## Audio file

OT_Podcast6td0a.mp3

## Transcript

00:00:00 Casey Ellis

Welcome to the Pre-Professional Playbook Podcast, where preparation and hard work come together.

00:00:05 Casey Ellis

This podcast explores pathways in the health and law professions to help you format your future.

00:00:10 Casey Ellis

I'm your host, Casey Ellis, an advisor in the University of Georgia's Pre-Professional Advising Office.

00:00:16 Casey Ellis

Whether you're just starting out, considering a career shift, or just wanting to know more, this episode is your guide to navigating the various educational and professional options available.

00:00:26 Casey Ellis

Today, we're discussing the innovative and transformative field of occupational therapy.

00:00:30 Casey Ellis

Let's get our heads in the game and discuss OT.

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Occupational therapists are healthcare professionals who help people of all ages participate in activities of daily living, known as ADLs, in school, work, home, and their community.

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OTs have a holistic approach, meaning they don't just focus on the person but also their patient's environment to help set them up for success.

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Occupational therapy is a client-centered practice that helps individuals develop, recover, or maintain the skills they need for meaningful everyday activities.

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Whether working with children who need support in fine motor skills, adults recovering from injuries, or older adults adapting to changes in mobility, OTs create personalized interventions to improve independence and quality of life.

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At its core, occupational therapy is about problem-solving, adaptation, and empowerment.

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By using therapeutic techniques, assistive technology, and environmental modifications, OTs help their clients navigate challenges and regain confidence in their abilities.

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Occupational therapists play a vital role in helping people regain independence and improve their daily lives.

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They observe their patients as they go about everyday tasks, taking note of any challenges, and reviewing their medical history to understand their unique needs.

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Using these insights, OTs evaluate a person's condition and develop a personalized treatment plan.

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This plan includes activities and goals designed to help improve movement, coordination, and overall ability to engage in daily or work-related tasks.

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But therapy isn't just

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exercises, OTs actively demonstrate movements and techniques that can make everyday life easier and more efficient.

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Beyond working with individuals, occupational therapists also take a broader approach by assessing the person's home, workplace, or school environment.

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They make recommendations to improve accessibility and safety, whether that means introducing adaptive equipment, modifying a workspace, or suggesting changes to prevent injury and discomfort.

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Occupational therapists can work in a wide variety of settings, including, but not limited to, academia and research, home and community environments, hospitals, long-term care facilities, mental and behavioral health settings, outpatient clinics, schools, early intervention programs, and other innovative or emerging fields.

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Lets take a closer look at some of the most common settings where OTs make a meaningful impact.

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Many experienced OTs transition into or choose to work in academia, where they educate and mentor the next generation of occupational therapists.

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They may work as professors, clinical instructors, or researchers, covering topics such as rehabilitation techniques, assistive technology, neuroscience, and healthcare ethics.

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The other side of the coin is research.

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OTs may study new treatments, conduct clinical trials, and focus on public health and how OT can benefit broader populations.

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Their work may contribute to advances in neurorehabilitation, sensory integration, adaptive technology, and policy development that enhances accessibility and inclusion for diverse populations.

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In both home and community settings, OTs play a vital role in helping individuals maintain their independence and improve their quality of life.

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At home, they assess and modify environments to support daily living activities, such as dressing, cooking, and mobility.

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They also address instrumental activities of daily living, like managing finances, grocery shopping, and transportation, ensuring individuals can safely and effectively navigate their routines.

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Within the community, occupational therapists work in programs that promote social participation, advocate for accessibility, and support public health initiatives.

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This can include working with individuals with disabilities to improve their engagement in community activities, designing inclusive recreational programs, or collaborating with policymakers to enhance accessibility in public spaces.

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In hospital settings.

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Occupational therapists focus on restoring function, preventing complications, and ensuring patients transition safely to the next stage of care, whether that be home, rehabilitation, or another facility.

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OTs work across various hospital departments, each with unique demands.

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In acute care and intensive care units, they assist patients recovering from serious injuries, surgeries, or illnesses, helping them regain functional mobility and self-care abilities.

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In neurology and stroke rehabilitation, they focus on restoring motor and cognitive skills following strokes, traumatic brain injuries, or other neurological conditions.

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Those working in orthopedic and post-surgical rehab help patients regain strength, range of motion, and independence after procedures like joint replacements or fracture repairs.

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In pediatrics and neonatal care, OTs address developmental delays.

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sensory processing disorders, and early motor skills to support infants and children in reaching key milestones.

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Occupational therapists also play a critical role in mental health and psychiatry, assisting individuals with conditions such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, or PTSD by developing coping strategies and life skills.

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In oncology and palliative care, they help patients maintain comfort and quality of life throughout cancer treatment or end-of-life care.

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Additionally, specialists in hand therapy and burn units focus on rehabilitating injuries to restore function and dexterity.

