

2026

Continuing Competency Practice Analysis

for the Certified Occupational
Therapy Assistant COTA[®]

COTA[®]

NBCOT[®] National Board
for Certification in
Occupational Therapy

About NBCOT

The National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy NBCOT® is a national not-for-profit organization that provides initial and renewal certification for occupational therapy professionals.

NBCOT's mission is to protect the public through the validation of essential competencies for effective and safe occupational therapy practice. Initial certification by NBCOT is required for licensure in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, and Puerto Rico. NBCOT's certification programs are accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA).

NBCOT's certification programs serve the public by ensuring that occupational therapy practitioners meet standards for entry-level competence and by supporting ongoing professional development across the career span. Initial certification provides assurance that a practitioner has met education and experience requirements and has demonstrated the knowledge necessary for competent entry-level practice.

For the purposes of NBCOT's programs, entry-level practice refers to the first three years following initial certification. Beyond the entry level, occupational therapy practitioners are expected to maintain and expand their competence over time through continued learning, experience, and professional engagement. Certification renewal reflects a practitioner's ongoing commitment to professional development and supports the maintenance of continuing competence throughout a practitioner's career.

Overview of the Practice Analysis

NBCOT conducts practice analyses to ensure that its certification programs remain grounded in current occupational therapy practice. For initial certification, these studies identify the tasks and knowledge required for entry-level practice. These findings inform the development of exam content outlines, which guide content distribution across the certification exams.

Candidate scores on these exams are used to make certification decisions based on whether an individual has demonstrated the knowledge required for competent entry-level practice. Periodically conducting practice analyses helps ensure that exam content and resulting certification decisions remain aligned with current occupational therapy practice, supporting the validity of NBCOT's certification programs.

NBCOT uses the same evidence-based practice analysis approach for its certification renewal program. The Continuing Competency Practice Analysis (CCPA) identifies the competencies required for safe and effective practice beyond the entry level, rather than the tasks and knowledge required for entry into practice.

The resulting COTA Continuing Competency Profile outlines the competencies expected of certified occupational therapy assistants who have progressed beyond entry-level practice. The profile serves as the foundation for NBCOT's certification renewal program, supporting alignment between its competency assessment tools and current practice. It also provides a shared framework for understanding the competencies expected of experienced COTA certificants across several audiences:

Who Uses the Competency Profile?



COTA CERTIFICANTS:

Can use the profile to guide self-reflection, identify professional development priorities, and plan continuing competency activities



EMPLOYERS & PRACTICE LEADERS

Can reference the competencies to support hiring decisions and guide mentoring, supervision, performance, and professional development discussions with employees



STATE REGULATORY BOARDS

May consult the profile when considering continuing competence requirements for licensure renewal.



CLIENTS & THE PUBLIC

May access the profile to understand the competencies expected of OTR certificants beyond entry level.

