



How Occupational Therapy Is Transforming Lives for Adults with ADHD

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“Why can’t I just stay on top of things?” Emily wondered as she stared at her cluttered desk. Despite her best efforts, the pile of unfinished projects, misplaced bills, and forgotten deadlines kept growing. She had tried countless planners, productivity apps, and self-help books, but nothing seemed to work. It wasn’t until she began working with an occupational therapist that she started to see real change in her daily life.

Emily’s experience is far from unique. Many adults with ADHD struggle with executive functioning skills, making it difficult to manage time, stay organized, and follow through on tasks. While medication and therapy can be helpful, occupational therapy offers a unique, practical approach that addresses daily challenges in a tangible way. Research conducted by Melo, an online platform connecting ADHD adults with occupational therapists for insurance-covered care, has shown that occupational therapy improves quality of life for adults with ADHD by an impressive 46% on average. A 2021 study found that occupational therapy interventions significantly improved emotional regulation and daily functioning in adults with ADHD, reinforcing its effectiveness as a core treatment approach (Adamou et al., 2021). Additional studies from universities and research institutions further confirm

that integrating OT strategies leads to better organization, time management, and overall well-being.

But what makes occupational therapy so effective? Unlike generic solutions, OT is holistic and deeply personalized and adapts to each individual’s unique challenges and strengths.

A holistic, personalized approach

Occupational therapy isn’t just about giving strategies; it’s about deeply understanding each person’s challenges, strengths, and lifestyle. ADHD affects people in vastly different ways, so what works for one person might not work for another. OTs take a *whole-person approach*, considering how ADHD fits into the bigger picture of a client’s life, from work and relationships to self-care and emotional well-being.

In the first session, an OT gathers an *occupational profile*, which includes the client’s daily routines, values, support systems, and goals. This ensures that every strategy is personalized and practical—not just “use a planner” or “set a timer,” but rather an approach that truly fits the individual’s brain and lifestyle.

For example, one person struggling with time management may need structured breaks to manage energy levels, while another may benefit from external accountability and deadline

adjustments. Someone struggling with organization might need an entirely restructured workspace, while another just needs a simple “drop zone” for misplaced items.

By looking at the full context of a person's life, OTs help individuals not only develop strategies but also adjust and refine them over time to ensure they're sustainable. This level of customization is what makes occupational therapy so effective for adults with ADHD.

Let's explore some of the specific ways occupational therapy helps adults with ADHD build lasting routines, manage time effectively, and navigate work and social life with greater confidence.

► Building routines that stick

Many adults with ADHD struggle with inconsistent routines, leading to forgotten appointments, missed deadlines, and general chaos. Occupational therapists don't just recommend generic solutions. They work with individuals to design personalized routines that align with their strengths, habits, and daily rhythms. For one person, this might mean integrating a visual planner that provides structure without feeling overwhelming. For another, it could involve developing a morning routine that eases them into the day without abrupt transitions. OTs adjust strategies over time, ensuring they are not only practical but also sustainable.

A software engineer shared: “Over the last four weeks, I've gained various strategies and had time to iterate on them to suit my needs. Applying these strategies has helped me stay on top of tasks. Additionally, I've developed strategies to make use of downtime before important meetings.”

► Enhancing time management

“I always feel like I'm running out of time” is a common frustration expressed by adults with ADHD, but the right solution looks different for everyone. Rather than simply suggesting timers or time-blocking apps, OTs work collaboratively to find an approach that fits the individual's thought process and work style. Some may benefit from breaking tasks into micro-steps with built-in buffers, while others might need guidance on identifying when their energy levels are best suited for deep-focus work. Through trial and adjustment, OTs ensure that time management strategies are realistic and adaptable.

A senior professional in design noted: “The strategies have immediate applicability, especially at work. Restructuring my calendar and being mindful of energy loss have improved my ability to handle challenges. This positive impact extends to my home life as well.”

► Improving organization and workspace optimization

Traditional organization strategies don't always work for ADHD brains, so OTs focus on crafting systems that feel intuitive rather than forced. This could mean setting up an adaptive workspace, using color-coded categories for quick visual scanning, adjusting lighting to improve focus, or designing a workflow that naturally follows the individual's habits. Some may need a structured, minimalist setup to reduce distractions, while others may benefit from



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designated “drop zones” for frequently misplaced items. The goal isn't just tidiness—it's function.

