

# When occupational therapy and magic collide

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Magic and occupational therapy in action!

Since its inception, occupational therapy has recognized the benefits of the arts to promote health and wellbeing. The profession stemmed from two movements of the 1900s: the arts and crafts movement and the moral treatment movement. The influence of the arts and crafts movement was to increase leisure and productivity (Levine, 1987), while the moral treatment movement helped facilitate the holistic point of view by actively involving clients in their treatment (Bockoven, 1971).

While the place of arts and crafts in the profession may have wavered through the years, there appears to be a resurgence of interest in the value these traditional tools can have in the occupational therapy tool-kit. The current discussions and debates about “social prescribing” allude to this interest. Social prescribing aims to encourage and assist individuals to take more interest in and control of their health and attempts to address these needs in a holistic way (Brandling and House, 2009). It is important that occupational therapists play a pivotal role not only in these discussions but, ultimately, in the implementation of this emerging awareness of the power of the arts to promote health and wellbeing.

Considering this, an area of the arts that has received little attention in the literature is that of *magic*. Magic has been around for thousands of years and is, perhaps, the oldest of all performing arts (Christopher and Christopher, 2006). References to magicians performing in the Courts of the Pharaohs date back as far as 5000 B.C. Primitive drawings of magicians practicing their trade can be found on cave walls in Northern Spain

and Southern France and magicians performed in the streets and marketplaces of ancient Rome and Greece (Spencer, 2014).

As professionals, we must ask, “Does the art of magic have a role in occupational therapy, and could it be used by practitioners to promote health and wellbeing? Can magic be used to help clients regain lost skills while increasing their motivation and self-esteem?”

Typically, when people consider the word “magic” they are referring to the performing art in which audiences are entertained by staged tricks or illusions of seemingly impossible feats. In contemporary society, magic has become a popular entertainment art form. It is a craft that calls into question our understanding of reality; but, in recent years, it has also evolved into a medium through which healing can occur. The practitioners of this “evolved medium” are magicians and illusionists, not occupational therapists. So, where does this collision of magic with occupational therapy occur?

Since the 1980s, the Model of Human Occupation (Kielhofner and Burke, 1980) has guided the daily pursuits of many occupational therapists. At the heart of

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this conceptual model are three sub-systems that make up the person. Of most importance to this discussion is the sub-system of *volition*. Volition provides a framework by which people make sense of their actions (Taylor, 2017). It involves thoughts and feelings about what one holds important (values), what one perceives they are able to do and effective at doing (personal causation), and what one finds enjoyable (interests). Thoughts and feelings about competence, enjoyment, and value are interwoven. People want to be competent at doing the things they value, and they tend to find enjoyable the things that they do well and to dislike those that overtax them.

Occupational therapists seek to engage their clients in occupations that promote their health and wellbeing. They do this by providing opportunities for them to choose the occupations that are meaningful and purposeful to them. To achieve optimal engagement, the client must be motivated toward the occupation (volition). The goal is to seek occupations that engage clients to the point that they experience “flow” – a term conceived by psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1990) – which describes being fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity. It is in seeking these moments of motivated engagement that occupational therapists should be open to the idea of using magic as an intervention to target areas of psychosocial, cognitive, motor, and sensory processing skills.

People’s fascination with magic is demonstrated by the success of JK Rowling’s *Harry Potter* novels. They recall how, as children, they made up their own imaginary worlds and often gave themselves magical powers. Magic challenges the logical way that individuals think. People love the feeling of wonder that witnessing magic gives them. This fascination is the product of our curiosity, the same attribute that lures us in, captures our imagination, and causes us to query the secret to the magic. People intently dissect the magician’s every move, looking for that moment when trickery becomes magic, to be left wondering and quietly exclaiming “No way!” If we could only know the secret, we could practice, perform, and impress our family and friends.

Curiosity is a powerful motivator and it is that characteristic that makes magic such an effective tool for occupational therapists. It is the learning, mastering, and creative story process that makes performing magic an amazing way to engage people. Clients voluntarily use parts of their body and mind in different ways, encouraging and promoting healing. When an occupational therapist gives clients the ability to do something that cannot be equaled by their peers – like a magic trick – it can become a powerful motivator for them to show resilience while working through the physical, cognitive, and social challenges they might face along the way.

Magic can work on skills like communication and socialization because magic tricks are meant to be performed for an audience. Much like storytelling, magic allows the person performing the trick to create his/her

own narrative. Magic taps into the cognitive processes: the planning and sequence of steps. Magic tricks are effective in increasing a client’s ability to manipulate objects, as well as gross motor skills: magic allows mastery of the environment without requiring skillful hand movements. Magic provides cognitive and perceptual challenges and can be used to increase frustration tolerance, task follow-through, concentration, cooperation, and impulse control. Magic may have a significant impact on neurodevelopmental functions, such as neuro-motor, attention, memory, language, temporal-sequential ordering, spatial ordering, social cognition, and other higher order cognition (Spencer, 2014). Like all treatment techniques, assessing whether this is the best approach for your client is essential, with special considerations being made for those with a mental health diagnosis.

The learning and performing of magic tricks can allow clients to safely explore their skill level while providing a fun way of reaching therapeutic goals, regardless of age, ability, or function. When occupational therapists use magic tricks to engage their clients in therapy, they no longer need to use dated and mundane therapeutic tasks. Instead, learning magic tricks provides a fun and motivating way to develop the necessary skills required to perform the trick for others. Because of the level of engagement, it is often an occupation clients will continue outside of therapy. They will carry it home and continue to improve, taking every opportunity to show their friends and family the skills they have acquired, exhibiting a sense of pride and belonging. At the same time, they reach their therapeutic goals, often without even being aware of it. A carefully selected series of tricks achieves these goals while the client merely thinks they are learning and performing “magic.”

Surely, that is the essence of what occupational therapists seek to do. Therapists find a motivating factor for their clients, an occupation in which they will engage to promote their own health and wellbeing. This enables their journey through the rehabilitation process, allowing the client to define what is meaningful and purposeful to them and redefine the life they live. Magicians follow a process when learning a new illusion that speaks loudly to those who are in rehabilitation: The difficult must become habit. Habit becomes beautiful. Beautiful becomes magic. Magic can be a part of the occupational therapy tool-kit as our profession looks to our future relationship with the arts and their healing properties.

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