

The value of occupational therapy for family caregivers in dementia care

By Lindsey Schimpf, OTS

Editor's note: *Lindsey Schimpf is a third-year Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) student at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities who is completing her capstone experience at Lyngblomsten as part of the Community Services team. Her work focuses on the ways occupational therapy can support family caregivers and individuals living with dementia. At the conclusion of her 14-week capstone experience (mid-October), she will develop caregiver education materials based on what she has learned and the educational and support needs identified by caregivers.*

My name is Lindsey Schimpf, and I am a third-year Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) student completing my capstone experience with Lyngblomsten Community Services over the next few months. A major focus of my capstone project is exploring how an occupational therapy perspective can support family caregivers of individuals living with dementia.

I will be joining Caregiver Connect groups, which are offered by Lyngblomsten Community Services, to listen, learn, and understand the lived experiences of caregivers within the community. During these groups, I will be presenting brief strategies, tips, and resources from an occupational therapy background that may help support these individuals in their caregiving journey. I will also be learning by joining sessions of The Gathering, Lyngblomsten's group respite program for older adults with early- to mid-stage memory loss that provides four hours of respite to family caregivers.

My interest in working with the older adult population started while working as a direct care professional at Arthur's Senior Care, providing memory care in a residential group home setting. Over the past five years in this role, I have gained firsthand experience of the highs and lows that come with caregiving as I have supported older adults living with dementia and other complex conditions. With these experiences, I was drawn to pursue occupational therapy, a profession that combines my interests of creativity, science, and client-centered collaboration to help people achieve their goals as it relates to daily living.

What is occupational therapy?

Occupational therapy is a profession serving people of all ages and abilities by promoting participation in daily living. Occupational therapists (OTs) can be valuable members of the care teams for those with Alzheimer's disease and related neurocognitive disorders to address their

complex and changing needs. OTs are also well-equipped to address the needs of the family, friends, and other caregivers who provide an important role to daily care.

As an individual's disease progresses, everyday activities that give structure and meaning to life may become increasingly difficult. Tasks such as dressing, grooming, toileting, bathing, eating, communicating, preparing meals, managing medications, managing finances, mobilizing, and driving can require more support over time. OTs are skilled at understanding how these changes impact a person's daily life as well as considering the environments and contexts in which they live. As individuals with dementia increasingly rely on their caregivers, this can also place greater demands on caregivers that can negatively impact their health and wellness. Knowing this, OTs also collaborate with caregivers to help them navigate changes, develop coping strategies, access educational resources, manage stress, and reduce the risk of burnout.

Occupational therapy is valuable as it focuses on helping individuals with memory loss continue to engage in meaningful activities and stay at home for as long as possible while also helping caregivers manage changes related to the progression of the disease. By addressing both sets of needs, occupational therapy can provide meaningful outcomes related to safety, participation, quality of life, and confidence in daily living.

How does occupational therapy work?

When working with an occupational therapist, the first step of the process is to conduct an evaluation. This evaluation allows the OT to understand more about the person seeking care, including their background, daily habits and routines, interests, strengths, challenges, and goals. Based on an individual's needs, the OT will then assess different areas, which could include cognition, gross and fine motor function, balance, and mobility. It is important to note that an OT's purpose is not to diagnose, but rather is to identify a person's current level of functioning and how it translates to skills required for daily living.

Based on the evaluation and assessment, OTs will then develop client-based interventions to promote the function, well-being, and safety of the individual. These interventions may include meaningful occupations and activities, caregiver education and training, assistive technology, home modifications, compensatory strategies, and wellness-focused approaches. OT interventions may aim to promote health, maintain current function, restore abilities when possible, adapt tasks or environments, and prevent or minimize further disability. As a person's needs change over time, OTs continue to evaluate client outcomes and adjust services accordingly.

If you are interested in learning how occupational therapy could support you, speak with your physician or healthcare provider about a referral for OT services. For more information on occupational therapy, refer to the following links:

- [Role of OT in Alzheimer's Disease Care - AOTA](#)
- [Assistive Technology for Caregivers - LiveLife Therapy Solutions, Inc](#)
- [Dementia and Assistive Technology - LiveLife Therapy Solutions, Inc](#)
- [OT Resources for Caregiver Support - CICOA Aging & In-Home Solutions](#)
- [OT Practice Guidelines for Adults with AD and Related Neurocognitive Disorders – American Journal of Occupational Therapy scholarly article](#)

You can learn more about caregiver support and resources by reaching out to Lisa Brown, Caregiver Services Program Coordinator, at (651) 632-5320 or caregiving@lynqblomsten.org.

Lyngblomsten Community Services will be hosting a virtual caregiver education event about occupational therapy on Wednesday, October 7, from 4–5:30 PM. Learn how an occupational therapist can help support you as a caregiver providing care for someone living with memory loss from Jessica Allison, OT. To learn more and register, visit our website at <http://www.Lynqblomsten.org/OTSupport>.