

# Occupational Therapy Interventions For Multiple Sclerosis

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## EVIDENCE CONNECTION

### Occupational Therapy Interventions for Adults With Multiple Sclerosis

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#### MeSH TERMS

- evidence-based practice
- multiple sclerosis
- occupational therapy
- patient care planning

This Evidence Connection describes a case report of a woman with an exacerbation of multiple sclerosis (MS), applying the evidence for intervention from the systematic reviews on MS that were conducted in conjunction with the American Occupational Therapy Association's (AOTA's) Evidence-Based Practice Project. The occupational therapy assessment and treatment processes for an inpatient rehabilitation setting are described. Evidence Connection articles provide a clinical application of systematic reviews developed in conjunction with the AOTA's Evidence-Based Practice Project.

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Management of chronic conditions is key to achieving the "Triple Aim" of health care: "(1) improving the individual experience of care, (2) improving the health of populations, and (3) reducing the per capita costs of care for populations" (Berwick, Nolan, & Whittington, 2008, p. 760). Occupational therapy practitioners have the education and knowledge to provide occupational therapy interventions to people with various diagnoses and chronic clinical conditions. Because of the increasing incidence and cost of chronic conditions, using evidence to support the role of occupational therapy practitioners as leaders of care management makes sense. These interventions enable clients to restore and maintain participation in a variety of occupations and can be incorporated into comprehensive care systems (Arbesman, Lieberman, & Metzler, 2014).

The chronic clinical condition discussed in this Evidence Connection article is adults with multiple sclerosis (MS). Findings from the systematic reviews on this topic were published in the January/February 2014 issue of the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* (AJOT; Yu & Mathiowetz, 2014a, 2014b) and in the American Occupational Therapy Association's (AOTA's) *Occupational Therapy Practice Guidelines for Adults With Neurodegenerative Diseases* (Preissner, 2014). Each article in this series summarizes the evidence from the published reviews on a given topic and presents an application of the evidence to a related clinical case. Evidence Connection articles illustrate how the research evidence from the reviews can be used to inform and guide clinical decision making.

#### Clinical Case

Susan, age 49, was diagnosed with MS 9 yr ago with no other noteworthy medical history. She was recently admitted to an inpatient rehabilitation unit after a 3-day acute hospitalization as a result of an exacerbation of her MS. Ana, an occupational therapist, was assigned to work with Susan. Ana reviewed Susan's electronic medical

**Occupational therapy interventions for multiple sclerosis** play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of life for individuals diagnosed with this chronic neurological condition. Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a disease that affects the central nervous system, leading to a range of physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges. Occupational therapy (OT) focuses on helping individuals engage in meaningful activities despite these challenges. This article explores various occupational therapy interventions tailored for individuals with multiple sclerosis, emphasizing the importance of personalized care and adaptive techniques.

# Understanding Multiple Sclerosis and Its Impact

Multiple sclerosis is characterized by the deterioration or destruction of the myelin sheath, which protects nerve fibers in the brain and spinal cord. The symptoms of MS can vary widely among individuals and may include:

- Fatigue
- Muscle weakness
- Coordination and balance issues
- Cognitive difficulties
- Vision problems
- Sensory disturbances

These symptoms can significantly impact daily functioning, making it essential for individuals with MS to receive comprehensive support through occupational therapy.

## The Role of Occupational Therapy in Managing MS

Occupational therapy is designed to help individuals improve their ability to perform daily tasks, enhance their independence, and adapt to their environment. For those with MS, occupational therapy interventions can focus on:

### 1. Assessment and Goal Setting

The first step in occupational therapy is a thorough assessment of the individual's abilities, challenges, and personal goals. This may involve:

- Evaluating physical abilities, such as strength, coordination, and endurance
- Assessing cognitive function, including memory and problem-solving skills
- Identifying emotional and psychological needs
- Understanding the individual's living environment and support systems

Based on this assessment, occupational therapists collaboratively set realistic and achievable goals

tailored to the individual's needs.

## 2. Enhancing Daily Living Skills

Individuals with MS often struggle with activities of daily living (ADLs). Occupational therapy interventions can help improve performance in:

- **Personal Care:** Techniques to manage grooming, bathing, and dressing independently.
- **Meal Preparation:** Adaptations in the kitchen to facilitate cooking and meal planning.
- **Household Management:** Strategies to simplify cleaning, laundry, and home maintenance tasks.

