

LET'S TALK DEI

Intraprofessional collaboration: Bridging the gap between OT and OTA

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Intraprofessional collaboration is a fundamental component of our professional practice. Intraprofessional collaboration between occupational therapists (OTs) and occupational therapy assistants (OTAs) is mandated by educational, ethical, and licensure guidelines making the relationship vital to clinical service delivery and client outcomes. Occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) co-exist in a delicate balance that hinges on trust, mutual respect, understanding of roles and responsibilities, two-way communication, empathy, and teamwork (Dennehy, 2022). Underpinning these attributes are the core principles of “equal voice, shared language, transparency, and team problem solving” (Johnson, 2017, p. CE-5).

In the context of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), there are underlying themes of marginalization and exclusion surrounding the role delineation between OT and OTA. Experiences of marginalization often facilitate a gap in the OT and OTA relationship that impedes collaborative success. Research conducted by Penner and colleagues (2020) reports that OTA perceptions of intraprofessional communication fell

into five major themes.

1. Feeling under-informed about volunteer or career-based opportunities
2. Being required to explain or negotiate roles
3. Feeling marginalized when job listings, promotional opportunities, or course offerings have degree requirements as prerequisites
4. Being referred to as "*just*" an assistant or "*my assistant*"
5. Questions of "who's the boss?" denoting unclear chain of command structures and boundaries based on setting or experience level between practitioners.

Although collaboration and supervision guidelines are outlined in AOTA official documents (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020), and further delineated in state practice acts, executing these guidelines can be difficult to successfully navigate if not explicitly explored during the entry-level academic process. Academic foundation in intraprofessional collaboration provides preparation for flourishing OTP partnerships throughout the career span (Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education, 2018). Providing OTPs with collaborative educational experiences, in both the didactic and clinical fieldwork curriculum, can foster an understanding of role delineation and provide grounding for positive relationships in future work environments (Carson, et al., 2018).

OTPs, throughout the career-span, have a professional responsibility to foster environments of respect and appreciation while striving to support, elevate, mentor, and educate one another in mutually beneficial ways. OTPs must create an inclusive environment to enable practitioners to feel safe in discussing themes of marginalization within the profession to promote more productive relationships. Both OTs and OTAs are encouraged to act as advocates and intraprofessional allies to ensure that all OTPs are afforded equity and representation in eligible professional and volunteer opportunities. OTPs can take action to build an inclusive and supportive environment by:

- effectively using AOTA documents and resources for understanding the guidelines outlining roles, responsibilities, and supervision,
- actively seeking and creating OTP intraprofessional experiences in the workplace and community,
- acknowledging systemic issues that create or promote marginalization within the profession,
- advocating for equal representation of OTs and OTAs in legislation, professional organizations, academic faculty, publications, media, marketing, etc., and
- using a DEI lens to enhance professional cultural humility, respect, and belonging when navigating intraprofessional relationships.

Together, OTs and OTAs can bridge professional gaps and ensure that the tenets of occupational

inclusion and justice are employed within our profession and beyond.

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