

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY JOBS AND CAREERS: OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST JOB DESCRIPTION

Occupational therapists care for persons with disabling mental, physical, developmental, and emotional conditions, helping them to recover or develop and maintain their daily living and work skills. Occupational therapists help patients live productively and independently. They help patients compensate for the loss of functions, as in the case of amputees or recently disabled individuals, as well as improve motor skills and reasoning and perceptual abilities. Some therapists work solely with specific disabilities or with certain age groups: Specialties include alcoholism, drug abuse, eating disorders, and mental health. Occupational therapy requires unequivocal dedication and often rewards its practitioners with a tremendous sense of accomplishment. The profession calls on the best of those who practice it; occupational therapists must be compassionate, caring, patient, and capable of commanding the respect and trust of those within their care. "The satisfaction you get from helping someone reclaim their life is enormous," enthused one student intern. "Sometimes they come in depressed and angry . . . and gradually their spirits are renewed with each day of therapy and hope is in their eyes and their future."

The well-trained professional is familiar with a wide range of activities that will be employed as a matter of course in the patient's recovery. Patients suffering from coordination problems, for example, may be given manual arts projects such as creative handicrafts to improve hand-eye coordination. Practical activities such as gardening and weaving increase strength and dexterity. Although most occupational therapists work an average forty-hour week, it is often emotionally draining and backbreaking work. Practitioners are challenged to develop and implement exercises that will gain the maximum participation and interest of patients. Occupational therapists face significant challenges when dealing with patients with permanent physical handicaps such as muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, or spinal cord injuries. They develop and teach patients how to operate adaptive equipment such as wheel chairs, splints, and other devices that allow those with limitations to exercise a measure of control over their environment. An occupational therapist who works with the physically disabled must have strength, agility and stamina to help patients in and out of beds and wheelchairs and allow patients to physically lean on him while he assists them with various exercises such as walking and lifting weights. Not all therapists need be physically strong and powerful, but all, including industrial therapists who assist patients in finding and holding jobs, are challenged to inspire trust, motivate progress, and demonstrate concern and compassion.

Paying Your Dues

A Bachelor's degree in Occupational Therapy is required for entry into this field. In the over thirty states that require licensing, therapists must obtain a post-bachelor's certificate from an accredited program and successfully complete a national certification examination given by the American Occupational Therapy Certification Board. Internships or volunteer work in the health care field show potential employers the commitment that is a necessary prerequisite to this profession. Applicants should carefully consider their ability to physically and emotionally cope with the demands of the job. By far the most significant qualification applicants to this profession could have is a sincere commitment to the care of others and a heart-warming smile.

Associated Careers

With a rapidly aging population, the need for assorted health care professionals to provide specialized rehabilitative care will be constant. Because therapists are required to be versed in a number of activities that are used in the care of the disabled, this facilitates an easy transition to alternative occupations. Horticulture, music, dance, manual arts, hand industries, and creative handicrafts are exercises for the physically challenged as well as those suffering from stress-related illnesses. Some occupational therapists, with further studies, will find entree to orthotics, chiropractic treatment, speech pathology, audiology, prosthetics, physical therapy and rehabilitation counseling.

Past And Future

The field of occupational therapy will continue to grow in leaps and bounds as large numbers of baby boomers make the transition to middle age and as home care and outpatient services become the norm in the health care industry. As scientific discoveries continue to extend the life expectancy of the average American, patients will need extensive therapy to combat a number of disabling conditions. Therefore occupational therapists will have to constantly update their knowledge of new adaptive equipment and its uses as they also develop new activities.

Quality of Life

Two Years Out

If she is practicing in a state that requires licensing, the occupational therapist should be thinking of and making steps toward becoming a registered professional. The ambitious therapist seeks the guidance and advice of mentors and develops professional contacts. This is an ideal time for the practitioner to decide whether she wants to work exclusively with a specific age group or service the needs of individuals with particular disabilities.

Five Years Out

With five years on-the-job experience, the occupational therapist is now board-certified and has updated his skills through job training programs, college courses, and professional workshops. Thus the occupational therapist is ready for and probably actively seeking advancement. At this juncture an evaluation of existing employment opportunities or the possibility of shifting to an alternate career is foremost in the mind of the practitioner. Private or group practice is a distinct possibility for the five-year veteran.

Ten Years Out

If the occupational therapist is not in a top-level administrative post at a health care facility after ten years of service then she should definitely be moving in the direction of establishing a private practice. With considerable years of experience, professional and personal contacts, and a growing number of adult daycare programs, nursing homes, and health care agencies, private or group practice should be a lucrative and worthwhile endeavor.

Professional Profile

# of people in profession:	27,000
% male:	N/A
% female:	N/A
average hours per week:	45

Professionals Read

Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling

OT

Counselor

American Journal of Occupational Therapy

Books, Films and TV Shows Featuring the Profession

Lethal Weapon

Daydreams

When the Line Breaks

Major Employers

Occupational Therapists are primarily employed by hospitals and social service agencies, and work in conjunction with therapists and counselors. Contact local health and mental health care agencies in your area for employment opportunities.

You'll Have Contact With

Physical Therapists

Psychiatrists

Psychologists

Social Workers

Physically Disabled Patients

Major Associations

American Occupational Therapy Association

4720 Montgomery Lane

P.O. Box 31220

Bethesda, MD 20824-1220

Tel: 301-652-2682

Contact: Public Relations Dept.

American Occupational Therapy Certification Board

800 South Fedrick Avenue

Suite 200

Gaichersburg, MD 20877

Tel: 301-990-7979

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