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Across all hospital settings, OTs collaborate closely with doctors, nurses, physical therapists, speech therapists, and social workers to provide comprehensive patient-centered care.

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Occupational therapists play an essential role in long-term care facilities, such as nursing homes, skilled nursing facilities, and assisted living communities.

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Helping older adults and individuals with chronic conditions maintain their independence and quality of life.

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A primary focus is fall prevention and mobility training, working to reduce the risk of falls and ensuring that residents can move safely within their environment.

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They also provide cognitive interventions for individuals with dementia or other cognitive impairments, using memory strategies and environmental modifications to support daily functioning.

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Additionally, they assist residents with activities of daily living, such as dressing, grooming, and eating, ensuring they can engage in self-care as independently as possible.

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To further enhance autonomy, OTs introduce assistive technology and adaptive equipment, including grab bars, reachers, and specialized utensils tailored to individual needs.

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Beyond physical support, occupational therapists prioritize quality of life by facilitating social participation, leisure activities,

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and personalize interventions that promote emotional well-being.

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Their holistic approach ensures that long-term care residents receive both physical and mental support, helping them maintain dignity and engagement in their daily lives.

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Occupational therapy plays a vital role in mental and behavioral health, helping individuals develop skills to manage daily life, cope with challenges, and improve overall well-being.

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Life skills training is a core aspect of their work, assisting individuals in establishing routines, managing time effectively, and engaging in meaningful activities that promote stability.

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They also provide emotional regulation strategies, teaching coping mechanisms for stress and anxiety, while supporting individuals in navigating daily challenges.

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Sensory processing interventions are another crucial component helping individuals manage sensory sensitivities that may impact their ability to function in different environments.

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OTs also focus on work and social participation support, guiding individuals in building confidence for workplace or social interactions.

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For those transitioning from inpatient psychiatric care, occupational therapists assist with community reintegration, ensuring a smoother adjustment to daily life.

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These professionals work in hospitals, outpatient clinics, community mental health centers,

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correctional facilities, and residential treatment programs, using a holistic approach that addresses both mental and physical well-being to support long-term recovery.

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Another popular setting is the outpatient clinical setting.

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Occupational therapists in outpatient settings work with individuals recovering from injuries, managing chronic conditions, or developing essential life skills to enhance independence.

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These clinics often specialize in areas such as hand therapy, neurological rehab,

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Pain management or return-to-work programs providing targeted interventions for diverse patient needs.

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Many outpatient OTs also conduct ergonomic assessments.

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offering guidance on posture, movement, and workplace modifications to prevent injury.

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Additionally, they may work with individuals experiencing long-term disabilities, such as Parkinson's disease or post-stroke impairments, to help them adapt to daily tasks and maintain a high quality of life.

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Last but certainly not least, OTs play an essential role in schools and early intervention programs.

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In these settings, they support children with developmental delays, learning disabilities,

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sensory processing challenges, and other conditions that affect their ability to participate in school activities.

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Occupational therapists collaborate with teachers, parents, and other professionals to create individualized education plans, improve fine motor skills, enhance handwriting, and develop self-regulation techniques that help students succeed academically and socially.

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Are you debating between a master's versus a doctoral occupational therapy program?

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Master's of occupational therapy programs are typically two years in length, which allows you to enter the workforce sooner, which might be appealing if you're eager to start your career promptly.

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Occupational therapy doctoral programs may be 2 1/2 to three years in length.

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This advanced degree delves deeper into areas like leadership, advocacy, and research.

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A distinctive component of the OTD is the doctoral capstone project,

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offering hands-on experience in a specialized area of interest.

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When deciding between the two, consider your long-term professional goals.

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If you're aiming for a swift transition into clinical practice, the MOT might be the right choice.

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However, if you're interested in leadership roles, contributing to policy, or engaging in specialized research, investing the extra time in an OTD could be beneficial.

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Both degrees pave the way for rewarding careers in occupational therapy.

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If you're planning to enter an OT program at the master's or doctoral level, you'll need a bachelor's degree.

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But here's the good news.

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There's no best major for OT school.

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Admissions committees don't favor one major over another.

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So the most important thing is choosing a field that truly interests you.

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You're far more likely to succeed in a major you enjoy, rather than forcing yourself into one just because it seems like the right choice.

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That said, some majors naturally include OT prerequisites, which might streamline your academic plan.

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But that doesn't mean you have to take that route if it's not the best fit for you.

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Follow your passions, challenge yourself, and make sure you're fulfilling the necessary coursework, because at the end of the day, it's your dedication and experience that will make you a strong OT candidate.

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OT programs may require the following prerequisite coursework.

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Keep in mind that every OT program is a little different, so this isn't a one-size-fits-all list.

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It's up to you to check the specific requirements for the schools you're interested in.

