

What is occupational therapy?

by Alice McGarvie

I'm proud of being an occupational therapist, but I don't always like explaining it.

Occupational therapy is a profession that a lot of people don't understand, some people think it is all about work and others confuse it with occupational health.

In June 2016 an occupational therapist sent a confession into the Simon Mayo BBC radio 2 show, she stated that she was not going to give her job title or explain her role as it was too confusing. It soon became clear to myself and all occupational therapists across the land that were listening that she was an occupational therapist.

It was a shame that she didn't want to explain our profession, what a great opportunity to fly the flag for occupational therapy on national radio at prime time. But also completely understandable that she would not want to take this task on, and endeavour to succinctly explain on national radio. Occupational therapists were listening and an occupational therapist from the OT Practice was on the programme the following day explaining very well what occupational therapy is. The profession sighed a huge sigh of relief.

You may have heard that we are called OTs too, that's right, but I'm not using the phrase here as I think it confuses matters more, and that as a profession we need to use our full title to promote occupational therapy.

Some people say that the physiotherapist will support you to walk again, but the occupational therapist will support you to put your dancing shoes on and get back on the dance floor. An explanation I heard when I was studying was that the doctor will help you live longer and the occupational therapist will help you live better.

The trouble is with explaining occupational therapy is that the profession is so broad and occupational therapists work in so many settings. We are dual trained in physical health and mental health, we work in paediatrics, orthopaedics, social care, learning disabilities, hospice, hospitals, community, the list is endless, but we could pop up anywhere. All of these roles will be different, so there is not a set answer for what is occupational therapy?

But let me have a stab at explaining it for you here. Occupational therapy is a profession that promotes health and well-being through occupation. Occupational therapy focuses on enabling people to take part in their hobbies and activities despite illness, disability, mental health or emotional difficulties. We are motivated and inspired by the things that we want to do, this is what gets us out of bed in the morning!

We view occupation as being anything that we do, so this includes having a shower and brushing your teeth, paid or voluntary work, leisure and sports activities, even sleeping. While we can take these things for granted, if we have an accident, illness or disability it can become much more difficult and exhausting to do any of our activities or our occupations. If you are fortunate enough to be fit, well and able bodied how would you cope if you broke an arm or a leg?

After illness or injury it can be difficult to participate in your everyday roles, and maintain structure and routine, especially if your mind and body are affected. When you have barriers to achieving your goals an occupational therapist can support you as an individual to accomplish what is important to you, by building on your skills and adapting your activities and environment.



After my breast cancer surgery I was unable to run, so I had to adapt and substitute running with walking. I could not reach or lift things so again I had to adapt by placing things in reach, and getting help with the heavy stuff. I was fatigued so I had to learn to pace myself throughout the day and I had trouble sleeping so I developed a good sleep hygiene routine.

I was being my own occupational therapist, making adaptations to the way I do things and to my environment to enable me to live life my way, and continue doing my occupations.

This is what occupational therapists do, we treat the person, not the diagnosis, and we find out what is important to you, what you're having difficulty with and support you to live life to the full. We are problem solvers, and love to be creative in our approach, we treat you holistically and will work on small goals with you to reach the big ones.

Alice is based in Portsmouth in the UK. She completed an MSc in occupational therapy in 2013. As an occupational therapist Alice is dual trained in physical and mental health. She has experience working with a wide range of clients in various settings including mental health, dementia, learning disabilities and neurological conditions in hospitals and the community. She writes about her experiences which can be found on her website: <https://fromtheharp.co.uk/>

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