

Occupational Therapist: What to Expect



1. What qualifications does one need to have to be designated as an occupational therapist (OT) in Ontario?

Registered OTs in Ontario need to have completed a Master's degree in occupational therapy from an accredited institution, and at least 1,000 hours of supervised fieldwork (on-the-job training) or clinical practicum (observation and experience) They must also pass the national exam to determine one's competency and register with the College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario.



2. What is the difference between an occupational therapist and a physiotherapist?

Although physiotherapists and occupational therapists work closely together, they do have separate roles when it comes to the treatment of a patient.

Physiotherapists help people restore physical function whereas OTs focus on how that function affects the ability to do the things that are important to them (activities of daily living, or ADLs). For instance, a physiotherapist can help someone restore range of motion (ROM) in their arm and an OT can help that same person figure out how to wash/dry their hair and/or access food in high cupboards with their limited ROM.

3. Can occupational therapists practice psychotherapy?

Some occupational therapists practice psychotherapy as well. The regulation for the controlled act of psychotherapy by occupational therapists has been approved as of January 1, 2020. This permits occupational therapists who meet the College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario's (COTO) requirements, to perform the controlled act of psychotherapy.

4. What is the role of an occupational therapist in supporting people with autism?

Occupational therapists enable people of all abilities, including those with autism, to function in their everyday lives. They assess an individual's situation by drawing upon evidence-based approaches and applying their specialized knowledge and skills to recommend a course of preventative or corrective action that will help people lead more productive and satisfying

lives.

OTs look at three main areas of occupation that are essential for human health:

- **Self-care:** these activities are performed for the purpose of maintaining oneself, such as showering, dressing and eating. These are also known as activities of daily living.
- **Productivity:** these activities fill the bulk of one's day, such as employment or being a student.
- **Leisure:** these activities are one's personal preferences and interests, such as soccer, gardening, or playing outside.

When working with autistic people, the most common support given is working with their sensory processing system. An OT can help determine which sensory system(s) someone has difficulty regulating. They can provide strategies and recommendations to help regulate their nervous system, with the goal of being better able to communicate, complete important tasks, and/or socialize.

The OT will also work with the autistic person, and/or their caregiver or teacher, to identify and address areas of difficulty they experience with everyday activities. For example:

- Fine motor skill development
- Printing readiness skills
- Printing
- Computer access
- Self-care skills (i.e., toileting, hygiene, dressing, eating, etc.)
- Transportation
- Transitions

Once the areas of difficulty are determined and assessed, the OT can complete the following:

- Teach new ways to accomplish tasks
- Help with developing new skills
- Suggest environmental adaptations to the home or classroom
- Provide effective strategies for accommodation of task(s)
- Prescribe devices
- Recommend products that can help make everyday tasks easier
- Provide support in acquiring funding for required equipment and devices
- Educate caregiver(s) and teacher(s) as necessary

5. Why might an autistic person want to see an occupational therapist?

If you believe you/your child has challenges in any of the areas described in question 4, it is recommended to contact an OT. Based on your input, the OT can decide if you/your child would benefit from an OT assessment. Once the assessment is complete, they will determine which treatment options would be best.

6. Many autistic people experience sensory challenges; how can an OT mitigate this during an appointment?

Knowing which specific sensory challenges exist in advance is helpful. For example, if noise is a concern, any music playing in the office would be turned down or off during the visit. Lighting can also be dimmed. If perfumes or other scents are a concern, they would be eliminated as much as possible during the visit. If the patient has a comfort object/toy, they are sometimes encouraged to bring it with them.

Based on the specific needs of the patient, an OT will choose appropriate interventions to help them feel “just right” during the session. For example, deep pressure techniques, spinning, swinging, therapeutic music and/or desensitizing techniques for the tactile system to name a few.

OTs will also work with the patient and/or caregivers to develop trust and a clear communication system to ensure the patient remains comfortable and safe.

7. What questions should I ask an OT when I contact them to provide services?

When connecting with an OT, you can keep these questions in mind:

- Are they experienced with working with autistic people?
- Do they have experience with the specific issues you’re concerned with (i.e. picky eating, toileting, sensory processing, etc.)?
- What is the breakdown of the fees (assessments, sessions, reports, mileage, etc.)?
- Will they teach a caregiver how to help their child succeed in their activities of daily living outside of OT sessions?
- How long are the appointments, and can they be adjusted to accommodate individual needs?

8. Will an OT teach parents some of the recommended rehabilitative treatments to practice at home?

There are certain techniques that an OT cannot teach you, as you need specific training to be able to perform these techniques.

However, the OT can explain different strategies that can be implemented at home to help things move along faster. These can be exercises or activities that the client can do or strategies they can implement to change their motor behavior. They can teach specific techniques to help improve ADLs and participate in developmentally appropriate activities with their peers.

However, the OT will never expect you to implement these strategies if you are not comfortable performing them.

9. Can an OT work with other professionals in supporting autistic people, such as behavioural clinicians, speech language pathologists, or physicians?

With the consent of the client and/or caregiver, an OT can consult all the professionals involved in the client's care to determine how to best support them. A team meeting can be held with all the members of a support circle, or the OT can individually contact each professional.

One example: In a school setting, an OT working on sensory processing skills can consult with the behavioural therapist to ensure that the recommendations are not conflicting with any existing behaviour plan. The OT can learn more about the behavioural plan and adjust their treatment accordingly.

10. What is the typical fee for an OT? Is there funding available to families for OT services?

For private OT services, the fee varies based on the OT. Geographical areas may influence the cost. At this time, there are no standardized OT fees. Some OTs may have a lump sum fee for an initial assessment that includes assessment, reporting and mileage. Other OTs may break down all costs separately. The best way to find out is by contacting your local OTs and asking.

It is typical to see fees range from \$80-150 per hour but please be mindful that fees may be outside of this range.

Some children *may* qualify for government-funded services such as school OT services. Some extended health insurance plans offer partial or full coverage for OT services or have provisions for coverage upon request.

Ontario Autism Program (OAP) funding can cover costs of OT services. It can also help fund a variety of equipment that may have been recommended.

About Taunia Clothier, BSc, MSc (OT), OT Reg. (Ont.)

Taunia Clouthier is an Occupational Therapist who brings 10 years of experience working within the School Health Support OT Services, where she assumes a consultative role in supporting children, parents and staff within the school environment. The skills and knowledge that she has gained over the years has inspired her to create FUNctional Therapy in 2018, a company in which she can further share her knowledge and passions through direct services and workshops. She is very passionate about providing education and believes it is one of the keys to successful growth and development in children.

References

The above information was gathered from several sources including, but not limited to, The College of Occupational Therapists (COTO), The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) and Ontario Society of Occupational Therapists (OSOT). For more information about Occupational Therapy, please visit the following websites:

COTO: <https://www.coto.org/>

OSOT: <https://www.osot.on.ca/>

CAOT: <https://www.caot.ca/>

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