Occupational Therapy Australia

The Participation Gap

A national snapshot on health, productivity and occupational therapy

October 2025

Acknowledgement of Country

Occupational Therapy Australia acknowledges and pays respect to the past, present and future Traditional Custodians and Elders of this nation and the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



“Gaka Yapameyepuka” - Come Together

Luke and Siena Tieri

‘Gaka Yapameyepuka’ depicts the collaboration and connection between Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and encourages cultural awareness and engagement to strengthen relationships, contributing to reconciliation.

About OTA

Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) is a not-for-profit, member-based association and the peak professional body representing occupational therapists nationwide.

We are dedicated to protecting and progressing occupational therapy in Australia, ensuring the profession is recognised, supported, and empowered to make a lasting impact.

Through education, connection, advocacy and visibility, OTA enables lifelong learning, supports professional growth, and promotes the vital role of occupational therapy in the health and wellbeing of the Australian community.

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Methodology

- This study was conducted online by YouGov between 29 August – 8 September 2025.
- The sample is comprised of a nationally representative sample of 1,501 Australians aged 18 years and older.
- Respondents are sourced from the YouGov panel. Panellists are incentivised by points that can be redeemed for cash or vouchers.
- YouGov designed the questionnaire, in collaboration with Occupational Therapy Australia, a copy of which has been included in this report.
- The figures are representative of the voting population by age, gender, region, income, education, 2025 Federal Election vote and 2023 Voice referendum vote.
- Significant differences have been reported at the 95% confidence interval.
- This study has been carried out in accordance with the ISO 20252:2019 standards, to which YouGov is accredited.

Unless noted otherwise, all statistics in this report are from The Participation Gap poll conducted by YouGov on behalf of OTA.



Foreword



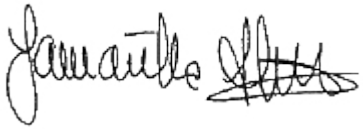
Australians want to keep contributing at work, at home and in their communities – and when health challenges strike, having the right support makes all the difference. This report shines a light on the scale of the participation gap and the barriers people face, while showing how occupational therapists help Australians adapt, rebuild and return to the roles that matter most.

It also highlights a practical opportunity – to better connect people with occupational therapy when and where they need it. OTA will continue working with partners across health, disability, aged care and community systems to make that a reality.

What makes these findings so important is that they connect everyday stories with national issues. When someone can no longer work or care for a loved one, the impact is deeply personal – but it also flows into household finances, workforce participation, and community strength. At a time when cost-of-living pressures and productivity challenges dominate public debate, this research shows how health and participation are inseparable.

Occupational therapy has always been about solutions, not just problems. Across hospitals, schools, aged care and community settings, OTs bring a distinct expertise in helping people do what matters most to them. The findings of this report are not only a reminder of how vital that contribution already is, but also a call to ensure that every Australian can access it when they need it.

As the national peak body for OTs, OTA is committed to ensuring the profession continues to grow, thrive and meet Australia's needs – now and into the future.



Samantha Hunter, CEO
Occupational Therapy Australia

Overview

New national polling reveals the scale of Australia's hidden participation gap: two in five Australians have had to significantly cut back on work, caring or community life because of health challenges, with millions sidelined for three months or more. The impacts are felt not only by individuals, but across households and workplaces – from financial strain and lost confidence, to reduced productivity at a time when cost-of-living pressures are already high.

Australians say some of the biggest obstacles to returning are pain and fatigue, fear of re-injury and mental health concerns – all practice areas where occupational therapists play a vital role. Nearly half of those who have been sidelined have direct experience of occupational therapy or know someone who has, demonstrating the profession's vital role in helping people adapt, rebuild and return to their roles. At the same time, one in five identify lack of professional support to help them adapt as a barrier, highlighting the ongoing barriers to accessing OT services when Australians need them most.

With 85% of Australians backing the importance of professional support to adapt or regain independence when health issues strike, the findings show both the enormous impact of OTs today and the clear opportunity to connect more people with their expertise – closing the participation gap and strengthening our communities and economy.



About occupational therapy

Occupational therapy is a highly skilled health profession that helps people take part in the everyday activities that bring meaning and independence to their lives. It takes a whole-person approach, addressing physical, mental, social and environmental factors, and focuses on practical solutions so people can keep doing what matters most.

Occupational therapists (OTs) are allied health professionals who support people of all ages to take part in the everyday activities ('occupations') that bring meaning and independence to their lives – whether that's working, caring, learning, playing or socialising.

OTs work in a variety of settings, including public and private hospitals, community health services, schools, disability services, aged care, mental health services, workplace rehabilitation and private practice.

