

Occupational Therapy and Cancer Survivorship

What is Occupational Therapy?

Life is made up of meaningful everyday activities or occupations such as walking the dog, gardening, preparing a meal, painting, doing the laundry and playing games. Occupations are part of life; they describe who we are and how we feel about ourselves. Occupations help bring meaning to life.

When we can't participate in daily occupations, due to injury, illness, disabilities or social and environmental circumstances, occupational therapists help find solutions to address the meaningful everyday activities of life. Occupational therapy also helps prevent disability or illness and enhances the way we participate in our communities and lives. Occupational therapy helps us engage in the occupation of living.



Why is Cancer Survivorship so Important?

According to the Canadian Cancer Society, cancer remains the number one cause of death in Canada with about 2 in 5 developing it in their lifetime. 63% of Canadians diagnosed with cancer are expected to survive for 5 years or more after their cancer diagnosis. Cancer survivors are in need of services that balance health and wellness with illness care.

Cancer treatments can have an impact on quality of life and participation in meaningful activities. This can include the experience of multiple physical, psychological and cognitive symptoms such as fatigue, pain or discomfort, decreased mobility and physical functioning, negative self-esteem and self-image, altered capacity to concentrate on tasks and fear of risk for cancer recurrence. Clients undergoing cancer treatments may also experience a change in their family roles, employment and recreation and may have difficulty navigating the complex health care system.

How do occupational therapists help?

Occupational therapists address the diverse and unique needs of cancer survivors. Occupational therapists use client-centered and holistic approaches to address the client's physical, social, emotional, and spiritual needs and goals. Treatments are designed to make use of the client's available strengths and resources, and are adapted to the client's changing abilities and goals to get them back to doing the activities they need to, want to, or are expected to do.

What do occupational therapists do?

- Work with clients to promote their participation in activities of daily living by addressing emotional concerns (including stress and anxiety) and physical changes or limitations
- Provide education for energy conservation and relaxation techniques
- Make suggestions to adapt activities, or alter the environment, to support the client's needs
- Collaborate with interprofessional health care teams to provide holistic care
- Engage and empower survivors to manage their health with the appropriate support
- Connect clients to available resources
- Advocate and develop the role of occupational therapy with Oncology Services to provide high quality and cost-effective survivorship care

Where do occupational therapists work?

Occupational therapists work with health care and other professionals in a variety of settings, such as long term care facilities, community support services, family health teams, hospitals, schools, and clients' homes. Occupational therapists work with organizations, such as government, policy makers, care providers and community agencies, to develop programs and resources.

Occupational therapy works!

Gina used to be really active! After being diagnosed with breast cancer and undergoing treatment, she stopped exercising and felt less confident because of her cancer-related fatigue, pain, brain fog and body image changes. She started to feel isolated and weak, even depressed at times. Her oncologist suggested she speak to an occupational therapist in the Cancer Survivorship Program. The occupational therapist helped Gina set up an exercise plan appropriate to her new physical abilities to improve balance, strength, endurance and range of motion. The occupational therapist also helped Gina with techniques to manage her lymphedema and pain. Once Gina was feeling ready, the occupational therapist helped her find a dance-based group exercise class, and connected her with a community based cancer survivors group. Gina is began to feel stronger and more confident, and was finally able to focus on moments of happiness when she could laugh, sing and dance, have fun and feel happy. Because of occupational therapy, Gina felt more like her self again and got back to enjoying life.