



## How Occupational Therapists Make a Difference

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Occupational therapists help people regain life skills and achieve their goals of being independent. Occupational therapists work with a variety of people, including those with mental disabilities such as autism and dementia, individuals with physical impairments, and seniors.

To learn more about occupational therapy and how occupational therapists make a difference in the lives of those they serve, we interviewed two of Saber Healthcare's occupational therapists: Jessica Talarico, Occupational Therapist at Dresher Hill Nursing & Rehabilitation Center, and Kristin Riley, Director of Rehab and Occupational Therapist at Autumn Care of Nash.

"Occupational therapy is a good field for people who want to help others, and there are a lot of settings and ways to get involved in the field. You can become a teacher in a school setting or work in acute inpatient rehabilitation. Because of the diversity of the field, it is easy to change and try different places to work. A lot of fields aren't like this, but this is one of occupational therapy's biggest pros," Talarico mentioned.

"I chose to work in occupational therapy because it's rewarding to help individuals regain the ability to care for themselves. It's an intimate setting where we can help people move their arm properly after a stroke or perform a simple task, such as buttoning their shirt, for the first time. It's always exciting to see them accomplish their goals," Riley said.

## Tell us a little about your background

Talarico originally started her career as a graphic designer in the advertising field. After being in graphic design for a while, she felt that she wanted to do more and help others.

"I became interested in the occupational therapy field through a friend who worked at St. Mary's Hospital. I was dissatisfied with doing design work all day, but with occupational therapy I found I could incorporate creativity into the treatment sessions," Talarico explained. "Now, I work at Dresher Hill Nursing & Rehabilitation Center."

Riley always knew she wanted to work in the medical field. Her first exposure to the occupational therapy field happened when her cousin was in the hospital, and she was amazed by how the occupational therapist made regaining skills a fun activity.

"After high school, I went to East Carolina University and received an undergraduate degree in family community services. Then I pursued my master's degree and started my occupational therapy career in 2007 at Wake Medical Hospital. I later transitioned to working in long-term care in 2010, and currently I'm at Autumn Care of Nash," Riley told us.

## Tell us about occupational therapy

“There’s a certain phrase or quote that I like to use to describe it: ‘medicine as day’s delight, but occupational therapy as light to days,’” Talarico said. “Our field helps people of all ages in different stages of life. We help with sensory or cognitive deficits and look at a person as a whole rather than just view the physical impairments of an individual.”

“Occupational therapy helps residents improve their self-care skills, which is any task that someone may normally do throughout the day. The geriatric population we work with here at Autumn Care of Nash includes activities such as bathing, feeding, and home management tasks. Our goal is to help the residents learn these skills so they can live a more independent life,” Riley stated.

## What is required to work as an occupational therapist in long-term care?

Both Talarico and Riley told us a Master’s degree is required to become an occupational therapist. After completing the Master’s, an aspiring occupational therapist must pass the National Board Exam and become licensed in the state they wish to practice.

For an assistant, they need an Associate’s degree and must pass a test to become licensed.

## What character traits are required to work as an occupational therapist?

“You need to have tough skin to deal with a lot of the things you’re exposed to because you are seeing people go through the hardest times of their lives. It’s important to establish rapport with residents so you can build trust. You also have to be prepared for changes in the field. You should always look out for obstacles and be flexible,” Talarico said. “A few character traits someone should possess include empathy, compassion, patience, and a sense of humor.”

“It is important to be able to problem solve issues effectively, be creative, and be versatile,” Riley mentioned. “Good communication skills are vital. You need to work as a team and collaborate with the other therapies. We communicate with the resident and educate them on what to do. We also speak to the families so they can take better care of their loved one.

## What does a typical day look like?

“Every day is different and it depends on what my caseload looks like, my evaluations, and who I have to screen. I collaborate with the assistant to talk about our residents. There’s no real typical day, and I’m flexible with what can happen and adapt for plans that go awry. We often accommodate for changes, whatever they may be,” Talarico said.

“I am the rehab manager and perform management duties as well as provide patient care. When it comes to providing Occupational Therapy, I evaluate new admissions or referrals and implement a plan of care with measurable goals. The evaluation is made with input from the resident and their family, and assessing the levels of function they have,” Riley explained. “Treatments include therapeutic exercises and activities, neuromuscular education, self-care retraining, and patient and caregiver education.”

## What is one thing you didn't know about occupational therapy until you worked in the field?

"I had to learn the art of productivity. This is essential to our field because we have to focus on our caseloads and how many minutes we have with each resident. I was never made aware of the logistics of the position while attending grad school at Thomas Jefferson University. It wasn't until I started my first job as an occupational therapist that I learned about the importance of productivity," Talarico told us. "The real learning begins when you are working in an environment implementing a plan of care for a variety of patient populations, while simultaneously developing rapport with individuals in order for them to gain trust in you.

"There's a lot of hands-on training once you get into the field. For my first month or two, I was mentored by another occupational therapist. I learned about neuro-developmental techniques and facilitating movement and coordination in upper extremities after a stroke. I also had to learn to adapt to the different personalities found in long-term care," Riley said.

## What advice do you have for someone aspiring to be an occupational therapist?

"If someone has a passion for it, they should shadow an occupational therapist. I would recommend exploring different setting options such as acute/patient rehab, long-term care, schools, mental health settings, and home care to determine if they enjoy the field. I also recommend that an aspiring occupational therapist compare the cost of programs to the average salary to ensure they are getting a return on their debt," Talarico advised.

"I recommend that someone observes different settings of occupational therapy. There are differences between pediatrics, acute hospitals, and other places to work as an occupational therapist. For example, I had always assumed I would enjoy pediatrics and then had field work at a school system. I quickly learned that working with children wasn't for me, and I decided that I enjoy working with adults and geriatrics and focusing on their needs, Riley said.

## Occupational Therapists Make a Difference!

Our occupational therapists work with our residents each day to help them regain their life skills and work through many of their rehabilitation needs. Saber Healthcare thanks our occupational therapy teams for always giving their time to help others reach their goals.

[If you're interested in becoming an occupational therapist with Saber Healthcare, check out our open positions at a community near you.](#)

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