

Introduction to Professional Ethics in Occupational Therapy

Introduction to Professional Ethics in Occupational Therapy

(A concise, easy-to-read guide for students and new practitioners)

1. Why Ethics Matter in OT

Reason	Explanation
Client-centered care	Ethical decisions keep the client's values, preferences, and goals at the forefront.
Professional credibility	Adhering to ethical standards builds trust with clients, families, colleagues, and the public.
Legal protection	Many ethical principles overlap with legal obligations (e.g., confidentiality, informed consent).
Quality of practice	Ethical reflection improves clinical reasoning and decision-making.
Social responsibility	Occupational therapists influence health policy, community resources, and equity of access.

2. Core Ethical Principles (OT Code of Ethics – AOTA)

Principle	Key Concepts	Practical Examples
Beneficence	Promote the client's well-being; act in their best interest.	Selecting interventions that maximize functional independence.
Non-maleficence	Do no harm; avoid actions that could cause injury or distress.	Recognizing and reporting unsafe practice environments.
Autonomy	Respect the client's right to make informed choices.	Obtaining informed consent; supporting self-determination even when choices differ from the therapist's preferences.
Justice	Provide fair, equitable services; avoid discrimination.	Offering the same level of care regardless of socioeconomic status, race, gender, or ability.
Veracity	Be truthful and transparent in all communications.	Disclosing realistic outcomes and potential risks of an intervention.
Confidentiality	Safeguard personal health information.	Storing client records securely; sharing information only with authorized parties.

Introduction to Professional Ethics in Occupational Therapy

Principle	Key Concepts	Practical Examples
Professional Integrity	Maintaining honesty, competence, and accountability.	Pursuing continuing education; reporting unethical behavior.

3. Ethical Decision-Making Model (Step-by-Step)

1. **Identify the problem** – Clarify the ethical dilemma (e.g., conflict between client wishes and family pressure).
 2. **Gather relevant information** – Review client records, legal statutes, policy documents, and the OT Code of Ethics.
 3. **Determine the stakeholders** – Client, family, interdisciplinary team, agency, community.
 4. **Consider the ethical principles** – Map the situation onto beneficence, autonomy, etc.
 5. **Explore alternatives** – List possible actions, including “do nothing” options.
 6. **Evaluate consequences** – Weigh short- and long-term outcomes for each stakeholder.
 7. **Make a decision** – Choose the option that best aligns with ethical principles and professional standards.
 8. **Implement and document** – Carry out the decision, record rationale, and monitor results.
 9. **Reflect** – Review the process, identify lessons learned, and adjust future practice.
-

4. Common Ethical Scenarios in OT

Scenario	Ethical Issue(s)	Suggested Response
Client refuses recommended therapy	Autonomy vs. beneficence	Explore reasons, provide information, respect the decision if the client is competent.
Family demands treatment the client does not want	Autonomy, confidentiality	Clarify client’s wishes, maintain confidentiality, involve a mediator if needed.
Limited resources restrict service provision	Justice, beneficence	Prioritize based on need, advocate for additional resources, document decision criteria.
Therapist discovers a colleague’s unsafe practice	Non-maleficence, integrity	Address the issue directly with