

The Role of an Occupational Therapist (OT) to Support People Living with Arthritis

by: Bella Cairns

What is an Occupational Therapist (OT)?

An OT is a healthcare professional who helps support individuals to participate in their everyday activities. Though many may think OT's only focus on supporting people at work, OTs can help people do all the things that they want to, need to, and enjoy doing on a daily basis. This may include self-care activities like dressing or bathing, leisure activities like reading or swimming, and productivity goals like schoolwork or volunteerism.

OTs want to promote the health and well-being of the people they work with. In comparison to other healthcare professionals, OTs focus on helping you to lead a meaningful life rather than symptom management. They take a comprehensive approach by considering the environmental, task specific, and unique person factors that might impact your ability to participate in everyday activities. OTs help you to leverage your strengths and overcome barriers to leading a fulfilling and meaningful life, while also taking into account your preferences, wishes, and values.

How can OTs support people living with arthritis?

OTs can support individuals living with arthritis in many ways. Here are some examples of strategies and services an OT may provide:

- 1) *Assistive technologies and devices (or gadgets):* There are various tools that can help you manage with everyday activities such as a right-angle knife for eating or preparing food, pump-action dispensers for bathing, split keyboards for work and education, long-handled grabbers for dressing, and furniture risers for the home.
- 2) *Mobility aids:* This includes canes, walkers, scooters, and wheelchairs. These mobility aids can provide extra support for balance and walking endurance, reduce the risk of falls, and promote independence in everyday activities.
- 3) *Energy conservation:* Energy conservation strategies allow people to save energy so that they can do all the things they need to do, want to do, and really enjoy doing throughout their day. We call these the "4Ps" which are pacing, planning, prioritizing, and posture.
 - a. Pacing - Make sure to slow down and take breaks to save some of your energy. Resting before you become tired can help you stay active longer throughout the day.
 - b. Planning - Think about what time of the day you have the most energy and try to plan your tasks around that. It's also important to plan your tasks for the day or week ahead of time to ensure you aren't rushing.
 - c. Prioritizing - Try to complete the most important tasks first when you have the most energy. That way you can push less important tasks to a time where you are less fatigued.
 - d. Posture – Sitting tasks save about 25% of your energy compared to standing. It is helpful to position yourself close to what you are working on to avoid reaching and using more energy.
- 4) *Pain management:* OTs can provide education about the pain-fatigue-mood relationship, cognitive behavioural therapy, mindfulness, and energy conservation.

- 5) *Splinting*: OTs can work with people whose arthritis impacts their hand function by creating custom fabricated splints or recommending and fitting you for off-the-shelf orthoses (including silver ring splints). These can be used for comfort during flare-ups or to assist with positioning.
- 6) *Exercise prescription*: OTs can provide people with exercises to complete to help them accomplish their unique goals and maintain or regain function in their everyday activities. OTs will keep in mind your symptoms and whether you are in a flare-up when recommending exercises. Exercise can help to improve range of motion, strength, endurance, and balance.
- 7) *Sleep hygiene*: OTs provide strategies to promote better sleep and reduce feelings of fatigue, which in turn gives you more energy to do your everyday activities.
- 8) *Home modifications*: An OT can assess the safety of your home and make recommendations to support your ability to complete activities that you need to, want to, and enjoy doing.

How to Find an Occupational Therapist

OTs work in hospitals, schools, retirement homes, private clinics, mental health institutions, and home and community care organizations.

Canada Wide (CAOT):

<https://caot.ca/site/findot>

Ontario:

https://occupationaltherapist.coto.org/coto/COTOWEB/DirectoryRD/COTOWEB/OT_Directory_RD/Directory.aspx

[https://arthritis.ca/support-education/support-in-your-community/arthritis-rehabilitation-and-education-program-\(ar](https://arthritis.ca/support-education/support-in-your-community/arthritis-rehabilitation-and-education-program-(ar)

BC (can't find link on website):

<https://cotbcv6.alinityapp.com/client/publicdirectory/>

Alberta:

<https://www.saot.ca/find-an-ot/>

Saskatchewan:

<https://ssot.sk.ca/what-is-ot/ot-directory>

Manitoba:

<https://msot.mb.ca/private-practice-directory/#/cid/1866/id/401>

Quebec:

<https://www.oeq.org/m-informer/trouver-un-ergotherapeute.html>

New Brunswick:

<https://nbaot.org/how-to-access-ot-services/>

Nova Scotia:

<https://cotns.ca/welcome-members-of-the-public/membership-directory/>

Prince Edward Island:

<https://www.peiot.org/find-an-ot-in-pe>

Newfoundland and Labrador:

<https://nlaot.ca/find-an-ot/>