

The field of occupational therapy is broad in its scope, but its focus is singular: we help people participate and engage in meaningful occupations. Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants have training in mental health practice and thus can play a pivotal role in the lives of people with mental health disorders or challenges. As a mental health occupational therapist, I work with a particular niche of people, the neurodivergent population. My goal with each of my clients is to empower and enable them to be active participants in their lives and to fully engage in their daily occupations.

Being a mental health occupational therapist means that I provide individualized treatment plans for each client based on their specific goals. Each person is unique, but many neurodivergent adults do face similar challenges. The majority of adults on the autism spectrum also have sensory processing disorder (SPD) (Marco et al., 2011). People with SPD experience their environment differently from neurotypical (NT) people. While NT people are able to modulate their responses to sensory input, for example, the ability to ignore ambient noise in order to focus on a single conversation, people with SPD are unable to filter out unnecessary sensory stimuli from the environment. The result is often at best, discomfort, and at worst, overwhelming shutdown and isolation due to overstimulation from the sensory environment (Lin & Huang, 2017).

This is where occupational therapy practitioners can have a profound impact on a neurodivergent person's well-being. Occupational therapy practitioners specialize in sensory processing and regulation and can provide valuable tools and coping strategies to help people engage in their environment successfully without reverting to a survival mode of living. My patients complete a sensory profile and a strengths-based assessment to create goals, and I

provide weekly short-term goals to ensure that the strategies they utilize in their life are rooted in actual doing. This guarantees sustainability and catalyzes positive change in their life.

We work on goals that are client-centered, meaning they are defined by the patient and thus require frequent re-assessment to make sure the goals align with the patient's values and current context. Neurodiverse people have wonderful strengths; they see the world through a unique lens. They observe details that a neurotypical person misses, they have an ability to hyperfocus on their special interests, and they experience the sensory environment in richer ways than an NT person can. The challenges of the neurodiverse population are often, but not limited to, the following: sensory processing and regulation strategies, reading subtle social cues, executive function skills such as breaking down large tasks into small manageable parts, and self-concept. Occupational therapy practitioners aid these patients by problem-solving through strategies they can use in their daily lives. These strategies include tools to manage sensory health and how to adapt or modify their environment, positive coping strategies for anxiety and depression, emotion regulation strategies, and much more.

Occupational therapy has a unique place in mental health practice; we are able to center the needs of our neurodivergent clients by enabling and empowering them to be active participants in their daily lives. The need to serve this population is present and mental health occupational therapy practitioners can fulfill the role.

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