► Strengthening emotional regulation

Emotional dysregulation can be a major hurdle, affecting work, relationships, and self-confidence. OTs guide individuals in recognizing emotional triggers and developing personalized coping strategies. For one person, this might mean structured movement breaks to release tension before a stressful meeting. For another, it could involve sensory regulation tools such as weighted blankets, noise-canceling headphones, or tactile fidget tools to prevent emotional overwhelm before it escalates. Instead of one-size-fits-all advice, OTs ensure each strategy is meaningful and actionable.

A patient from the insurance industry reflected: “Prior to my first session, I was in a dark mental health spot. Over the last four sessions, I feel better both mentally and physically, with symptoms of anxiety and depression waning. My mental health has improved over the last four weeks.”

► Social skills and relationship support

Interpersonal challenges vary widely among individuals with ADHD, so OTs provide tailored support based on specific struggles. Some may need help reading social cues and interpreting unspoken workplace norms. Others might struggle with impulse control in conversations, finding it difficult to pause and listen. Through personalized strategies like role-playing, structured feedback, and real-life scenario planning, OTs help individuals practice and refine social interactions in a way that feels natural and achievable.



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► Workplace and career coaching

Thriving at work isn't just about productivity—it's about finding sustainable ways to navigate deadlines, workplace dynamics, and personal strengths. Instead of generic career advice, OTs work with individuals to build customized systems that match their roles and responsibilities. This might include breaking large projects into flexible checkpoints, setting up accountability structures that don't feel restrictive, or identifying accommodations that truly enhance performance. By focusing on practical adjustments, OTs help individuals succeed in their careers on their own terms.

An engineer described her turnaround: "I was already failing in my work with my deadlines and schedules, and my manager had been criticizing my performances before I had my OT sessions. My OT has been really instrumental. I had a check-in with my manager recently, and he could see there's an improvement after only three sessions."

While these success stories highlight the life-changing impact of OT, many adults don't realize that these services are often covered by insurance, making them more accessible than people assume.

► Accessibility through insurance coverage and direct access

A key advantage of occupational therapy is its insurance coverage, making it more accessible to those in need. Since OT is provided by licensed clinicians, many health plans cover it, similarly to

psychotherapy. In many states, direct access allows individuals to seek OT services without a physician's referral, expediting care. While coverage details vary, using in-network providers helps maximize benefits and keep costs manageable. Navigating insurance can be complex, but specialized platforms and resources simplify the process by connecting individuals with covered providers. Checking with your insurer about direct access policies and coverage specifics can also help prevent unexpected costs.

A life-changing approach

Occupational therapy isn't about forcing individuals to conform to a "normal" way of doing things. It's about helping them discover strategies that work for them. By focusing on practical, real-world solutions, OTs empower adults with ADHD to thrive in their daily lives, from staying organized to excelling at work and building meaningful relationships.

If you or someone you know struggles with ADHD, consider exploring occupational therapy. With the right strategies and support, a more structured, fulfilling, and confident life is possible. 🧠



Ziqun Zhou is the chief executive officer and co-founder of Melo, a telehealth platform on a mission to make quality neurodivergent care more accessible. Melo connects adults with ADHD to occupational therapists who accept their insurance and truly understand their needs. She founded Melo after personally struggling with ADHD and executive functioning challenges but finding no affordable, targeted support. Realizing this was a widespread issue, she set out to create a solution that would empower the neurodivergent community with the care they deserve. Learn more at www.hellomelo.co.



Roxie Li is the chief operational officer and co-founder of Melo. The mission is deeply personal to her. Having close friends who have struggled with ADHD, she has witnessed firsthand the challenges they face in managing daily life, securing accommodations, and accessing the right support. Seeing people she cares about suffer without adequate resources, she became passionate about finding a better solution. At Melo, she is dedicated to ensuring that others in the neurodivergent community receive the understanding and high-quality care they deserve.



Zara Harris, MSOT, OTR, is a pediatric occupational therapist with many years of experience working with children, teens, and adults with ADHD and coexisting conditions. She has worked in private practice and in schools around the world. She has presented to international audiences on ADHD, DCD, handwriting, and using technology to compensate for weaknesses. Harris has served on the planning committee for the International Conference on ADHD and as the deputy chair of the editorial advisory board for CHADD's *Attention* magazine.

RESOURCES AND ADDITIONAL READING

Consistent Occupational Therapy Improves ADHD Outcomes: A Sustainable Approach to Behavioral Health. December 20, 2024. <https://www.hellomelo.co/consistent-therapy-improves-adhd-outcomes/>

Adamou M, Asherson P, Arif M, et al. Recommendations for occupational therapy interventions for adults with ADHD: a consensus statement from the UK adult ADHD network. *BMC Psychiatry* 21, 72 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-021-03070-z>