



Career as an Occupational Therapist: Therapy Assistant

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OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY IS ONE OF the hottest careers in healthcare. There are plenty of opportunities, and the need is growing for occupational therapists (and occupational therapy assistants and aides) all over the country. In fact, the number of jobs is predicted to swell by 30 percent over the next 10 years. What is occupational therapy? It is a health and rehabilitation profession providing services for people of all ages who may need help to lead productive, independent, and fulfilling lives. Patients may need specialized assistance as a result of physical, developmental, social, or emotional problems. The term “occupational” does not only relate to jobs, but may include any task or activity, whether it is work-related, recreational, or part of daily life, such as getting dressed, cooking, and driving. Occupational therapy is a patient-centered practice that relies on holistic principles to assess and treat people as unique individuals. Every treatment plan is designed for a particular patient to help the person achieve specific goals. Most occupational therapists work in hospitals, skilled nursing facilities, doctors’ offices, and schools. A growing number work for home health agencies, providing services to patients in their homes. Occupational therapists can be generalists, working with people of all ages and with every kind of disability. Being a generalist has its advantages, like keeping every day interesting and providing a wide variety of experiences. Also consider that this is a very flexible career with many different kinds of practice to choose from for those with particular interests. For example, some OTs may enjoy working with school children with Down syndrome or helping amputees regain skills needed to get back to work. Others may prefer to work with premature babies in a pediatric hospital, help veterans with PTSD, or assist older people in nursing homes deal with Alzheimer’s disease. There are currently nine specialty areas that offer opportunities for certification. There are also new specialties that do not yet offer certification, but may in the near future. They include autism sensory integration, corrective medicine, and occupational science. A master’s degree is required to become a licensed occupational therapist. If an individual is not ready to invest the money and time (six years on average following high school graduation), there are alternatives. It only takes a two-year associate degree to be eligible for certification as an occupational therapy assistant (COTA). COTAs do much the same work as occupational therapists, and they are paid quite well considering the modest educational requirements. A COTA’s average annual salary is about \$60,000, which is about 70 percent of what a licensed occupational therapist can expect. Someone wishing to enter the field can also qualify for a job as an occupational therapy aide with no more than a high school diploma. People who start out as assistants or aides usually go back to school at some point to do the additional work required to become an occupational therapist. Occupational therapy can offer a lifetime career that is challenging and diversified. If you are looking for a career in the healthcare field that offers satisfying and rewarding work, read on.

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