

# Occupational Therapist

## Snapshot

**Career Cluster(s):** Health Science

**Interests:** Health; biology; psychology; anatomy; record keeping; physical therapy; helping others

**Earnings (Yearly Average):** \$84,950

**Employment & Outlook:** Much Faster Than Average Growth Expected

## OVERVIEW

### Sphere of Work

Occupational therapists provide therapeutic services aimed at helping variously disabled people perform everyday tasks in their life and work. Occupational therapists treat people with temporary and chronic motor function impairments caused by mental, physical, developmental, or emotional issues. An occupational therapist may help patients with skills such as self-care (dressing, eating), household care (cleaning, cooking), using communication devices such as telephones and computers, and such basic activities as writing, problem-solving, memory, and coordination. Occupational therapists develop patient treatment plans that attempt to maintain, develop, or recover a patient's daily functioning, productivity, and quality of life. Animal-assisted therapy may also



A patient gets to know her new therapy dog  
(monkeybusinessimages via iStock)

be a component of patient care, and occupational therapists are becoming increasingly involved in human-animal interaction (HAI), which explores the impact of human-animal relationships on overall health and well-being.

### Work Environment

Occupational therapists work in settings such as rehabilitation facilities, hospitals, nursing homes, occupational therapy clinics, and schools. In medical environments, occupational therapists generally partner with medical and social service professionals, such as doctors and social workers, to increase patients' physical and mental abilities and overall independence. In school settings, occupational therapists partner with educational professionals such as teachers and special education coordinators to address the physical or mental issues of students with special needs. Occupational therapy is a common component of a special needs child's individualized education plan (IEP). Occupational therapists generally work a standard 40-hour week, and scheduled appointments are the norm. However, they may work nights or weekends, as needed, to accommodate patients' schedules.

### Occupation Interest

Individuals attracted to the field of occupational therapy tend to be physically capable people who enjoy hands-on work and close interaction with others, and animals used in animal-assisted therapy. Individuals who excel as occupational therapists exhibit traits such as intellectual curiosity, problem solving, a desire to help, patience, and caring. Occupational therapists must be good at science and able to work as part of a team to meet patient needs.

### Profile

**Interests:** Data, People, Things, Animals

**Working Conditions:** Inside

**Physical Strength:** Medium Work

**Education Needs:** Master's Degree

**Licensure/Certification:** Required

**Opportunities for Experience:** Internship, Military Service, Part Time Work

**Interest Score:** 51

### Duties and Responsibilities

- Evaluating patients' progress, attitudes, and behavior
- Designing special equipment to aid disabled patients
- Instructing and informing patients how to adjust to home, work, and social environments
- Testing and evaluating patients' physical and mental abilities

### A Day in the Life—Duties and Responsibilities

An occupational therapist's daily occupational duties and responsibilities include full days of hands-on patient interaction and treatment as well as administrative duties. Patients seen by occupational therapists include those experiencing physical limita-

tions caused by accident or injury, stroke, or congenital conditions such as cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy; other patients may require services due to developmental delays and learning disabilities.

As a medical or therapeutic professional, an occupational therapist interacts with patients or clients on a daily basis. Daily work responsibilities may include conducting patient assessments; developing patient treatment plans; providing patients with special instruction in life skills; advising patients on the use of adaptive equipment such as wheelchairs or orthopedic aids; providing early intervention services to young children with physical and social delays and limitations; building adaptive equipment for patients with special needs not met by existing options; providing instruction in self-care such as dressing and eating; counseling patients on technical or physical adaptations that will allow the patient to continue to work at his or her chosen occupation; and meeting with patient treatment team or patient families.

An occupational therapist's daily administrative responsibilities include the record keeping involved with patient evaluation and treatment. Occupational therapists must draft treatment plans, record notes following patient treatment sessions, provide written updates to patient treatment teams, and provide insurance companies with patient records and progress notes as required. Independent occupational therapists working outside of a school or medical clinic may also be responsible for patient appointment, scheduling, and billing.

Therapists may spend a lot of time on their feet while working with patients. They also may be required to lift and move patients or heavy equipment. Many work in multiple facilities and have to travel from one job to another.

## ***Skills and Abilities***

### **Adaptability**

- Being creative when determining the treatment plans and adaptive devices that best suit each patient's needs

### **Communication Skills**

- Listening attentively to what patients tell them and explaining what they want their patients to do
- Communicating with medical team, clearly explaining the treatment plan for the patient and any progress made

### **Compassion**

- Sensitivity to patients' needs and concerns, especially when assisting with personal activities

### **Interpersonal Skills**

- Earning the trust and respect of patients and families while teaching and explaining therapies

### **Patience**

- Exhibiting patience in order to provide quality care to the people they serve

## **OCCUPATION SPECIALTIES**

### **Director of Occupational Therapy**

Directors of Occupational Therapy plan, direct, and coordinate occupational therapy programs in hospitals, institutions, and community settings to facilitate the rehabilitation of those who are physically, mentally, or emotionally disabled.

