

HEALTH & WELL-BEING

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

Re-learning the daily tasks of life

About the author

Barbara Ravage moved to Cape Cod from her native New York City in 2000, after the youngest of her children went off to college. She considers heavy doses of ocean air and Cape light the best cure for empty-nest syndrome.

A graduate of Barnard College, she is the author of nine books, including a biography of Rachel Carson for middle-school students and "Burn Unit: Saving Lives After the Flames," which explores the history and science of burn treatment.

She balances her writing life with yoga, karate, and pottery. After years of making do with two summer weeks on the Cape, her favorite part about living here is that she's already home.



MERRILY LUNSFORD/CAPE COD TIMES

Occupational therapist Barbara Hansen, right, works with Connie Meleo at Eagle Pond Rehabilitation and Living Center, helping her relearn how to function independently in the kitchen. OTs help people who are recovering from illnesses and injuries to relearn how to do the daily activities that made their lives worthwhile, from dressing themselves to returning to work.

BY BARBARA RAVAGE

Unless you've needed occupational therapy, you probably don't know what it is. Is it sort of like physical therapy? If so, what's the difference? And what does it have to do with jobs and working?

"The easiest way to understand the word occupation is that it's whatever you do in your life," explains Barbara Hansen, who has practiced and taught occupational therapy for her entire adult life. "If you're a child, your occupation is to crawl and play and learn to socialize. Adults have jobs, but that's not really their occupation." Instead, it's the activities of daily living, or ADLs, from bathing and dressing to preparing meals, getting where you want to go, "doing whatever it is that makes you feel that life is good," she says.

Occupational therapists (OTs) help people who have difficulty engaging in their ADLs determine what it is that gives meaning and purpose to their lives and then work with them to make it possible to do those things.

Although they are separate and distinct professions, occupational and physical therapy may be used in conjunction. If the goal is regaining mobility after an injury or illness, for example, physical therapy would focus on building strength and increasing the distance the individual could walk, while functional issues would be the focus of occupational therapy. As Barbara explains it, "Suppose you dropped something. We'd work on picking it up, which involves changing balance." A myriad of other activities that require strength, balance, and stamina – opening drawers and cabinets, getting clothes from the closet, making the bed – are within the realm

PLEASE SEE OT, PAGE 18

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OT

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of the OT.

Now 61, Barbara knew what she wanted to do even before she knew what it was called. "When I graduated from high school in 1965, occupational therapy was not very well known. In those days, if you wanted to work with people with disabilities, you became a teacher for the blind or for the hard of hearing. I didn't want to limit myself. I wanted to be able to work with children and adults, with people with different disabilities." When she found out she could do just that as an OT, the New Jersey native made a beeline to what was then one of the few degree-granting programs in the country, at Eastern Michigan University, in Ypsilanti.

The profession has grown in the years since and there are many more academic programs available throughout the country. Today, licensed OTs must have a master's degree, serve a minimum of six months of clinical internship, and pass a national exam. Many pursue further specialization, as hand therapists or pediatric OTs, for example. They work in a variety of settings, from schools and hospitals to out-

patient rehabilitation facilities, homes, and workplaces. Their clients may have a temporary or permanent disability due to a broken limb or an amputation, a chronic condition such as arthritis or multiple sclerosis, a progressive illness such as Parkinson disease, or have suffered an event such as a heart attack or stroke. Pediatric OTs work with children who have a wide range of movement and developmental disabilities. OT services, which are covered by Medicare and most private insurers, require a doctor's referral.

OTs have to be both knowledgeable and creative as they develop adaptive strategies and equipment suited to an individual's abilities, needs, and circumstances. They might visit the home or workplace to see how the environment could be modified. If,

for example, the person will be in a wheelchair, it may be a matter of installing a ramp, looking at doorways and passages, figuring out how to make free movement possible. They would practice transferring from the wheelchair to bed, bathing, and other personal care activities. The focus is always on what the individual wants to be able to do.