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That said, most OT programs expect you to have a solid foundation in a few key areas, such as anatomy and physiology, CBIO 2200 and 2210 with labs, physics, Physics 1111 with lab,

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Statistics, STAT 2000 General Psychology, Psychology 1101 Abnormal Psychology, Psychology 3230 Lifespan Development, HDFS 2200 Medical Terminology, CLAS 1030 Anthropology or Sociology, Anthropology 1102 or Sociology 1101 and Fundamentals of Human Nutrition, Nutrition 2100.

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Having an application that goes beyond just checking off prerequisites is key.

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It's your chance to show admissions committees that you have what it takes to be an all-star occupational therapist.

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Sure, your GPA and coursework matter, but they're only part of the game.

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Schools also want to see real-world experience, leadership, community involvement, and strong interpersonal skills.

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Think of it this way.

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Your academics might get you onto the field, but it's your hands-on experience, shadowing, volunteering, part-time jobs,

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and extracurricular activities that will help you score big.

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In short, OT schools want to see that you're not just academically prepared, but that you're also personally and professionally ready to go the distance.

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So let's break it down, play by play, and dive into these areas more deeply.

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If you're considering applying to OT programs, gaining hands-on experience through shadowing is a must.

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While each school has its own specific requirements, a strong application typically includes at least 100 hours of observation across three to four different settings.

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Try and get at least 15 to 20 hours per setting, but know that if you only get 15 hours from somewhere, that won't be a person you will want to get a letter of recommendation from.

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The key here is diversity.

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Exposing yourself to both inpatient and outpatient environments can give you a well-rounded perspective on the field.

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And here's a bonus, the OTCAS application actually allows paid physicians to count as shadowing.

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So if you're working as a rehab aide alongside OTs, that experience can strengthen your application while also giving you valuable real-world insight.

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Bottom line, the broader your shadowing experience, the better prepared and more competitive you will be.

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Volunteering is one of the best ways to show your commitment to helping others and making a real impact.

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And here's the good news.

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It doesn't have to be directly related to OT.

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Sure, there are some great OT-focused opportunities around Athens, like Oconee therapeutic writing, but what really matters is showing up, serving with empathy, and making a difference in people's lives.

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Consistency is key.

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Aim for one to two hours a week, engaging face-to-face with an underserved community.

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Whether you're working with kids, seniors, or individuals with disabilities, the experience you gain will not only strengthen your application but also shape you into a more compassionate and well-rounded future OT.

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So find a cause that speaks to you and get involved.

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Remember to keep up with your hours and information for the community you volunteer for, as you will need this on the application.

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When it comes to letters of recommendation for your OT application, quality matters more than quantity.

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OTCAS requires a minimum of three letters, but allows up to five.

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Just remember, more isn't always better.

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Strong, thoughtful recommendations from people who truly know your skills and character will go much further than just stacking up letters.

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Also, be sure to waive your right to see them.

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It shows schools that your recommendations are candid and unbiased.

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And if a school doesn't use OTCAS, you'll need to have your evaluators submit their letters directly.

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So don't drop the ball, double-check each program-specific requirements to stay ahead of the game.

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You're more than just your OT aspirations, and admissions committees want to see that.

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They're looking for well-rounded applicants who bring diverse experiences to the table.

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So get involved in activities you enjoy, whether that's Greek life, study abroad, volunteer trips, intramural sports, or even part-time jobs.

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Not only will these experiences give you something meaningful to talk about in your application and interviews, but they'll also help you grow as a person and future OT.

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So don't just check boxes, find what excites you and make the most of it.

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Everything we have discussed from shadowing to volunteering to activities you enjoy will be part of your application.

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You will apply through an application called OTCAS.

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OTCAS charges $164 for the first program you apply to and 71 for each additional program.

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Some programs will have supplemental applications and fees, and you will apply to programs directly after submitting your OTCAS application.

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OTCAS opens every year in July and stays open through June in the following year, but schools often have deadlines where the application closes before then.

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It is good to apply as early as possible to have a competitive edge.

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According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median annual wage for occupational therapists was $96,000 in May of 2023.

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Employment of OTs is expected to grow 11% from 2023 to 2033, which is much faster than the average compared to other occupations.

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Occupational therapy is a field full of possibilities, blending science,

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creativity, and compassion to improve lives in countless ways.

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OTs work across diverse settings to help people regain independence, build essential skills, and navigate life's challenges with confidence.

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Their holistic approach ensures that individuals receive not just treatment but the tools and support they need to thrive.

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As the field continues to grow and evolve, so do the opportunities within it.

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Whether it's through research, advocacy, or hands-on therapy, OTs are shaping the future of healthcare in both big and small ways.

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For those considering a career shift in occupational therapy, there has never been a better time to explore the impacts this profession has on individuals, families, and communities.

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Don't forget to subscribe, leave a review, and share this episode with your teammates and colleagues.

00:18:09 Casey Ellis

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