

GUIDE TO CODE OF ETHICS

Purpose

The purpose of the Code of Ethics and the Guide to the Code of Ethics is to set out the ethical principles and values governing the conduct of occupational therapists registered to practice in Ontario regardless of role, responsibilities, job title, practice area or practice setting, client population, years in practice or level of experience.

The Code of Ethics and the Guide to the Code of Ethics are not intended to tell registrants exactly how to act in every situation but rather to be used to guide registrants on how to conduct themselves and how to navigate the wide range of ethical scenarios and dilemmas that can arise in practice.



GLOSSARY of TERMS¹

Accountability

Accepting full responsibility for our actions and decisions, ensuring they align with professional standards and ethical conduct.

Client

Occupational therapists work with people of any age, along with their families, caregivers, and substitute decision makers. Therapists may also work with collectives such as families, groups, communities, and the public at large.

¹ (Competencies for Occupational Therapists in Canada, 2021)

Collaboration

Working cooperatively with colleagues, clients, and stakeholders, recognizing that diverse perspectives lead to better outcomes.

Context

Context strongly influences occupational possibilities and healthcare service. This document looks at three layers of context:

1. 'Micro' context: The client's immediate environment – their own state of health and function, family and friends, the physical environment they move through.
2. 'Meso' context: The policies and processes embedded in the health, education, justice, and social service systems that affect the client.
3. 'Macro' context: The larger socioeconomic and political context around the client – social and cultural values and beliefs, laws, and public policies.

Ethical spaces

When an occupational therapist works with someone who has a different worldview, they seek to create an 'ethical' or neutral space for dialogue. This is a space to “step out of our allegiances, to detach from the cages of our mental worlds and assume a position where human-to-human dialogue can occur” (Ermine, 2007).

Equity

Equity is different from equality. Equality means everyone has the same resources and opportunities. Equity allocates resources and opportunities based on each person's circumstances, so that they can achieve equal outcomes. We need to take an equity approach because so many barriers to equality still exist in our society.

Humility

Cultural and intellectual humility is an approach to working with people that seeks to find common ground and mutual respect. The occupational therapist knows that they cannot fully appreciate another person's culture, and they must not assume that their own culture is superior. They listen deeply to what the client says about their life and experience. They stay open to the possibility that they might need to question their own professional knowledge and beliefs.

Indicator of Ethical Practice

An indicator of ethical practice is a quantifiable characteristic of practice that is subject to measurement and can be used to describe one or more aspects of ethical practice.

Integrity

Upholding honesty, fairness, and consistency in all professional actions, adhering to both the spirit and letter of the law.

Knowing Better and Doing Better

Maya Angelou, a renowned American poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist, once said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better” (2014). *Knowing better and doing better* is committing to continuous learning and improvement to ensure that our work is informed by the latest knowledge and practices, striving for excellence and competence.

Minimizing Harm

Acting thoughtfully to minimize harm, considering the impact of our decisions on individuals, communities, and society at large.

Occupational rights

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (2019) recognizes occupational rights for all people to:

- Take part in occupations that support survival, health, and well-being
- Choose occupations without pressure or coercion, while acknowledging that with choice comes responsibility for others and for the planet
- Freely engage in needed and chosen occupations without risk to safety, human dignity, or equity.

Privilege

In the context of equity, ‘privilege’ refers to unquestioned and unearned advantages that people enjoy when they are members of more dominant groups in a society.

Respect

Treating everyone with dignity, and fairness, recognizing and honoring cultural differences and individual experiences.

Respecting Autonomy

Honouring the right of individuals to make informed decisions by providing them with the information, support, and resources needed to act in line with their values.

Social position and power

The words ‘social position and power’ are used in the competencies to refer to the concept of ‘positionality’. Differences in social position and power shape personal identity and *privilege* in society. Competent occupational therapists know how to analyze their positionality in order to act

in an unjust world. This means being aware of one’s own degree of privilege based on factors such as race, class, educational attainment, and income.

Transparency

Foster trust by communicating openly and honestly, ensuring clarity in all professional interactions.

BACKGROUND

Occupational therapists registered to practice in Ontario are governed by the Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991. The Board of the College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario, *the College*, is required to establish and maintain a Code of Ethics under the provisions of the Health Professions Procedural Code in Ontario and pursuant to section 8.08.4 of the College Bylaw.

This Code of Ethics outlines the ethical responsibilities and expectations for registrant conduct. It is one of the ways that the College fulfills its mandate to promote and protect the public interest. Registrants are required to uphold the Code of Ethics and failure to do so may constitute unprofessional conduct.

This iteration of the Code of Ethics emphasizes expectations for how registrants demonstrate their commitment to culturally safer practice consistent with the College’s commitment to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion; and Land and Territorial Acknowledgement.