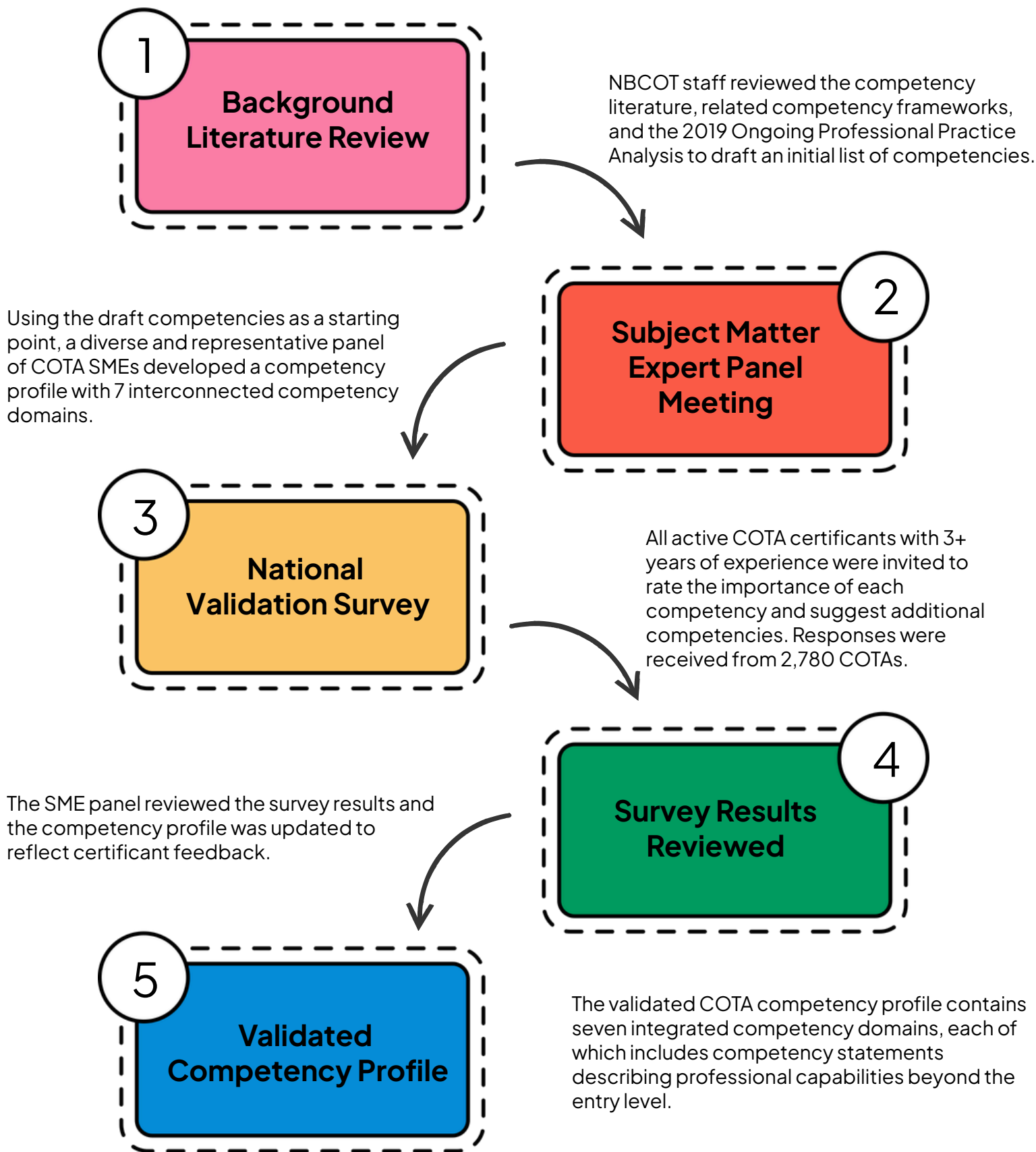
What Is Continuing Competence?

NBCOT defines continuing competence as the ongoing ability of a certified professional to integrate and apply the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and ethical decision-making required for safe, effective, and evidence-informed practice. It reflects a commitment to lifelong learning and professional growth, supporting the maintenance of competence beyond initial certification and throughout one's career. This includes staying current with emerging research, evolving practice standards, and the changing needs of clients, systems, and society.

Competencies are distinct from individual tasks or discrete skills. They describe broad professional capabilities that require judgment, adaptability, and the integration of knowledge, experience, and professional behavior across diverse practice situations.

Continuing competence builds on the foundation established at entry into practice. As COTA certificants gain experience, they may demonstrate increased proficiency in applying clinical reasoning within the context of assigned services, implementing interventions, and adapting their practice to meet varied client needs and contextual demands. Experienced COTA certificants contribute throughout the occupational therapy process by collaborating with the OTR to provide direct service delivery and support continuity and quality of care. Depending on their role and practice setting, experienced COTA certificants may also contribute through activities such as mentoring students and newer practitioners, supporting quality improvement initiatives, and advocating for the clients and communities they serve. The COTA Continuing Competency Profile describes the competencies that reflect and support this level of practice.

Continuing Competency Practice Analysis Process



Continuing Competency Practice Analysis Process

The 2025 CCPA was conducted with COTA certificants who have three or more years of experience. The process included four key phases.

1 Background Literature Review

Staff from the Competency Assessment and Research and Psychometrics Departments reviewed competency frameworks across related healthcare disciplines, along with the task list developed from the 2019 Ongoing Professional Practice Analysis (the predecessor to the CCPA). Following this review, staff developed an initial draft competency profile for the COTA credential..

