

The Role of Occupational Therapy (OT) in Mental Health

The Society of Alberta Occupational Therapists (SAOT), supports the Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health (CAMIMH) in its endeavours to promote mental health literacy, reduce stigma, encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, and address mental health and mental illness as significant social and economic public health issues (CAMIMH, 2007).

Valuing Mental Health: Report of the Alberta Mental Health Review Committee 2015 concluded that: "Alberta's addiction and mental health system must serve Albertans better by identifying problems earlier, by providing the right care when and where needed, and by supporting people as they move through life."

The SAOT believes that occupational therapists (OTs) are highly capable of playing a fundamental role in mental health care throughout Alberta and want consideration given to renewing their role throughout the system.

Through the renewal of OT's role in Alberta's addiction and mental health system it will enable the OTs to apply their holistic lens to addressing mental health challenges through their ability to tackle barriers in the home, work and community environments.

A continuum of transitional utilization of OT from primary care to the community can meet the intent "to provide the right care when and where needed".

- OTs fundamentally believe that people living with mental illness want to recover and participate in normal daily occupations and activities, and in turn can use occupation/activity engagement to promote wellness and increase quality of life.
- OTs recognize that engagement in meaningful occupation/activities can positively influence mental health. They are specifically trained with the skillsets to facilitate engagement across environments and over the life span.
- OT intervention should begin in primary health care. Therefore, a stronger role is required in the primary care system to work alongside of psychiatrists, psychologists and pharmacists as OTs are uniquely trained to assist with transitions from primary care to community care.
- OTs successfully conduct therapeutic groups in inpatient, outpatient and community settings. A study by Cone & Wilson (2012) found that OTs incorporated the Recovery Model into mental health practice through the process of facilitating occupation/activity engagement on the ward and in the community.

- The Recovery Model is currently embedded in Alberta Health Service's Addiction and Mental Health Services. OTs play an integral role in the design and implementation of Cross Level Services and Support (CLSS) programs.

Evidence shows that OT interventions are cost-effective in management of health outcomes in complex and chronic diseases (CAOT, 2012). Health economics influence health system transformation and OTs recognize the need to maximize health service efficiencies in the delivery of OT services.


- In Canada, OTs are regulated health professionals with specialized training in physical, cognitive and affective components of human performance (CIHI, 2011).
- OTs address occupational/activity engagement components to help people overcome limitations or restrictions across areas of self-care, home management, play, work, study, leisure and social participation.
- OT interventions are therefore designed to improve health and well-being, organize time and develop structure to living (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007). Thus, providing practical solutions to a range of problems provides an efficient approach to system transformation (CAOT, 2012). A literature review by CAOT identified strong evidence indicating positive health outcomes from OT intervention providing value from an economic perspective.
- The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation (2011) concluded that overall money alone is not the solution to fix the system but rather strategic realignment including changing professional culture and roles (Denis et al, 2011). Therefore, specifically integrating OT in primary care through community transition and in community care has promise for efficiency in achieving effective living outcomes for people of all ages with mental health care challenges.

OTs are positioned to promote the use of a Recovery Model in practice across environments. The OT focus is in capacity building with the aim of an individual feeling empowered to make choices regarding their own desired goals and outcomes.

- OTs can facilitate the development of personal skills, new knowledge, coping strategies, support networks and resiliency.
- Evidence suggests that service receivers view recovery as an "occupational journey" involving responsibility, active choice, empowerment, hope and search for personal meaning (Kelly et al, 2010).
- Its been demonstrated that occupational engagement amongst mental health service receivers was almost always seen as a positive and empowering experience (Hitch,2009).



By recognizing the importance of community, OTs are well positioned to advocate for the provision of mental health services to expand into the community.

- OTs approach mental health with a unique perspective that considers an individual's needs in context of family and community.
 - This client-centered philosophy is consistent with the cornerstone of Canada's mental health reform, which views consumers and families as critical partners in planning, delivering and evaluating mental health care services (CAOT, 2008).
 - Stigmatization and social exclusion are barriers to recovery, while developing skills through OT interventions designed to enhance learning, social relationships and self-management, can have a positive impact on recovery.
 - Care giving further places demands on emotions, time and resources of families and communities. Many service gaps exist, causing families to assume greater responsibility for care.
 - Thus, it is essential to involve individuals, families and communities in planning, implementing and evaluating mental health and mental health services, specifically in the OT domain of developing effective living skills.
 - OTs can promote public education and awareness by participating in multi-sectoral activities and by developing information and resources highlighting the utility of OT services in mental health care.
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