Therapists may introduce assistive devices, such as grab bars, adaptive utensils, or modified furniture, to enhance independence in these areas.

## 3. Fatigue Management

Fatigue is one of the most common and debilitating symptoms of multiple sclerosis. Occupational therapy can assist individuals in managing this fatigue through:

- **Energy Conservation Techniques:** Strategies that promote the efficient use of energy during daily tasks.
- **Prioritization of Activities:** Teaching clients how to identify and prioritize essential tasks.
- **Scheduled Rest Periods:** Encouraging regular breaks to reduce fatigue levels.

By implementing these techniques, individuals can maintain a higher level of function and well-being.

## 4. Cognitive Rehabilitation

Cognitive challenges in MS can hinder daily functioning. Occupational therapists can provide cognitive rehabilitation through:

- **Memory Aids:** Utilization of planners, reminders, and digital tools to enhance memory.

- **Organization Strategies:** Techniques to declutter and organize living spaces and schedules.
- **Problem-Solving Training:** Activities that strengthen decision-making and critical thinking skills.

These interventions can significantly improve cognitive functioning and promote greater independence.

## 5. Coordination and Motor Skills Training

Impairments in coordination and motor skills are common in individuals with MS. Occupational therapy can address these issues through:

- **Fine Motor Skills Exercises:** Activities designed to improve hand function and dexterity.
- **Balance and Coordination Training:** Exercises that enhance stability and prevent falls.
- **Strengthening Activities:** Customized exercise programs to build muscle strength and endurance.

These interventions aim to improve overall mobility and reduce the risk of injury.

## 6. Environmental Modifications

Creating an accessible and supportive environment is essential for individuals with MS. Occupational therapists can recommend modifications, such as:

- **Home Assessments:** Evaluating the living space for potential hazards and suggesting improvements.
- **Adaptive Equipment:** Recommending tools such as reachers, ergonomic tools, and mobility aids.
- **Smart Home Technology:** Integrating technology that can simplify daily tasks and enhance safety.

These modifications can significantly enhance safety and independence.

# Incorporating Family and Caregivers

Family members and caregivers play a vital role in the support system for individuals with MS. Occupational therapists often involve them in the intervention process by:

- Providing education about MS and its effects
- Teaching caregivers how to assist with activities while promoting independence
- Encouraging open communication about challenges and successes

This collaborative approach helps create a supportive network that fosters the individual's growth and adaptation.

## Conclusion

**Occupational therapy interventions for multiple sclerosis** are instrumental in helping individuals manage their symptoms and maintain their independence. By focusing on personalized assessments, daily living skills, fatigue management, cognitive rehabilitation, coordination training, and environmental modifications, occupational therapists provide valuable support tailored to the unique needs of each individual. Involving family and caregivers in the process further enhances the efficacy of these interventions. With the right support, individuals with MS can lead fulfilling lives and engage in the activities that matter most to them.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What are common occupational therapy interventions for individuals with multiple sclerosis?**

Common interventions include adaptive techniques for daily living activities, energy conservation strategies, cognitive rehabilitation, and the use of assistive technology to enhance independence.

### **How can occupational therapy help manage fatigue in multiple sclerosis patients?**

Occupational therapists can teach energy conservation techniques, prioritize tasks, and create balanced daily schedules to help manage fatigue effectively.

### **What role does occupational therapy play in improving fine**

## **motor skills for multiple sclerosis patients?**

Occupational therapy focuses on strengthening hand and finger movements through specific exercises, adaptive tools, and techniques to enhance fine motor skills for better performance in daily activities.

## **How can occupational therapy support cognitive function in multiple sclerosis?**

Therapists employ cognitive rehabilitation strategies, such as memory aids, organizational tools, and task breakdown methods, to help improve cognitive function in daily tasks.

## **What types of assistive devices might an occupational therapist recommend for someone with multiple sclerosis?**

Assistive devices may include grab bars, modified utensils, walking aids like canes or walkers, and adaptive technology such as voice-activated systems to facilitate independence.

## **How can occupational therapy address sensory issues in multiple sclerosis?**

Occupational therapy can provide sensory integration techniques, graded exposure to stimuli, and desensitization methods to help manage sensory issues experienced by individuals with multiple sclerosis.

## **What is the importance of a personalized occupational therapy plan for multiple sclerosis patients?**

A personalized plan ensures that interventions are tailored to the individual's specific symptoms, functional limitations, and goals, maximizing the effectiveness of therapy and improving quality of life.

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