**Industrial Therapist**

Industrial Therapists arrange salaried, productive employment in an actual work environment for disabled patients, to enable them to perform medically prescribed work activities and to prepare them to resume employment outside of the hospital environment.

**WORK ENVIRONMENT****Immediate Physical Environment**

Occupational therapists work in rehabilitation facilities, hospitals, nursing homes, therapy clinics, and schools. Therapeutic office settings used by occupational therapists may be shared with other therapeutic professionals such as physical, recreational, or speech and language therapists. Home healthcare services also accounted for 9 percent of occupational therapy work environments in 2019. An occupational therapist engaged in animal-assisted therapy may handle the animal themselves, or work with a handler. The types of animals involved may include such diverse creatures as horses, llamas, dogs, and ducks. Not every animal can be a therapy animal. Their behavior and temperament need to be consistent and reliable, and they need to enjoy and desire to work with humans.

**Human Environment**

Examples of patients needing occupational therapy to increase their independence and quality of life include people suffering balance and strength issues caused by cerebral palsy, spinal cord injuries, or muscular dystrophy; stroke victims experiencing memory loss or coordination problems; people experiencing mental health problems; and children or adults with developmental disabilities. Occupational therapists usually work as part of a patient treatment team that includes patient families, social workers, teachers, doctors, and other therapists. As a member of a treatment team, occupational therapists participate in frequent team meetings and are responsible for communicating patient progress to fellow team members.

**Technological Environment**

Occupational therapists use a wide variety of technology in their work. Computers and Internet communication tools are a ubiquitous part of occupational therapy work. Occupational therapists often introduce specialized computer programs to patients that need help with their reasoning, problem solving, memory, and sequencing. In addition, occupational therapists generally learn how to

use and teach adaptive devices such as wheelchairs, orthopedic aids, eating aids, and dressing aids.

## EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND ADVANCEMENT

### High School/Secondary

High school students interested in pursuing the profession of occupational therapy in the future should pursue coursework in biology, psychology, anatomy, sociology, and mathematics to prepare for college-level studies. Students interested in the occupational therapy field will benefit from seeking internships or part-time work with occupational therapists or people with physical, developmental, or social problems that have an impact on their daily lives. Volunteering is also encouraged, whether at an animal-care organization or at a hospital or nursing home. Some libraries also offer therapeutic reading-dog programs.

### Suggested High School Subjects

- Algebra
- Applied Biology/Chemistry
- Applied Communication
- Arts
- Biology
- Chemistry
- College Preparatory
- Composition
- Crafts
- English
- Health Science Technology
- Physical Education
- Physical Science
- Physiology
- Psychology
- Science
- Sociology

### Related Career Pathways/Majors

#### *Health Science Career Cluster*

- Therapeutic Services Pathway

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### **Postsecondary**

Occupational therapists are typically required to have a master's degree or higher in their field. Interested college students should complete coursework in occupational therapy, if offered by their school, as well as courses in physical therapy, special education, biology, psychology, anatomy, sociology, and mathematics. Students interested in attending graduate school in occupational therapy will benefit from seeking internships or work with occupational therapists, people with impaired functioning, or as occupational therapy assistants or special education aides. A student membership in the American Occupational Therapy Association may provide networking opportunities and connections.

### **Related College Majors**

- Anatomy
- Exercise Science/Physiology/Movement Studies
- Human & Animal Physiology
- Occupational Therapy

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### **Adult Job Seekers**

Adult job seekers in the occupational therapy field should generally have completed master's or doctoral training in occupational therapy from an accredited university (as determined by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE)), as well as earned the necessary professional licensure. Occupational therapists seeking employment will benefit from the networking opportunities, job workshops, and job lists offered by professional occupational therapy associations such as the American Occupational Therapy Association.

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### **Professional Certification and Licensure**

Occupational therapists are required to have a professional occupational therapy license prior to beginning their professional practice. Upon completion of an accredited master's or doctoral program in occupational therapy, candidates take a national occupational therapy licensing exam and, if successful, earn the Occupational Therapist Registered (OTR) title. In addition to national licensing, occupational therapists are required to register with their state health board and engage in continuing education as a condition of their license. State licensing boards generally have additional requirements for occupational therapists choosing to specialize in early education, mental health, or gerontological occupational therapy.

Occupational therapists who wish to incorporate animal-assisted therapy into their practice can become certified through online, distance, and continuing edu-

cation courses offered by a number of colleges and universities, as well as specialized institutions such as the Animal Behavior Institute in Durham, North Carolina.

