Getting Your Life Back

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Cancer and its treatment can make it harder to perform many daily activities—whether at work, at home or during your leisure time—which can affect your quality of life. An occupational therapist (OT) helps you learn to work around these changes to live as full a life as possible.

What is an OT?

We are health professionals who address the individual as a whole, both mentally and physically. An OT identifies the challenges people are experiencing and helps them find ways to participate in what is meaningful to them, as safely and independently as possible. OTs help you overcome obstacles to living the life you want.

What kind of care do you provide for people with cancer?

We start by evaluating and interviewing patients. This helps us understand the difficulties they are experiencing and develop the necessary interventions. An OT collaborates with the individual to set and prioritize treatment goals.

We consider the stage of healing and the changes that can occur as patients progress through their cancer care regimen. We look at previous treatments they have received—for example, whether there was recent surgery—and what additional treatments are expected.

Fatigue is a symptom commonly experienced by people undergoing cancer care. I will discuss techniques that allow individuals to conserve energy and to develop work strategies that allow them to maximize productivity throughout the day. I may start someone on an energy-building routine, with exercises that gradually progress as tolerance allows.

If you are experiencing increased pain, I may teach you specific exercises as well as self-massage techniques. (To read about the exciting new treatments for cancer-related pain on the horizon, click here). I may also suggest adaptive equipment, such as an elongated shoehorn, mats that prevent slipping and kitchen gadgets that make it easier to open jars. An OT may also fabricate a brace to help with impairment of a patient's arm or hand.

An occupational therapist's goal is to make an individual as independent as possible. This may include learning how to practice self-care, finding solutions to mobility issues and making

adjustments to the home environment so that it is safe and comfortable. We also help with issues navigating when you’re out and about.

What is the most inspiring or hopeful part of your work?

I am inspired by the people I meet and watching how they cope and work hard at healing. Witnessing this, along with the excitement they show when a skill is mastered or a goal is achieved, is very rewarding. I am fortunate to be a member of a dedicated team that is committed to those with whom we have the opportunity to work. Understanding the person living with cancer is key to providing the best care and outcomes.

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