



HealthcareDegree

## Careers in Physical Health: Occupational Therapist

By Kenneth Parker, Rachel Drummond, MEd, Oct 23, 2024

*“One of the most important things to consider with occupational therapy is that our work is holistic. We work with our patients to help them stay as independent as possible—the goal is that when our time together is over, they feel like they can retain the ability to do many things on their own.”*

*-Cecile Hall, OT, Senior Occupational Therapist at VNS Health*

Occupational therapy is a healthcare specialization that has come into high demand and jobs in the field exist at all levels of the healthcare spectrum. Occupational therapists (OTs) are responsible for addressing issues with a patient’s musculoskeletal system, and in many cases, pain and difficulty with mobility may be chronic.

An occupational therapist’s goal is to help patients gain physical strength and pursue the rehabilitation of key musculoskeletal systems that are crucial for a self-sufficient lifestyle at home and work.

OTs assist injured individuals in successfully performing daily tasks, prevent premature loss of physical functions, maintain or even improve mental health, and facilitate workarounds for lifestyle disruptions caused by physical or musculoskeletal injury. Apart from these essential duties, occupational therapists work collaboratively with physicians and other healthcare professionals.

As injuries of the musculoskeletal system will continue to need attention, the role of certified occupational therapists will remain critical to healthcare, combining best health practices with physiology, anatomy, wellness, and a purposeful mindset.

### Meet the Expert: Cecile Hall



Cecile Hall is a senior occupational therapist at home and community-based health nonprofit [VNS Health](#). She has worked as an occupational therapist for twenty years and studied occupational therapy at Dominican University, New York. She currently serves patients across the Bronx community.

VNS Health is one of the country's largest home and community health nonprofits, and team members work together to make a difference in the lives of 52,000 patients and members in their care on any given day.

**HealthcareDegree.com: What's something most people don't know about being an occupational therapist?**

**Hall:** One of the most important things to consider with occupational therapy is that our work is holistic. We work with our patients to help them stay as independent as possible—the goal is that when our time together is over, they feel like they can retain the ability to do many things on their own.

While we do help people with Activities of Daily Living (ADL), people may be less familiar with the work occupational therapists do in helping people maintain cognitive abilities. This often occurs in cases where a patient has impairment from Alzheimer's or dementia, a stroke, or other cognitive deficits. I might have a patient with early onset dementia, and we work together to find ways for them to keep track of appointments or phone messages using tools like notebooks or calendars. It helps many patients to have something they can refer back to, and it's heartening to see how it can help bring a sense of control back to the patient.

As a home care occupational therapist, creativity is a key part of the job. You won't always have access to the tools a facility might, so you have to be ready to think on your feet. For example, that could look like encouraging a patient to do exercises with a soup can if weights aren't handy or adapting exercises to their unique home environment. No two days look alike!

**HealthcareDegree.com: What is one piece of advice you would give to a prospective occupational therapist?**

**Hall:** There are many different environments you can work in as an occupational therapist. I've worked in a skilled nursing facility, and for many years now worked in home care, as I realized it was a better fit for my needs and strengths. Every day is a new day because every visit to a new home is a new place to work—there's a lot of variety!

I would encourage people new to the field to shadow or see an OT in action to determine if it's right for you. In this job, you really must care about people and want to help them. Being an occupational therapist requires a great deal of compassion. And it's rewarding! It makes me so happy when I run into one of my past patients walking down the street while I'm out in the field. They'll come up to show off how much they've progressed since I last saw them. Knowing I'm making a difference in people's lives feels great.

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Occupational therapy is used along with other approaches to physical health to address the highly-specialized needs of a wide variety of patients. There are a number of specializations and career types available to prospective occupational therapy professionals. Formal specialties and certifications are offered by the **American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)** in two types: board certification and specialty certification. Individual types of certifications include:

- Occupational Therapy Instructor (vocational or community college level)
- Residential Occupational Therapist (in businesses where physical injury is a possibility)
- Developmental Occupational Therapist

- Gerontology (BCG)
- Mental Health (BCMh)
- Pediatrics (BCP)
- Physical Rehabilitation (BCPR)
- Driving and Community Mobility (SCDCM or SCDCM-A)
- Environmental Modification (SCEM or SCEM-A)
- Feeding, Eating, and Swallowing (SCFES or SCFES-A)
- Low Vision (SCLV or SCLV-A)
- School Systems (SCSS or SCSS-A)

Some degree programs focus on various types of OT populations or skills to prepare future OT professionals for work in a specialized area.

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