### **Additional Requirements**

Occupational therapists fundamentally enjoy helping other people achieve greater freedom and independence in their daily lives. They find satisfaction working in health care or educational environments with special needs populations. High levels of integrity and ethics are required of occupational therapists, as they work with confidential and personal patient information. Membership in professional occupational therapy associations is encouraged among junior and senior occupational therapists as a means of building status within a professional community and networking. Successful occupational therapists engage in ongoing professional development.

## **EARNINGS AND ADVANCEMENT**

Earnings of occupational therapists depend on the individual's education and experience and the type and geographic location of the employer. Those in private practice generally earned more than salaried workers. Occupational therapists in public elementary or secondary schools were sometimes classified as teachers and received pay accordingly, which averaged less than their hospital counterparts.

Median annual earnings of occupational therapists were \$84,950 in 2019. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$56,800, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$121,490.

Occupational therapists may receive paid vacations, holidays, and sick days; life and health insurance; and retirement benefits. These are usually paid by the employer.

## **EMPLOYMENT AND OUTLOOK**

There were approximately 143,300 occupational therapists employed nationally in 2019. Major employers included hospitals, offices of health care practitioners, school systems, and nursing care facilities. Employment is expected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations through the year 2029, with em-

## Fast Fact

Sigmund Freud's Chow, named Jofi, unofficially helped his well-known owner work with his patients in the 1930s. Not only could the dog help assess a patient's mood, but he knew exactly when it was time to end the 50-minute sessions.

Source: [www.counseling.org](http://www.counseling.org)



Chow Chow (Luigi Borromeo via Wikimedia Commons)

employment projected to increase 16 percent. Job growth will occur as a result of an aging population that requires increased occupational therapy services and from advances in medicine that allow people to survive serious illness and injury and need rehabilitative therapy. Job opportunities should be good for licensed occupational therapists in all settings, particularly acute hospital, rehabilitation, and orthopedic settings where the elderly receive treatment. Occupational therapists with specialized knowledge in a treatment area also will have better job prospects.

### Related Occupations

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- Nurse Anesthetist/Nurse Midwife/Nurse Practitioner
- Occupational Therapy Assistant/Aide
- Physical Therapist
- Physician Assistant
- Recreational Therapist
- Speech-Language Pathologist

### Related Military Occupations

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- Physical/Occupational Therapist

## MORE INFORMATION

### American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)

6116 Executive Boulevard, Suite 200

North Bethesda, MD 20852-4929

301.652.6611

[members@aota.org](mailto:members@aota.org)

[www.aota.org](http://www.aota.org)



**Animal Assisted Intervention International (AAII)**

administration@aai-int.org

aai-int.org

**Animal Behavior Institute**

4711 Hope Valley Road, Suite 4F-332

Durham, NC 27707

866.755.0448

support@animaledu.com

www.animaledu.com

**International Society for Animal Assisted Therapy (ISAAT)**

info@aat-isaat.org

www.aat-isaat.org

**National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT)**

One Bank Street, Suite 300

Gaithersburg, MD 20878

301.990.7979

info@nbcot.org

www.nbcot.org

**Pet Partners**

345 118th Avenue SE, Suite 200

Bellevue, WA 98005

425.679.5500

petpartners.org

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*Simone Isadora Flynn; updated by Stuart Paterson*



## *Conversation With...*

### **DR. AUBREY H. FINE**

Family and child psychologist  
Professor Emeritus, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona  
Clinical Psychologist, 35+ years

#### **What was your individual career path in terms of education/training, entry-level job, or other significant opportunity?**

As a little boy, my mother didn't like animals, and I never had a pet. When I was a teenager, we got our first pet, a mouse. My mother started to scream, "It's a rat!" I went back to the store planning to let them keep the mouse for a few weeks until I could get my mother to be calm. When I went back, I got a gerbil instead. I named her Sasha. It was a cold Canadian winter when I first brought her to a social skills-based program I ran with children with learning disabilities because, even in my teens, I wanted to work with kids and was very involved with the Quebec Association for Children with Learning Disabilities.

One boy said, "Can I hold her?" I looked at the boy and told him he needed to sit down, cross his legs, and I'd sit near him. He needed to promise not to move so Sasha didn't get scared. Sasha meandered up his tummy and the boy said to me, "You see, I promised you I wouldn't move." It was at that moment that I began to understand the power of the human-animal bond.

That was also the beginning of my journey as a clinician, college professor, writer and speaker and how I serendipitously got involved with animal-assisted interventions (AAI). What I have done in my career is not work to me. It's been a life. Animals have enriched my life. My grandfather once told me: "make a life—not a living—and you'll be happy." How right he was!

