

Dr Pauline Boland Discusses Occupational Therapy

Occupational therapists understand how the familiar and meaningful activities we engage in are important when someone has, or is at risk of, delirium. There are a number of ways that an occupational therapist might support patients with delirium, their family and other members of the MDT, through and after a delirium event.

Occupational therapists can advise on adapting the environment for someone with altered cognition and perceptual abilities, thought consideration of noise, lighting, colour contrast, visual or written aids, which can all make a difference to someone's ability to sit up out of bed, listen to those around them as well as complete other daily activities like washing and dressing. Occupational therapists will often work with nursing staff and family to adapt the environment to minimise distraction, which is tiring for someone with delirium, and maximise orientation and support for reduced cognition and high stress, such as clear clock faces, family member photos and calendars kept up to date in line of sight.

Managing fatigue during delirium, often through a schedule agreed across the MDT, can be essential to make everyday tasks more feasible as well as optimising sleep during night-time, which can be done with the use of eye masks and ear plugs. Preferred restful activities during the day may assist with distress, such as listening to favourite music or radio station.

Through essential activities such as self-care, an occupational therapist will often recommend that familiar items are positioned within easy reach for patients and as safety allows, for example a patient's own clothing or toothbrush is readily available. As someone's delirium starts to resolve, mobilisation, assessing risk of falls and increasing cognitive stimulation are ways occupational therapy can support their recovery.

We know that early Occupational Therapy input has also been associated with improving functional outcomes at hospital discharge and reducing length of stay. As someone recovers from a delirium, gaining confidence and re-skilling in the activities they need to do to leave hospital become important. This means a person with resolving delirium may be encouraged with independence in showering and dressing, practice being able to prepare a meal, alongside preparing their home environment, safety taking into account possible physical and cognitive challenges when they leave hospital.