

Occupational Therapy and Universal Design

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 cannot participate in daily occupations, due to injury, illness, disability 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.



What is universal design?

Universal design is a way to create products and environments that are more usable by everyone, regardless of age or ability. Universal design can be defined as the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible without the need for adaptation or specialized design. In this definition the needs of persons with wide ranges of cognitive, visual, hearing, mobility and agility functions are taken into account as well as the needs of persons of various heights, widths and ages. Universal design is important to the design of environments such as houses, office buildings, hotels, restaurants, parks, streetscapes, urban planning, swimming pools, trails, historic attractions, museums, exhibits, auditoria, web sites, communication, product design, services and policies.

How do occupational therapists help?

Universal design creates environments, materials and tools that provide accessibility, adaptability, ease of use, and safety. Occupational therapists have the knowledge and skills to be experts in universal design. Universal design contributes to health and well-being by enabling engagement in self-care, productivity and leisure. Occupational therapy in Canada is based on a model of practice that recognizes the interaction between occupation and the social, cultural, physical and institutional environment.

What do occupational therapists do?

- collaborate with stakeholders such as national and regional jurisdictions, professional associations, health and human service organizations and communities to promote implementation and evaluation of universal design principles for built environments, materials and tools
- promote the understanding of the relationship between engagement in healthy and accessible environments, occupational engagement and health and well-being
- continue professional education and practice resources to support occupational therapists understanding and use of universal design principles
- educate consumers and decision makers with evidence-based universal design resources
- collaborate in research to promote universal design for occupational engagement

Where do occupational therapists work?

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

Occupational therapy works!

Claire has always been involved in local government. Recently, she started volunteering on the local Accessibility Committee. The Committee received complaints that some children were unable to use the local playgrounds. The committee hired an occupational therapist to consult and assess the local parks and play structures. The occupational therapist explained how the playgrounds do not work for some children and made recommendations based on the principles of universal design. The Committee brought the report to the attention of the Council who initiated modification of the local playgrounds. The Committee members have recently told Claire that they now understand how important it is for all of the town's children to play, grow and learn together. Because of occupational therapy, all kids can play together.