The following table illustrates where the Code of Ethics are situated within the overall structure of legislated and other governing authorities for the practice of occupational therapy:

Document	Description
Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991	The act that governs the practice of health professions currently regulated in Ontario. It sets out legal requirements relating to registration, continuing competence, and complaints and discipline. Section 94 (1)(k) provides for the scope of practice to be included in our bylaw.
Occupational Therapy Act, 1991	The regulation that governs the profession of occupational therapy. It outlines more detailed provisions regarding register categories, requirements for registration application and renewal, and protected title.
Bylaw, College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario	Schedule “A” Code of Ethics The Bylaw contains the Code of Ethics (“the Code”). The Code provides registrants with information about the College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario’s (the College’s) expectations for ethical practice
Anti-Racism Act, 2017	An Act creating a provincial anti-racism strategy that aims to eliminate systemic racism and advance racial equity.
Human Rights Code, 1990	The Code prohibits actions that discriminate against people based on a protected ground in a protected social area. Protected grounds are: Age, Ancestry, colour, race, Citizenship, Ethnic origin, Place of origin, Creed, Disability, Family status, Marital status (including single status), Gender identity, & gender expression, Sex (including pregnancy and breastfeeding), Sexual orientation. Protected social areas are: Housing; Contracts; Employment, Good, Services and facilities; Membership in Unions

Document	Description
	or professional associations.
Code of Ethics (CoE)	The set of values and principles that guide the conduct of occupational therapists registered to practice
Competencies for Occupational Therapists in Canada – ACOTRO, ACOTUP, CAOT (2021)	A nationally adopted document that outlines the broad range of skills and abilities required of all occupational therapists at all stages of their career. Occupational therapists registered to practice in Canada are expected to use the competencies document to inform their practice and competence needs.
Standards of Practice (SoP)	The set of regulatory requirements that define the minimum expectations for the practice of occupational therapy that result in the provision of ethical, accountable and effective services.
Occupational Therapy Statement of Commitment to Indigenous Peoples in Canada – ACOTPA, ACOTRO, ACOTUP, CAOT, COTF, (2023)	The statement prepared to summarize the recommended actions each of the participating organizations has committed to undertake to address the articles in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007); the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Report (TRC, 2015) and the Calls to Justice from the report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG, 2019).

Risk Management Approaches

A risk-based approach allows occupational therapists to prioritize and address the most significant risks to client occupations, health, and wellness focusing services and enhancing overall risk to a client. Taking a risk-based approach to practicing occupational therapy is part of providing safe, effective and ethical occupational services.

Trauma-Informed Approaches ²

Trauma-informed approaches are policies and practices that recognize the connections between violence, trauma, negative health outcomes and behaviours. These approaches increase safety, control and resilience for people who are seeking services in relation to experiences of violence and/or have a history of experiencing violence.

Trauma-informed approaches require fundamental changes in how systems are designed, organizations function and practitioners engage with people based on the following key policy and practice principles:

1. Understand trauma and violence, and their impacts on peoples' lives and behaviours
2. Create emotionally and physically safe environments
3. Foster opportunities for choice, collaboration, and connection
4. Provide a strengths-based and capacity-building approach to support client coping and resilience

² [Trauma and violence-informed approaches to policy and practice - Canada.ca](#)

Health professionals, that do not understand the complex and lasting impacts of trauma may unintentionally re-traumatize. The goal of trauma informed approaches is to *minimize harm to the people you serve*—whether or not you know their experiences.

Embedding trauma-informed approaches into all aspects of policy and practice can create universal trauma precautions, which provide positive outcomes for all people. They also provide a common platform that helps to integrate services within and across systems and offer a basis for consistent and ethical ways of responding to people with such experiences.

Social Media, Virtual Service Provision and Generative AI Usage

The use of social media, virtual care platforms, and generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) can enhance occupational therapy service if used responsibly and ethically.

The Ethical Practice Checklist includes ethical considerations when using social media, virtual service platforms and AI.

HOW TO USE THE CODE OF ETHICS

The Code of Ethics is a resource for registrants and others with whom they interact. For example:

Registrants use the **Code of Ethics** and the **Ethical Practice checklist** to guide ethical conduct and decision making. When resolving ethical issues, registrants consider applicable legislated and governing authority, the Competencies, the Standards of Practice, and other college guidance documents together with what they know about their own practice context (e.g., organization policies and resources, geographic location, client population, etc.) and their clients' context.

Registrants are responsible for their decision making and actions and must, when requested by the college, be able to articulate their rationale for ethical decisions made. Failure to follow the Code of Ethics may be found to constitute unprofessional conduct.

The College, within its legislated mandate of serving and protecting the public interest, uses the Code of Ethics to inform registrants of their ethical responsibilities in daily practice. They are used in the Quality Assurance Program Competence Assessments. They are also used to frame responses to registrant questions or concerns about practice and in addressing complaints of unprofessional conduct.

Clients and the public may refer to the Code of Ethics to gain understanding of how their occupational therapist should be conducting themselves.

Employers or supervisors of occupational therapists can use the Code of Ethics to support or assist the evaluation of employee conduct.

