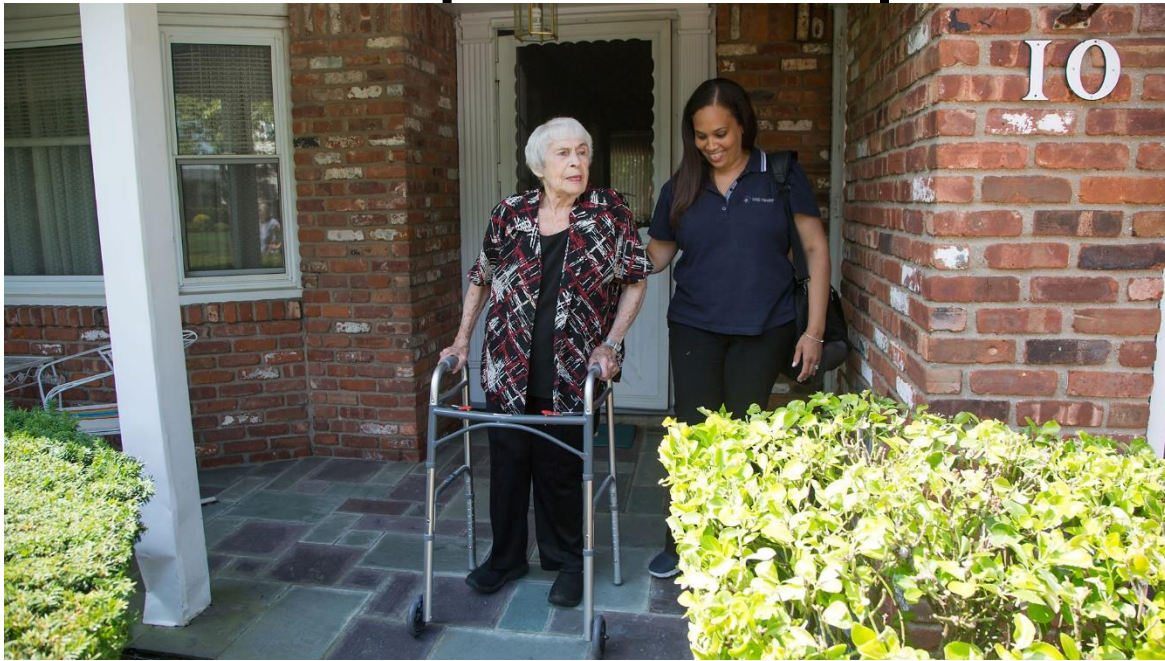




## Thriving Independently: Insights from an Occupational Therapist



*By Qianwen Xu, Occupational Therapist, VNS Health, April 24, 2025*

Explaining my role as an Occupational Therapist (OT) can be challenging because it encompasses so much. Which makes [Occupational Therapy Month](#) a perfect time to celebrate the many different ways that therapists like myself contribute to community health, often behind the scenes.

OTs often come into a patient's life after they've had a major health event such as a stroke, a fall, or a heart attack. We then help patients regain and build the skills they need for daily living, which can vary widely. Our work might involve helping patients learn to navigate stairs, get on or off a bus, prepare a meal or even load the dishwasher. In essence, my job is really all about fostering independence.

As an OT with [VNS Health Home Care](#), I help patients rebuild these skills right in their homes. Because I'm providing therapy in the place they live, I get to see, firsthand, the challenges they face day to day. I work closely with each patient, working on goals that are meaningful to them, which helps them stay motivated and gain confidence from their progress. Seeing patients thrive and take on life independently is one of my favorite aspects of the job.

A significant part of my work involves helping clients recover from falls. As the NYC Department of Health [reports](#), falls are the leading cause of injury-related death and hospitalization for older adults. As we celebrate Occupational Therapy Month, I thought I'd take this opportunity to highlight fall prevention as a key focus for occupational therapists. Here are some tips for reducing fall risk that my colleagues and I often share with our patients to avoid those "slips, trips and falls."

### **Rise and Shine**

All of us start and end our day in the same place—the bed. So that's usually where I encourage patients to focus on first when recovering from a fall. We work together to find ways to safely get in and out of the bed and practice the transfer from lying to sitting. Once you and your clinician have learned to do this safely, building additional skills, like moving from bed to a chair, keeping balance, and other mobility

challenges can become easier over time. In many of these cases, I collaborate closely with our physical therapists to find the safest way for our patients to do these activities and build up strength in the process. We're very much a team—with a physical therapist helping focus on the patient's basic movement and function.

### **Get Creative!**

As we age, our muscle function declines, making it harder to recover from a fall. I work with people to develop home exercise programs that make the most of their environment. As an OT, I love finding creative ways to make recovery simple and take advantage of what my patients already have at home. Don't have weights? Lifting a can of soup from your cabinet works just as well! And you don't need a treadmill to get those steps in—even taking a short walk down your hallway every day can make a big difference.

### **Bright Ideas**

Bathrooms are one of the trickiest rooms to navigate after a fall—water on the floor, tight spaces, and slippery rugs can all lead to a fall happening again. One of the simplest changes I encourage clients to make is adding a bright lightbulb and extra lighting. Being able to see where you're walking can make all the difference in preventing a walk to the shower turning into a trip to the hospital.

### **Don't Give Up**

Many of the people I care for are extremely isolated and/or bed-bound, which can make the journey to recovery seem daunting. I want my patients to know they're not alone on this road, and that I am here to help them every "step" of the way. Each visit, I remind them of the progress they've made from last time, and that change is possible—it just takes time!

There's no reason to believe that falls are inevitable as we age, and while having one may feel like a setback, it can inspire change and growth that helps us stay healthier and independent. Remember, you're not alone—occupational therapists, alongside other rehab specialists, nurses, social workers, and many others can all help you take a step in the right direction!



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