

Engaging clients in meaningful activity— a step towards improved health and functioning!

Engagement in occupation and participation in society are necessary for health and quality of life (Harrison & Sellers, 2008). The value of occupational engagement has been noted, in particular, for persons with mental illness (Gewurtz & Kirsh, 2007; Mee, Sumsion & Craik, 2004). When the process of evolving into occupational beings becomes disrupted due to illness or disability, bridges are needed to be built to link with one's previous life and to reclaim the 'self' (Mee et al, 2004).

Occupational therapists are well suited to bridge this gap and, at ERGO-Wise, we have taken on this challenge. Clients benefit from an occupational therapy framework where occupation is central and where the focus is on enabling occupation to promote health and life satisfaction (Mee & Sumsion, 2004; Letts, 2011).

Many researchers have found that through engagement in activity/occupation, people acquire new skills, learn to cope with challenges, have the opportunity to experience success, and through this process feel empowered and gain self confidence (Gewurtz & Kirsh, 2007; Haley & McKay, 2004; Mee & Sumsion, 2004).

ERGO-Wise puts these findings into action through its services which focus on assisting

clients to re-engage in life and return to work.

Our hallmark *cognitive work hardening* program facilitates engagement in meaningful occupation through work tasks which are designed to simulate an individual's work tasks and/or the cognitive skills required to meet job demands. Through such engagement, fundamental goals of cognitive work hardening are achieved which include increase in concentration, focus, and work stamina. Participating in meaningful occupation provides feelings of usefulness and value. Work tasks enable a person to practice and develop skills and competencies, improve proficiency and experience mastery, and increase confidence leading to enhanced feelings of self-worth (Haley & McKay, 2004; Mee & Sumsion, 2001; Mee, Sumsion, & Craik, 2004).

Through the cognitive work hardening process, clients increase their capacity to work and begin to feel that they have more control over their functioning and their future. They typically progress in work tasks from basic, structured and less demanding tasks to ones that require higher level mental functioning. As a result, clients emerge with a stronger belief in their abilities

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Work Information Newsletter is developed by Adeena Wisenthal, registered occupational therapist and owner of ERGO-Wise, a centre in Ottawa that specializes in workplace mental health.

This issue focuses on engaging in meaningful activity as a way to improve health, functioning, and occupational performance. Emphasis is on consumers of mental health services for whom meaningful occupation has been found to be critical.

Occupational performance begins with meaningful occupation!

Meaningful occupation includes activities of daily living, leisure/recreational activities, and work.

Engaging in occupation fosters skill development, mastery, and self-esteem.

Engaging in meaningful occupation has been found to be critical for mental health service users.

Stay engaged through activity

Meaningful Activity

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which in turn results in increased self-confidence and perceived employability. These attributes have been found to be related to mental well-being (Berntson & Marklund, 2007).



When a person is not yet ready to engage in a return-to-work preparation program, such as cognitive work hardening, a 're-activation' approach is used.

Clients are helped to re-engage in life through addressing their current level of functioning, determining with the client what is needed to increase activity levels, and setting goals to reach self-identified targets. These might include having a structure in place for daily self-care, household chores, or family routines. Goals may also include increasing physical activity, engaging in new leisure activities / re-engaging in old leisure activities, or increasing socialization through meeting a friend for coffee or joining a recreational group.

Following several weeks of reactivation, clients are often ready to participate in the cognitive work hardening program for return-to-work preparation.

Aligning with the fundamental principle of occupational therapy that views occupation as a means to health, ERGO-Wise enables clients to move beyond their current level of functioning to rediscover their selves, especially as occupational beings with new found self esteem, competence, motivation, and hope for their futures.



Structure to one's day can assist with improving feelings of self esteem, enhancing motivation and offsetting general feelings of hopelessness that are often reported in consumers of mental health services (Mee & Sumsion, 2001).

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ERGO-Wise specializes in workplace mental health. Through our hallmark **cognitive work hardening program**, we focus on return-to-work preparation which assists clients to develop the cognitive skills they need to meet job demands. It also provides the structure and work routine needed to prepare for transitioning back to work. Specific skills such as assertiveness, time management, and organizational skills can be part of the program as well.

Clients who are not ready for return-to-work preparation benefit from **re-activation** through working with the occupational therapist. Setting goals to increase activity and functioning pave the way for life re-engagement which can lead to readiness for return-to-work preparation.

Services are provided within a community-based, non-clinical simulated work setting.

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