I earned my bachelor's in psychology from George Williams University in Montreal, which is now Concordia University. I went on to the University of Southern Alabama for my master's and earned my EdD at the University of Cincinnati.

I originally thought I would become a faculty member at a university-affiliated center for persons with developmental disabilities. While working on my doctorate, I was speaking at a conference in New Mexico and was approached about an opportunity at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. I ended up taking it, where I spent many years as a professor of education and integrative studies. I'm Emeritus status now—I still teach a class and do committee work along with working with children in my private practice—but it has been a won-

derful experience. At my university, many students were the first in their families to go to college. It really is a privilege to join them on their journey of learning. I also teach an adjunct course at Utah State University, in the vet school, about the human-animal bond.

For the past 30 or so years, I also have worked in my clinical practice part time with children with ADHD, learning disabilities, developmental disorders, as well as other challenges with their parents. These experiences in many ways made me a better professor. Since I was trained to do clinical work, I couldn't see myself just being an academic.

Over the years, my work with animals grew. I started out working with small animals. Sasha was the first, then I worked with guinea pigs and rabbits. Next came large birds, which live a long time. I'd get just-born birds so I could hand-feed them and have that interaction, although sometimes rescue birds allowed my patients to help in the healing process, such as helping heal a broken wing. Then I started using dogs. Over the years, I've had many, many different therapy dogs. While I was learning to work alongside animals, I made sure that I learned about the animals from people who understood animal behavior and welfare. It is important to be open to learning from others.

Since 2001, I've been doing research and writing on animal welfare and therapy animals and I've written a number of books on human-animal interactions including *The Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy*, *Our Faithful Companions* and *Afternoons with Puppy*.

Not every animal can be a therapy animal. Their behavior and temperament need to be consistent and reliable, and they need to enjoy and desire to work with humans. We need be aware of the stress signals animals share with us, so we can preserve their well-being. It is important to be the animal's voice and advocate to be sure that their well-being is considered. Once, after a talk in Europe, a man came up to me and told me he had a great therapy dog he took to a nursing home once a week. He was worried that she always began to throw up when she got in the car. My first response was, "Isn't she telling you she doesn't want to go?"

**What are the most important skills and/or qualities for someone in your profession?**

Albert Einstein once said creativity is probably more important than intelligence. I can talk about competency and skill sets—and they are really important—but beyond that you have to be passionate about what you do. You have to believe in what you do. You have to be willing to open your mind to realize the many ways to do things. If I had not, I never would have understood that I could combine animals therapeutically with what I do as a psychologist.

You also need to be respectful and humble.

**What do you wish you had known going into this profession?**

I don't think there's anything. Early on, I became a strong ambassador for animal welfare and strongly encouraged people to get training and learn to look at both ends of the leash.

**Are there many job opportunities in your profession? In what specific areas?**

The early years of animal-assisted interventions, our findings from our research were mainly anecdotal. Now, the state of animal-assisted interventions is really changing. This is a whole area of science with a strong need for research to demonstrate the efficacy of what we are doing. You can be a scientist or a researcher and study human animal interactions and animal assisted

interventions. I think that's really important because science should inform policy. There is a lot of good research that explains the human-animal bond. From a clinician standpoint, you find different professionals incorporating animal-assisted interventions as a form of complementary therapy. I am a psychologist who utilizes numerous forms of complementary therapies in my work and one very strong intervention has been partnering with animals. Even as COVID has changed the manner in which I work with children, kids still enjoy seeing my dogs through our Zoom meetings. Sometimes they just want to say hello or watch me brush the dogs while other times some children ask the dog to do different things. Kids even write letters and draw pictures for the dogs.

Early on, animals were primarily involved in AAI to provide emotional support as a social lubricant. As the years have gone on, people have thought of other ways to incorporate animals and appreciate their importance in our lives. You could be a psychiatrist or an occupational therapist. Many city planners are beginning to realize the importance of greenbelts in their communities so people can enjoy walking with their animals and feel more at ease. They are beginning to realize that the animals can act as social capital and encourage more positive interactions.

**What do you enjoy most about your job? What do you enjoy least about your job?**

Probably what I like best are the times people come back and say, "You changed my life," or "Your dog changed my life." I least like that it's hard to say goodbye when you work alongside animals. We know their lives are shorter. Remember the time you had with each other.

**Can you suggest a valuable "try this" for students considering a career in your profession?**

Volunteer. That changed my life. Go to a humane society. See if you can register with your pet with an organization like Pet Partners ([www.petpartners.org](http://www.petpartners.org)) and volunteer at a nursing home or hospital when that's permitted. Libraries have reading dog programs. Maybe you can work under the wing of someone who can mentor you.