"If you had had a stroke and were paralyzed on one side of your body, it might be harder for you to get dressed," Barbara explains. "But you might want to do that yourself, and you could if you could learn some techniques. Or if you wanted to return to your employment, you'd need to learn some energy conservation techniques so you could manage the physical demands of your work."

After graduating from Eastern Michigan, Barbara made her way east as her professional and personal life evolved. Her first job was in a rehabilitation facility at Ohio State University Medical Center, in Columbus, where her husband at the time was in graduate school. She next found herself in Syracuse, New York, again working with adults in a rehab hospital. She worked in a special children's center and then in a school-based program while earning a master's degree in

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 OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST

counseling.

She continued helping children, and also brain-injured adults, through Easter Seals, in Hartford, Conn. Eventually she became director of the OT department at St. Joseph's Hospital, in Elmira, N.Y., and finally she joined the faculty of Ithaca College.

In addition to teaching classes, Barbara was the fieldwork coordinator, setting up the internships required of all students. For years Ithaca was known for its outstanding physical and speech therapy programs, but the OT program was just getting started when Barbara arrived.

"I was the second faculty person hired in the OT department so developing that program was a challenge – a fun one and an exciting one." It

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remained so for 10 years.

By 2006, her two sons, Eric and Ryan, were grown and her 90-year-old mother, widowed the previous year, was the one who needed Barbara. When making the eight-hour trip from upstate New York several times a month became too much, she decided to take a leave of absence to be with her mother in Dennis.

Speaking as both a loving daughter and an OT professional, she says, "I felt like Mom's life was not as good as it could be and I was hoping I could bring some additional meaning and purpose to it." Her intention was to evaluate the situation, set up needed services, and spend time with her mother. Though largely housebound, her mother was determined to live as independently as possible, so "the meaning and purpose was in hearing her stories and sharing meals, conversation, and being with her for that period of time," she says.

She returned to Ithaca for the fall semester before retiring so she could move permanently to the Cape. Three weeks after she got here, her mother broke her ankle and ended up at Eagle Pond Rehabilitation and Living Center, a Kindred Healthcare facility in South Dennis. Barbara tried to keep a low profile when visiting, but one day her mother's OT noticed an Ithaca College patch on her vest. It turned out Peoplefirst, which provides the rehabilitation services at Eagle Pond, needed per diem OTs, and Barbara found herself with an offer she did not want to refuse. She's called in when there are more patients than the permanent staff can handle. She loves having direct patient contact – "That's why I went into the profession to begin with," she says – but also the freedom to say no if she has other plans.

Her mother died in September 2008, less than a year after Barbara moved here. But she has made a rich and rewarding life for herself, both in her community and in the wider world. She was on the women's Habitat for Humanity team that built a

Quickhits

WebLinks

Visit the American Occupational Therapy Association Web site to learn more about occupational therapy, and read "Tips for Everyday Living," "Older Driver Safety," and "Adult Caregivers."

www.aota.org

Eagle Pond Rehabilitation and Living Center
1 Love Lane
P.O. Box 208
South Dennis, MA 02660
508-385-6034
www.eaglepond.com

A myriad of other activities that require strength, balance, and stamina – opening drawers and cabinets, getting clothes from the closet, making the bed – are within the realm of the OT.

house in Brewster. She is an active member of her church, volunteering in the thrift shop and serving on the missions committee. Last year, she joined a church mission to Katrina-ravaged Gulfport, Mississippi. She intended to make a similar trip this year to an area of Texas hit by Hurricane Gustav, but an opportunity arose to spend 10 days as part of a medical team at a pediatric clinic in Sierra Leone.

"You never know what's around the corner. I can't say enough about how much I've enjoyed occupational therapy and the doors it has opened for me. I've had interesting, challenging jobs, and traveled to fascinating places." In the past, she's gone to the Caribbean nations of Montserrat and Antigua, through Partners of the Americas, and taught in Sweden, golden opportunities to help make life better for people with disabilities.

There's no question occupational therapy has been fulfilling for Barbara. "It was the right career choice for me for sure. It's creative and it's a lifelong learning career. People have such great life stories and are motivated to be well and to lead meaningful lives. If you can help them do that, that's kind of exciting."

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