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Occupational Therapy is A Lifeline for Many

Consider a senior citizen who has suffered a disabling stroke, a child dealing with developmental disabilities, a construction worker who seriously injured his back on the job, a teenager who incurred a traumatic brain injury following a motorcycle accident—what do they have in common? All can benefit from occupational therapy, or OT. Occupational therapists are members of the health care team who specialize in helping people overcome their disabilities or medical conditions so that they are able to perform everyday tasks. According to the American Occupational Therapy Association, occupational therapy is “skilled treatment that helps individuals achieve independence in all facets of their lives.” The mission of OT is to improve an individual’s performance of daily activities, to prevent illness and further disability, and to assist the individual in adapting to changes in his or her life.

Every day, people develop health problems that impede their ability to “manage their daily lives.” Conditions that benefit from occupational therapy include work-related injuries, limitations resulting from stroke or heart attack, brain and spinal cord injuries, burns, arthritis, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, cancer, substance abuse, eating disorders, amputations, birth injuries, broken bones, sports injuries, learning and developmental disabilities, problems with vision or cognition, motor vehicle accidents, post surgical conditions, and certain behavioral or mental health conditions like Alzheimers’ disease and schizophrenia.

Occupational therapists can help people regain their independence by designing treatment programs that strengthen their abilities to perform daily tasks, by evaluating their capabilities, and by assessing their home, work, or school environments in order to make recommendations about environmental adaptations. Assessment methods include the use of skilled observation and the administration and interpretation of standardized and non-standardized tests and measurements.

After an assessment is completed, occupational therapists employ rehabilitative techniques to help people perform daily living activities such as feeding themselves, bathing, and getting dressed, as well as carrying out tasks associated with school and work, like writing and using a computer. While the ideal is to help people regain their prior abilities, this is not always possible, and the therapy may focus on retraining for a new work setting, learning to use adaptive equipment, or learning to use transportation alternatives when driving a vehicle is no longer possible. At times the goal is to develop skills that are lacking or slow to develop, such as time management, budgeting, homemaking, and shopping. In an educational setting, the focus of OT may be learning to listen and follow directions, developing social skills, and facilitating fine motor movements. Occupational therapists also provide guidance to family members and other caregivers.

As a discipline, OT is an interdisciplinary field. According to the American Occupational Therapy Foundation, the occupational therapist addresses not only the physical limitations of the person, but also the psychological, social, and environmental factors that impact on the individual’s ability to function. Because of the diversity of health conditions that can be improved with OT, occupational therapy services

address the needs of people of all ages in a variety of settings, including schools, hospitals, long-term care facilities, and rehabilitation centers.

In recognition of the many contributions of occupational therapy, April is designated Occupational Therapy month. It is a field that has grown and evolved considerably since its inception over 100 years ago as a means of helping war veterans return to life at home. Now, not only war veterans are the beneficiaries, but people of all ages who are limited by any number of health problems are able to attain or regain a higher level of independence with the help of OT. To learn more about occupational therapy, contact the American Occupational Therapy Association at 301-652-2682 (www.aota.org), the National Association of Advisors for the Health Professions at 217-355-0063 (www.naahp.org), or the American Occupational Therapy Foundation at 301-652-6611 (www.aotf.org). For information about this or other public health concerns, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org).