2 Subject Matter Expert Panel Meeting

NBCOT convened a panel of experienced certificants to review and revise the draft profile. These qualified subject matter experts (SMEs) were selected to represent the broader practitioner population across geographic region, years of experience, practice area and setting, and demographic characteristics. The panel added, consolidated, and refined competency statements to reflect current practice. Following the meeting, NBCOT staff conducted a final review to ensure consistency and incorporate all panel feedback. The resulting competency profile included seven domains.

3 National Validation Survey

To confirm the relevance of the proposed COTA competency profile among the broader certificant population, NBCOT conducted a national validation survey. All active COTA certificants who had been certified for three or more years were invited to participate in the survey. Respondents rated the importance of each competency in the profile. The survey reached practitioners across all 50 states and several U.S. territories and yielded a large, broadly representative sample of COTA certificants (see Appendix A for a demographic breakdown of respondents). After data cleaning and quality review, 2,780 survey responses were deemed complete and valid for analyses. This sample represents a 6% response rate, which is consistent with expectations for large-scale national surveys of practicing professionals. The validation survey results supported the retention of all competencies identified and verified by the SME panel

4 Profile Refinement and Finalization

Open-ended survey responses and survey results were reviewed by NBCOT staff and shared with the SME panel for consideration. The panel reconvened virtually to discuss suggested additions. Based on this review, one competency in the *Innovation and Continuous Improvement* domain was revised to explicitly reference the integration of artificial intelligence, and a new competency addressing billing, insurance, and reimbursement was added to the *Professionalism and Accountability* domain.

Structure of the Competency Profile

The COTA competency profile is organized into seven interconnected competency domains, each representing a broad area of professional practice. Within each domain, competency statements describe integrated professional capabilities and how they are reflected in practice beyond the entry level. Effective occupational therapy practice requires integration of competencies across multiple domains. The domains are not intended to be interpreted as discrete or sequential, but rather as complementary dimensions of professional practice.

The full competency profile, including all competency statements, is provided in Appendix B. The seven domains are summarized below

Domain 1: Core Occupational Therapy Expertise.

The foundational and advanced occupational therapy knowledge that practitioners apply across the full scope of the OT process, including understanding health conditions and contextual factors, applying OT models and frames of reference, assisting with evaluation and assessment tasks, using activity analysis, monitoring client performance, and collaborating with the OTR to support continuity of care and discharge planning.

Domain 2: Clinical Reasoning and Evidence-Based Practice.

Practitioner's role in applying clinical reasoning within the scope of assigned services. It includes observing and interpreting client performance, using available resources to apply evidence to practice, measuring outcomes, and contributing to decision-making by integrating evidence, clinical experience, and client factors to support therapeutic effectiveness.

Domain 3: Client-Centered Care.

Practitioner's commitment to placing clients at the center of care by acknowledging their values and lived experiences, collaborating on meaningful goals, using therapeutic use of self, and adapting care to meet evolving client needs and contextual factors.

Domain 4: Collaboration and Communication.

Effective communication and relationship-building with clients, families, caregivers, and interprofessional and intraprofessional team members, as well as accurate documentation and constructive conflict resolution.

Structure of the Competency Profile

Domain 5: Leadership and Advocacy.

Practitioner's role in mentoring and supervising others, contributing to teams and organizations, and advocating for the profession and for clients who may face barriers to accessing occupational therapy services

Domain 6: Professionalism and Accountability

Ethical and safe use of evidence-based care for experienced practitioners, including adherence to laws and regulations, risk management, self-assessment and reflection, self-care, and compliance with billing and documentation requirements.

Domain 7: Innovation and Continuous Improvement,

Practitioner's engagement in lifelong learning, quality improvement, application of new technologies and emerging evidence, and awareness of evolving areas of practice.

