

# Occupational Therapy and Older Adults

## 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, 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.



## Why is Older Adult Health so important?

Older adults are the fastest growing sector of our population, with nearly 5 million people aged 65 and older, according to Canadian statistics. A large majority of older adults live in private residences, and report their health as very good or excellent. However, the incidence of chronic illness increases with age, and one in ten people aged 75 and older require assistance with basic activities of daily living.

Older adults play key roles in communities. Such roles may include volunteering, working, sharing knowledge and experiences, and caregiving. These occupations need to be supported by communities and societies to ensure that environments are inclusive, accessible and safe and, thus, enable older adults to engage in their chosen roles.

## How do occupational therapists help?

Occupational therapists work with older adults, including those with disabilities, to age in a place of their choosing by building relationship with the older adults, their families, caregivers, and community stakeholders.

Occupational therapists advocate for and help plan safe, accessible, affordable, and age-friendly living options and community environments. Occupational therapists work with other professionals to assess and help clients develop the skills needed to engage in healthy and meaningful lives.

## What do occupational therapists do?

- Facilitate opportunities for independence, personal choice and social connectedness
- Work with individuals, families and support agencies to identify needs and encourage opportunities to engage in meaningful occupation
- Help to identify, plan, initiate and track short and long term goals that enable participation in daily life
- Adapt and modify homes and working environments to increase independence and minimize the risk of injury and pain
- Develop tools and resources that contribute to active living for all older adults
- Develop residential care schedules that keep people meaningfully occupied
- Link communities with researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of innovative home or residential care support options

## 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!

*Richard works for a company that owns and manages several long term care facilities for older adults. Richard has been looking for ways to enhance the quality of life of his residents while containing costs. His company decided to employ an occupational therapist who developed and helped build individualized programs based on the residents' personal interests and abilities, worked with the interprofessional care staff to ensure that they understand how best to support the residents and initiated appropriate programs that provided opportunities for residents to be meaningfully occupied. As a result of the intervention, residents are happier and healthier; require less attendant care and staff members are more confident and efficient in their approach. Because of occupational therapy, Richard is offering the best possible service.*

