

Treating Parkinson's Occupational Therapy



We all need to do the things that make life meaningful and keep us independent — whether in our work, hobbies, social life, or in simply taking care of ourselves. But maintaining these activities can be especially challenging for people who live with Parkinson's disease (PD). One of the best resources for people in this situation is occupational therapy or OT. Occupational therapy is designed to improve your ability to take on the activities you value and to be the person you want to be. Here is an overview of how OT can help.

What is Occupational Therapy?

In life with Parkinson's, you may have encountered speech or physical therapists. Where does occupational therapy fit in, and how is it different? First, note that the word "occupation" in occupational therapy means "activity." Our job in OT is to identify the strategies that will allow you to continue doing the activities that are important to you. To get an idea of the kinds of activities that occupational therapists can help facilitate, see the graphic at right. Keep in mind that each person with Parkinson's will have different goals, based on his or her symptoms and disease progression — not to mention individual lifestyles, interests and priorities. Whether you have been living with PD for one month, five years or 20 years, and whether your goal is playing tennis or spending time with family, our approach is the same: *find ways of matching your personal strengths to activities, and to an environment that will help you reach your goal.*

Be Your Own Therapist

Which activities are most important to you? Once you answer, try the strategies below to see which ones work for you for each activity.

Use Your Personal Strengths: How can you build on your strengths and minimize your limitations? For example, if you have the strength of helping children to enjoy reading, you could exercise your strength by reading to your grandchildren, by listening to them as they read their

books, or by playing a reading game that stimulates both your imagination and theirs.

One of your strengths may be thinking skills. One thinking skill is imagining doing the activity before doing it. For example, imagining writing big can actually help you write big. Another thinking skill is speaking the steps out loud. When combing hair, try saying "hold and comb," to avoid dropping the comb.

Also, make sure you are exercising. Improving strength, balance and endurance through exercise supports your participation in all sorts of activities. Whether it is dancing or walking to a neighbor's house, find a way to exercise that is fun and fits into your routine.

Lastly, be positive. Think, "I will do..." rather than "I'll try to..." and you may be more successful.



(over please)



Change the Environment: How can you adapt your surroundings so as to support your chosen activity? Will it help, for example, to choose a different physical or social setting for the activity, or to use different objects and tools?

Take a look at your environment. Create a quiet space, with conveniently arranged furniture, to make activities easier. Look into adaptive devices — for example, a tub seat to make showering safer, or a swivel seat cushion in the car to ease the process of getting in and out, or a keyboard adjustment to make it easier to use your computer. Think about the social environment. Choose places where people will understand your needs.

Adapt the Activity: Which activities do you enjoy? And how can you adapt that activity to make sure you can still do it? For example, if you love baking, perhaps substitute intricately-designed cakes with simpler cupcake recipes.

To get started, write down your goals or say them aloud to yourself or better yet, to someone else. Then ask, are there ways in which I can simplify or modify the activity? For example, if you love golfing with friends, but now find the sport challenging, ask yourself if it is just the golf you enjoy or if it is the socializing that goes along with it? Based on your answer to this question, can you perhaps meet your friends for coffee or a drink after they finish their round? Or can you perhaps play nine holes instead of the full 18? And can you make use of the golf cart instead of walking the course?

Lastly, focus on one activity at a time. Parkinson's disease can make it difficult to multi-task. If someone is talking to you while you are eating, tell the person that you'll continue the conversation in a moment — first, finish your meal, and then continue the conversation.

Find an Occupational Therapist

Are you looking for a more personalized plan? If so, request a referral for occupational therapy from your neurologist or movement disorder specialist. Ask them if they can recommend an OT with knowledge of PD. You can also contact your state OT association, or a local rehabilitation facility or home care agency, to find an OT. You can also find more

Case Study: Eating Out

Goal #1: Socializing

Use personal strengths. Communicate about Parkinson's disease to make for a more comfortable situation. Tell people if you want help or if you don't. If PD makes it difficult to smile or show facial expressions, use words.

Change the environment. Eat out during your "on" time. Reserve a table at a restaurant that's quiet. Go out to eat during the week, when it's less crowded. Eat out with friends you know well. Choose a restaurant that has tables and a bathroom you can easily access.

Adapt the activity. Eat at home, then order dessert at the restaurant. Or invite people to your place and order in.

Goal #2: Reducing Soup Spills

Use personal strengths. Sit upright in a supportive chair, with good posture. Rest your arms on the table to support your upper body and leave your hands free! Visualize yourself eating soup without spilling. If swallowing is a challenge, say to yourself, "one, two, three, swallow."

Change the environment. Use a chunky utensil (bring your own). Use a nonskid placement to prevent the bowl from sliding as you eat. You may worry less if you tuck a large napkin into your shirt.

Adapt the activity. Try eating a thick soup rather than a thin one. Drink soup from a mug to reduce spills.

information on the website of the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org.

Conclusion: Stay Engaged

People with Parkinson's can and should keep doing the activities they love to do. If PD symptoms get in the way, an occupational therapist can help. Together, you will set realistic goals, identify challenges and strategize solutions. Identify what is important to you, and then figure out a way to continue doing it. Find the "sweet spot" where your strengths, the activity and the environment work together — and then go for it!

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If you have or believe you have Parkinson's disease, then promptly consult a physician and follow your physician's advice. This publication is not a substitute for a physician's diagnosis of Parkinson's disease or for a physician's prescription of drugs, treatment or operations for Parkinson's disease.