Appendix A

COTA Respondent Demographic Characteristics

1. With which gender do you identify? (N = 2,629)

Gender	Percent
Female	90.6
Male	7.76
Nonbinary	0.023
Prefer to self-identify	0
Prefer not to answer	1.41
Total	100

2. Which of the following describes your race/ethnicity? (N = 2,781)

Race/Ethnicity	Percent
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.32
Asian	2.37
Bi or multi-racial	2.3
Black or African American	4.71
Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin	4.85
Middle Eastern or North African	0.14
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.25
White	75.01
Prefer not to answer	10.03
Total	100

3. What degree or certificate were you awarded upon completion of your OT education? (N = 2,629)

Degree	Percent
Associate degree	92.7
Certificate	2.3
Entry-level Bachelor's degree (e.g., BA, BS)	2.7
Other	2.4
Total	100

4. Indicate the year in which you completed your entry-level OT education. (N = 2,601)

Year	Percent
2020-2029	9.65
2010-2019	46.71
2000-2009	20.07
1990-1999	18.22
1980-1989	4.69
1970-1979	0.62
1960-1969	0.04
Total	100

5. In what state or jurisdiction is your primary OT employment setting located? (N = 2,528)

State/ Jurisdiction	Percent
Alabama	1.1
Alaska	0.1
Arizona	2.5
Arkansas	1.4
California	4.5
Colorado	2
Connecticut	1.3
Delaware	0.6
District of Columbia	0.1
Florida	5.5
Georgia	1.8
Guam	0
Hawaii	0.3
Idaho	0.5
Illinois	5.2
Indiana	3
Iowa	1.1
Kansas	1.6
Kentucky	1.1

State/ Jurisdiction	Percent
Louisiana	1
Maine	0.4
Maryland	1.5
Massachusetts	3.1
Michigan	3.6
Minnesota	2.2
Mississippi	1
Missouri	3
Montana	0.3
Nebraska	0.5
Nevada	0.9
New Hampshire	0.4
New Jersey	1.9
New Mexico	0.7
New York	4.5
North Carolina	4.2
North Dakota	0.5
Ohio	6.4
Oklahoma	1.5
South Carolina	2.2
South Dakota	0.4

State/ Jurisdiction	Percent
Oregon	0.5
Pennsylvania	6.5
Puerto Rico	0
South Carolina	2.2
South Dakota	0.4
Tennessee	1.9
Texas	7.1
Utah	1.1
Vermont	0.2
Virginia	3.2
Washington	1.6
West Virginia	0.6
Wisconsin	2
Wyoming	0.3
Other- International	0.1
Total	100

6. What is your primary OT practice setting? (N = 2,613)

Practice Setting	Percent
Academia	1.88
Assisted living facility	3.52
Early intervention	2.6
Group home	0.31
Home health	8.99
Hospital – inpatient rehab	5.09
Hospital – acute care	5.24
Hospital – mental health	1.15
Hospital – subacute care	0.46
Outpatient clinic – pediatric	6.97
Outpatient clinic – rehab	2.64
Outpatient clinic – specialty	1.88
School or special education cooperative	18.68
Skilled nursing facility	29.31
Telehealth	0.11
Other - please specify	5.4
N/A - I do not currently provide direct OT services	5.78
Total	100

**7. Which of the following populations do you work with most frequently in your OT practice?
Select all that apply. (N = 2,610)**

Population	Frequency
Infant/toddler (0-3)	234
Early childhood (3-5)	566
School-aged children (5-12)	769
Adolescents (12-18)	490
Young Adults (18-35)	453
Middle-Aged Adults (35-55)	615
Older Adults (55+)	1,574
N/A - I do not currently provide direct OT services	170
Total	100

Note. Respondents were asked to select all that apply; therefore, frequencies rather than percentages are reported and total frequencies exceed the number of respondents.

8. Which area of practice best describes your current primary OT employment? (N = 2,579)

Practice Area	Percent
Acute Care	7.56
Administration and/or Management	1.59
Assistive Technology	0.35
Ergonomics	0.04
Hand therapy	1.28
Health/Wellness	0.58
Mental Health	1.82
Neuro Rehabilitation	3.22
Older Adults/Productive Aging	25.05
Orthopedics	1.98
OT Education/Research	2.17
Other OT-related area	3.49
Pediatrics	30.01
Physical Rehabilitation	15.24
Vision Rehabilitation	0.23
Vocational Rehabilitation	0.31
Work and Industry	0.19
My current job role is not directly related to OT	4.89
Total	100

9. Reflecting on your OT caseload, indicate the top 3 diagnoses from each of the following 6 categories of clients to whom you provide the majority of OT services.

Note. Respondents were asked to select all that apply; therefore, frequencies rather than percentages are reported and total frequencies exceed the number of respondents.

