

Occupational Therapy and Suicide Prevention

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 suicide prevention so important?

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) reports that, in Canada, approximately 4000 people die by suicide each year. Some risk factors for suicide include previous suicide attempts, family history of suicidal behavior, serious physical or mental illnesses, substance use problems, major loss or life changes, lack of social support, or family violence. Suicidal thoughts or behaviors can affect people of all ages, cultures, education and income levels. Suicide or suicidal behaviors differ from person to person, but are often predicated by overwhelming feelings of hopelessness and helplessness (CMHA, 2015).

How do occupational therapists help?

Occupational therapy recognizes that everyday occupational engagement can influence, be influenced by, or be interrupted by suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Occupational therapists routinely interact with clients about intimate details of their lives, and so are positioned to detect and respond to a risk of suicide in any practice setting. Occupational therapists believe that occupational performance, organization, choice and satisfaction are determined by the relationship between persons and their environments. This holistic approach to health, wellness and occupation means occupational therapy can support clients who are at risk of suicide by addressing risk factors, connecting clients with support networks in their communities, and developing strategies to enable everyday occupations that are impacted by suicidal thoughts and/or behaviors.

What do occupational therapists do?

- Work with clients and their families to identify the occupations and activities that make life meaningful
- Help to plan, initiate and track short and long term goals that enable participation in those activities
- Identify when a person is at risk for suicide and address those risk factors
- Connect clients with a network of community supports
- Alert emergency services if the client is acutely suicidal
- Develop cognitive strategies to minimize or ameliorate suicidal ideation
- Help structure lives and organize daily activities so that clients can balance everything they want, need or are expected to do

Where do occupational therapists work?

Occupational therapists work with health care and other professionals in a variety of places such as communities, schools, workplaces, hospitals, private practices, residential homes and prisons.

Occupational therapy works!

Maria was 18 years old and moving to a new city for university, isolated from friends and family, using substances to cope with a mixed bag of emotions including low self-esteem and low mood. The stress got so bad that she began thinking about suicide. She met with an occupational therapist who helped her realize that she didn't want to die, she just didn't want to live like that. To prevent more suicidal thoughts or behaviors, her occupational therapist checked in regarding these thoughts on a regular basis and connected her with support services for substance use. Maria felt heard and validated by her occupational therapist, something she valued during her emotional recovery. Maria trusted her occupational therapist and felt safe and ready to consider different options for how she could be successful in university and learn strategies to manage stress. Because of occupational therapy, Maria is living life on her terms and seeing a door open to her future.