure.

Duties

OTs focus on bridging the gap between symptomatic relief and functional improvement in daily life. While psychiatrists and nurses alleviate symptoms through medications and therapy, OTs help patients apply these psychological gains to real-world situations.

Key duties of an OT include:

- Conducting initial assessments and creating personalized treatment plans related to Activities of Daily Living (ADLs), social skills, work skills, and money management skills.
- Conducting more specific assessments as necessary, such as fall risk and cognitive functioning evaluations.
- Facilitating a variety of therapeutic groups, from goal-setting and life skills to art, music, and substance abuse therapy.
- Assessing patients' readiness for discharge and providing insights into the level of care needed post-discharge.

How To Collaborate Effectively With Occupational Therapists

Understanding the work of an OT can greatly enhance your collaborative efforts. Here are some strategies:

1. Attend OT-run groups: This will familiarize you with group activities -- the primary source of psychosocial treatment on units -- and provide insight into your patients' progress.
2. Review OT documentation: OTs record their activities, initial evaluations, and patient participation in the medical chart. Reviewing these can offer valuable information for your treatment plans.
3. Understand ADLs: OTs assess both Basic and Instrumental ADLs. Basic ADLs include walking, feeding, dressing, grooming, toileting, bathing, and transferring. Instrumental ADLs are more complex tasks required for independent living, such as managing finances, transportation, shopping, meal preparation, housecleaning, home maintenance, communication management, and medication management.