Neurological Diagnoses (N = 2,514)	Frequency
Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis	34
Cerebral palsy	528
Cerebrovascular accident	986
Complex regional pain syndrome	70
Dysphagia	178
Guillain-Barré Syndrome	48
Low vision	487
Multiple sclerosis	174
Muscular dystrophy	108
Neurocognitive disorder/dementia	931
Other (please specify)	177
Parkinson's disease	901
Peripheral nerve lesion	26
Peripheral neuropathy	211
Spina bifida	92
Spinal cord injury	204
Traumatic brain injury	522
Vestibular dysfunction/disorder	214
I do not provide services to this diagnostic category	372
Total (excluding those who do not provide services)	5,891

Developmental Diagnoses (N = 7,916)	Frequency
Autism Spectrum Disorder	3,610
Congenital anomalies	430
Developmental coordination disorder/dyspraxia	898
Developmental delay	2,928
Feeding and/or swallowing disorders	831
Fetal alcohol syndrome/spectrum disorder	125
Genetic disorders	666
Intellectual disability	1,503
Learning disability/disorder	1,278
Malnutrition	318
Other (please specify)	184
Sensory processing/sensory integrative disorder	2,254
Visual processing deficit	715
I do not provide services to this diagnostic category.	2,693
Total (excluding those who do not provide services)	5,106

Cardiopulmonary Diagnoses (N = 2,417)	Frequency
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease	1,269
Congestive heart failure	1,340
Coronary artery bypass graft	227
Long COVID	150
Myocardial infarction	569
Other (please specify)	40
Pneumonia	769
Tuberculosis	15
I do not provide services to this diagnostic category.	910
Total (excluding those who do not provide services)	4,379

Musculoskeletal/Orthopedic Diagnoses (N = 2,428)	Frequency
Hand injuries	295
Low back pain	710
Osteoarthritis	824
Other (please specify)	42
Pelvic floor dysfunction	109
Sprains	77
Strains	62
Tendinopathy	66
Upper and/or lower extremity amputations	725
Upper and/or lower extremity fractures	1,059
Upper and/or lower extremity joint replacements	1,037
I do not provide services to this diagnostic category.	811
Total (excluding those who do not provide services)	5,006

Psychosocial Diagnoses (N = 7,880)	Frequency
Anxiety disorders	1,356
Attention deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder	839
Bipolar and related disorders	507
Depressive disorders	904
Disruptive, impulse-control, and conduct disorders	539
Feeding and eating disorders	312
Other (please specify)	35
Personality disorders	181
Schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorders	359
Somatic symptom and related disorders	61
Substance-related and addictive Disorders	342
Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders	454
I do not provide services to this diagnostic category.	451
Total (excluding those who do not provide services)	5,889

General Medical/Systemic Diagnoses (N = 2,422)	Frequency
Autoimmune disorders	297
Bariatric	507
Burns	55
Cancer	646
Diabetes	985
Fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome	219
General deconditioning/debilitation	803
HIV/AIDS	45
Lipedema	41
Lymphedema	314
Open wounds/decubitus ulcers	342
Organ transplantation	31
Other (please specify)	27
Rheumatoid arthritis	497
Trauma/polytrauma	276
I do not provide services to this diagnostic category.	787
Total (excluding those who do not provide services)	5,085

Appendix B

COTA Continuing Competency Profile

Domain 1: Core Occupational Therapy Expertise

Apply foundational and advanced occupational therapy knowledge to support client-centered occupational participation and performance.

Competencies:

- 1.1 Demonstrate understanding of complex health conditions, diagnoses, and contextual factors, and how they impact occupational participation and performance.
- 1.2 Apply relevant OT models, theories, and frames of reference to guide services across the occupational therapy process.
- 1.3 Assist with administering assessments and engage in ongoing collaboration with the OTR to monitor and update the plan of care, goals, and outcomes.
- 1.4 Use activity analysis to facilitate the selection, grading, and adaptation of occupations
- 1.5 Recognize meaningful patterns in performance and report observations to the OTR to ensure continuity of care.
- 1.6 Understand the personal and contextual factors that impact discharge planning.

Domain 2: Clinical Reasoning and Evidence-Based Practice

Apply clinical reasoning and evidence-based decision-making across the occupational therapy process.

