

Occupational Therapy

When someone's life is altered after a traumatic brain injury, many survivors are left to cope with new cognitive deficits, behavioral problems, medical complications and more. A traumatic brain injury may rob a person of his or her independence, leaving the survivor reliant on others for bathing, dressing, feeding and other daily living necessities.

Occupational therapists (OTs) provide survivors with the training they need to regain independence in these daily living skills, including activities such as self-care, education, employment and social interaction. OTs help people develop "skills for the job of living." They increase self-sufficiency to allow patients the ability to lead productive and satisfying lives. Rainbow OTs are skilled professionals in human growth and development with an emphasis on helping individuals overcome the social, emotional and physiological effects of illness and injury. They help individuals with disabilities get on with the "occupation" of living.

In rehabilitation hospitals and in adult foster care homes, the primary emphasis of occupational therapy is on regaining basic functions.

Once a person becomes independent in fundamental skills and performs them consistently and safely, he or she may be ready to move to a less structured environment.

Individuals who have mastered self-care tasks are able to focus on higher-level skills such as financial transactions, personal organization and money management. Rainbow's Semi-Independent Apartment Program offers these opportunities so clients can practice and master skills of daily living. Following are therapeutic skills that Rainbow occupational therapists commonly address.

Money Management — Clients benefit from learning to manage a checking account, which includes balancing a checkbook, budgeting and bill paying. An OT can set up a mock bill-paying program — mailing simulated bills to a person with a due date for each payment. This works in conjunction with a mock checkbook register, working on accuracy of simulated paycheck deposits recorded, as well as check writing and timeliness of bill paying.

Managing a Home — An OT assesses safety and independence with meal planning and grocery shopping. Some people struggle



with the larger living space of an apartment when they may have been accustomed to maintaining only a bedroom. Other household tasks such as laundry, vacuuming and cleaning are monitored as well.

Getting Back into the Community — People that are new to the area or new to public transportation benefit from training on using the bus schedule, riding the bus, transferring buses and arranging taxis. As part of Rainbow's interdisciplinary team approach to therapy, OTs work closely with recreational therapists to assist clients with identifying, initiating and following through with community leisure activities.

Work / School — People living in Rainbow apartments often attend school, volunteer, and/or work in the community. They may benefit from assistance with enrolling in school, applying for jobs and developing strong study skills.

Medication Management — Clients work closely with OTs, nurses and rehabilitation assistants to learn to manage their medication routines with minimal assistance.

Building Social Skills — Many clients benefit from exploring ways to meet new people. They may need assistance with establishing and maintaining a network of friends, dating, and

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practicing safe and appropriate methods of sexual expression. Semi-independent living also provides an opportunity to work on appropriate interactions with neighbors and other people in the community.

Driving — Some OTs are specially trained to assess driver readiness and provide behind-the-wheel training when necessary. If a person has clearance from a doctor and has a registered, insured vehicle, they may be permitted to drive.

NOTE: Generally, driving is not permitted in a group home setting.

Parenting Skills — An OT can provide guidance and assistance with enrolling children in school and arranging childcare. Clients and therapists work together to find affordable childcare resources, including preschool and day care.

Strategies OTs implement

Because traumatic brain injury is often accompanied by psychosocial dysfunction, Rainbow OTs are trained in using behavioral and mental health techniques in the rehabilitation process. The term psychosocial covers a broad spectrum of mental disorders including substance abuse, mood fluctuations, anxiety and adjustment disorders. Psychosocial disorders, while not unique to people who have brain injuries, tend to be prevalent in the TBI community.

Compensatory Strategies — Deficits such as memory and problem-solving may not always improve, so the occupational therapist's goal is to instruct clients in ways of working around these problems using compensatory strategies. For example, if a person's short-term memory does not improve, it is still possible to be successful in the workplace by using strategies to compensate for the memory problems. Such strategies include using an assistive device such as a planner, alarm, watch or a PDA.

Over Learning — Another strategy to move clients forward in the rehabilitation process is to implement over learning. Repeating the same task is an effective way to learn. Even if a person does not remember being instructed on how to do an activity, if it is performed regularly, his or her performance can improve.

Routine — Maintaining a consistent routine is a good way to work around memory and organization deficits. For example, some can become increasingly frustrated when looking for



Assisting clients with activities of daily living is an important step toward independence. Pictured above: Laura (right), an Occupational Therapist, works with Carole Anne on personal money management skills.

misplaced keys in their apartment. An OT can work with the person to designate a place for keys, such as on a hook next to the front door.

Verbal Cueing — Some people benefit from reminders when performing tasks. They may not need hands-on assistance, only a reminder to get started. For example, OTs can put a program in place where staff visit or call a client to remind that person to do laundry.

Group Therapies — Group sessions can address time management, community re-entry, awareness of deficits, fitness, nutrition and provide education on brain injury. They also provide opportunities for leisure exploration and socialization.

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Through assisting clients with self-care, education, employment, community integration and social interaction, OTs increase clients self-sufficiency and help them to carry on with satisfying and productive lives. Occupational therapists allow brain injury survivors to get on with the “job of living.” Whether in the Semi-Independent Apartment Program, outpatient therapy, town house or group home, OTs provide training for the skills clients need for satisfying, independent lives ❖

About the Author...

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