Educators and students use the Code of Ethics to inform curriculum content and student placement or entry-to-practice expectations.

Other health professionals/service providers may use the Code of Ethics to provide insight into how they can expect an occupational therapy colleague to conduct themselves.

HOW TO USE THE ETHICAL PRACTICE CHECKLIST

The Ethical Practice Checklist provides a list of quantifiable characteristics of practice that point to the existence of ethical practice and can be used to describe one or more aspects ethical practice. Users of this resource can use the indicators of ethical practice in the Ethical Practice Check List to guide ethical conduct and decision making. See Appendix 1.

Acknowledgments

The Code of Ethics were coproduced as a template for use across Canada, in consultation and collaboration with registrants, college advisory committees and the Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy Regulatory Organizations (ACOTRO) Code of Ethics working group and board.

ACOTRO respectfully acknowledges the content taken and adapted from the Alberta College of Occupational Therapists (ACOT) building on the Codes of other regulatory organizations in Canada and worldwide.

Questions regarding the College's Code of Ethics and occupational therapy practice can be directed to Practice@COTO.org

SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

[Occupational Therapy Statement of Commitment to Indigenous Peoples in Canada](#). Report from the Occupational Therapy Truth and Reconciliation Task Force. (ACOTPA, ACOTRO, ACOTUP, CAOT, COTF - Sep 2023)

Promoting Occupational Participation: Collaborative Relationship-focused Occupational Therapy (2022)

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[Trauma and violence-informed approaches to policy and practice - Canada.ca](#)

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APPENDIX 1: Ethical Practice Checklist

Occupational Therapy Practice is ethical when it includes reflection, respect, meaning for the client, collaboration and engagement with the occupational therapy profession.

A. Reflective Practice

Practice is reflective when the occupational therapist:

- Engages in reflective practice and continuous learning throughout their career to acquire, maintain, and enhance competence in practice.
- Provides services only in areas of competence and seek support and additional education, training, mentorship or supervision when a gap in competence is identified.
- Considers degree of privilege and/or experiences of oppression and how they influence the therapist-client relationship.
- Exercises independent judgment.

B. Respectful and Meaningful Practice

Practice is respectful and meaningful when the occupational therapist:

- Acknowledges and respects the rights for all people to take part in occupations that support survival, health, and well-being without risk to safety, human dignity, or equity.
- Serves the client's best interest, by working in a transparent, honest manner and while striving to do no harm.
- Provides occupational therapy services that upholds the dignity of each client.
- Provides services to all clients in a respectful, unbiased manner. This includes not discriminating or refusing to provide services based on grounds protected under the *Human Rights Code of Ontario*.
- Seeks to create an 'ethical' or neutral space for dialogue.
- Provides services that incorporate equity-focused approaches.
- Respects and supports a client's autonomy to choose whether to proceed with occupational therapy services, including in situations when a client does not have capacity to provide informed consent
- Respects a client's autonomy to determine their own tolerance for risk in service provision.
- Incorporates risk management approaches in service provision as appropriate for the client's priorities, needs and circumstances, and the practice situation.
- Recognizes the power imbalance inherent in the therapist-client relationship and determine and communicate boundaries appropriate for the practice situation.
- Manages conflicts of interest that cannot be avoided.
- Implements measures that protect personal information, ensuring these protections when utilizing

artificial intelligence (AI), social media, and virtual care tools.

C. Collaborative Practice

Practice is collaborative when the occupational therapist:

- Includes practicing collaboratively with colleagues and other key partners to promote coordination and alignment of client services.
- Creates and sustain practice environments that are free from discrimination or oppression.
- Provides mentorship and guidance as needed to colleagues, students and/or persons they are responsible for supervising.
- Seeks and receives and then uses professional judgment when acting on feedback given by colleagues or others regarding the provision of occupational therapy services and/or the registrant's conduct.

D. Professional Practice

Practice is professional when the occupational therapist

- Maintains a level of professional conduct that promotes the respect and integrity of the profession and sustains public confidence.
- Recognizes systems of inequity in their practice context and act within their professional sphere of influence to
 - (a) address and prevent racism and other forms of discrimination or oppression,
 - (b) minimize the ecological costs of care.
- Acts transparently and with integrity in all professional and business activities (e.g., fees and billing; contracts or terms of agreement with clients or contracting organizations; advertising of professional services; use of social media or other online platforms; response to any real or perceived conflicts of interest; etc.)
- Works effectively within the systems where occupational therapy services are provided (i.e., education, health, social, justice) and the policies, procedures or processes of any funding programs accessed in the provision of services.
- Shows leadership through one or more of the following:
 - contributing to the education of students, assistants or other system partners.
 - mentoring or educating occupational therapists.
 - engaging with professional networks or communities of practice; OR
 - otherwise contributing to the occupational therapy body of knowledge.
- Engages in quality improvement activities that support the provision of quality occupational therapy services.