Competencies:

- 2.1 Observe, analyze, and interpret patterns in client performance to inform clinical decision-making.
- 2.2 Locate appropriate resources to critically appraise and apply evidence to guide best practices.
- 2.3 Assess the efficacy of evidence-based interventions by measuring outcomes.
- 2.4 Draw upon best evidence, clinical experiences, and client factors to advance therapeutic outcomes.

Domain 3: Client–Centered Care

Uphold equitable, inclusive, and client-centered occupational participation throughout the plan of care.

Competencies:

- 3.1 Review the occupational profile to guide the intervention approach according to the plan of care.
- 3.2 Acknowledge and respect clients' values, identities, and lived experiences to deliver client-centered care.
- 3.3 Collaborate with the client and relevant others to identify meaningful activities and occupations.
- 3.4 Utilize therapeutic use of self to engage with clients and promote positive health outcomes.
- 3.5 Adapt interventions in response to evolving client needs and contextual factors.
- 3.6 Provide care with awareness of the principles of equity, cultural humility, and trauma-informed care and their impact on client outcomes.
- 3.7 Empower clients by addressing their needs, facilitating resource access, and fostering self-advocacy.

Domain 4: Collaboration and Communication

Build and sustain effective, respectful relationships with clients, families, caregivers, intra/interdisciplinary professionals, and other relevant parties.

Competencies:

- 4.1 Communicate with clarity, empathy, and responsiveness across all audiences and modes of communication.
- 4.2 Engage in collaborative interprofessional care that fosters respect and trust while remaining within the OT scope of practice.
- 4.3 Foster healthy intraprofessional communication with occupational therapy practitioners to promote goal-directed client-centered care.
- 4.4 Facilitate interprofessional and intraprofessional learning and teamwork.
- 4.5 Address conflict using appropriate and constructive strategies and model self-awareness and empathy.
- 4.6 Document skilled occupational therapy services accurately, ethically, and in sufficient detail to support continuity of care.
- 4.7 Adapt communication across various levels of learning and understanding to effectively communicate with clients, caregivers, and other relevant parties.

Domain 5: Leadership and Advocacy

Advocate for practice environments and systems that improve outcomes and advance the profession.

Competencies:

- 5.1 Mentor, supervise, and coach students, occupational therapy practitioners, and support personnel.
- 5.2 Serve as a resource and leader within interdisciplinary teams, organizations, and communities.
- 5.3 Advocate for the OT profession by providing education on occupational therapy's distinct value in established and emerging practice areas.
- 5.4 Address occupational injustices by advocating for marginalized or underserved populations who receive or may benefit from OT services.

Domain 6: Professionalism and Accountability

Uphold high standards of ethical, safe, and evidence-based care.

Competencies:

- 6.1 Apply ethical decision-making in everyday practice while adhering to relevant laws and regulations.
- 6.2 Utilize and uphold the supervisory process to exchange information, collaborate, and problem solve.
- 6.3 Identify and mitigate risks to ensure the safety of clients, self, and others.
- 6.4 Model professionalism by adapting practice through self-assessment, reflection, and peer feedback.
- 6.5 Model self-awareness and adaptability by taking ownership of outcomes and actions across the therapeutic process.
- 6.6 Prioritize self-care to sustain personal well-being, prevent burnout, and uphold quality care in occupational therapy practice.
- 6.7 Demonstrate professionalism by prioritizing tasks and meeting clinical, administrative, and client-centered responsibilities in a timely and organized manner.
- 6.8 Apply knowledge of billing, insurance, and reimbursement within relevant practice settings to support accurate documentation and compliance with funding and regulatory requirements.

Domain 7: Innovation and Continuous Improvement

Engage in lifelong learning with a growth mindset and contribute to individual and practice advancement.

Competencies:

- 7.1 Identify individual learning needs and pursue ongoing professional development to advance competence
- 7.2 Utilize quality improvement initiatives, research, and outcome tracking to determine best practice.
- 7.3 Integrate new and emerging technologies, techniques, and strategies, including applications of artificial intelligence, when appropriate, to enhance service delivery.
- 7.4 Evaluate and adapt to sociopolitical changes as needed to sustain effective service delivery to individuals, communities, and populations.
- 7.5 Contribute to or lead initiatives that integrate new knowledge into current practice.
- 7.6 Remain aware of emerging practice areas to identify opportunities for professional innovation.

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