To practise in Australia, OTs must complete an accredited bachelor's or master's degree in occupational therapy, be registered with the Occupational Therapy Board of Australia under Ahpra, and maintain ongoing professional development.

As of June 2025, there were 34,423 occupational therapists registered with Ahpra: 30,602 with general registration, 1,153 with provisional or limited registration (including postgraduate supervised practice), and 2,668 non-practising[1].

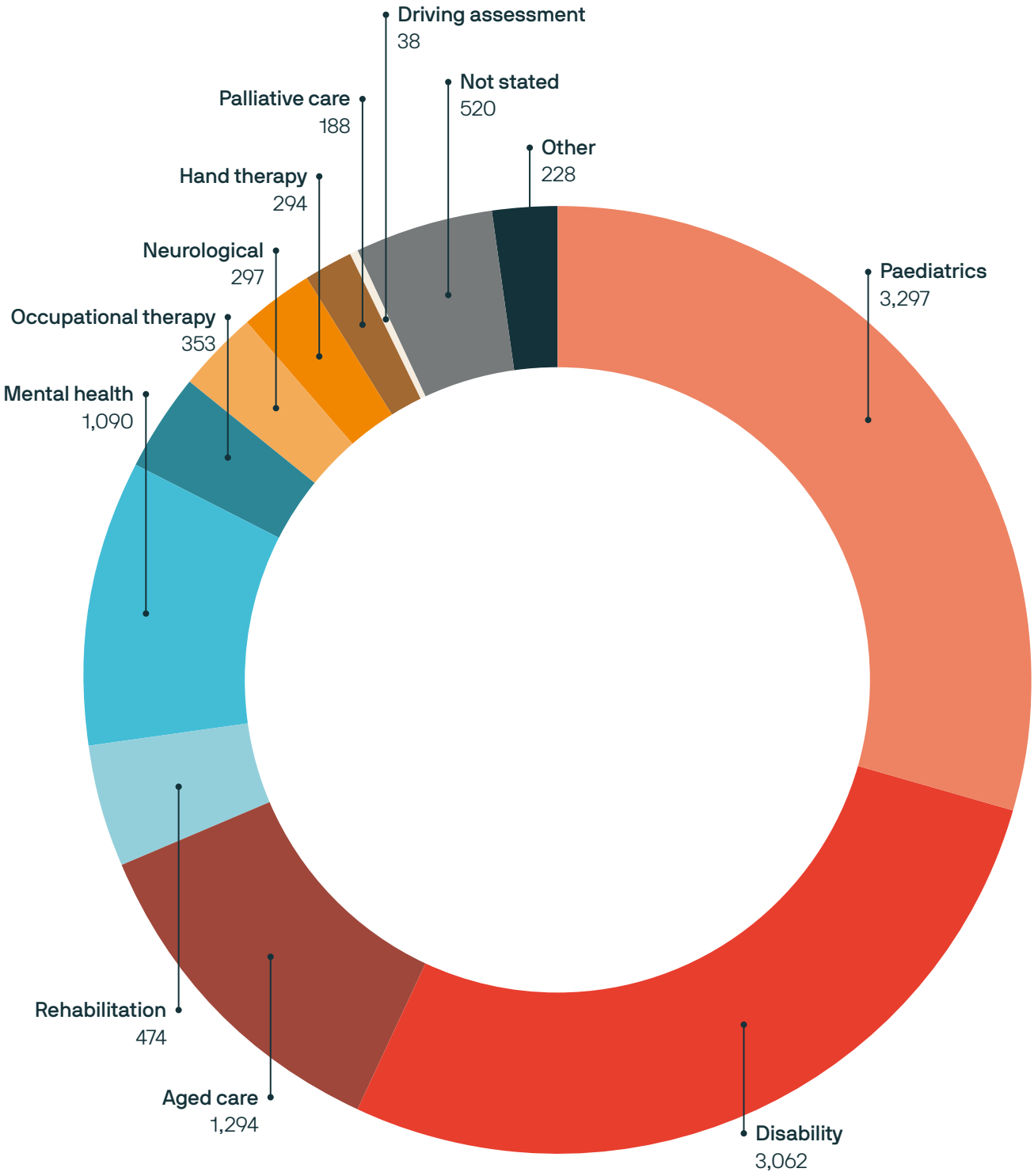
Occupational therapists work across a large range of practice areas and the data demonstrates some significant trends in growth and decline across these areas. Over the period from 2013 to 2021, there was a nearly 9% increase in OTs practising the field of disability and a nearly 6% increase in OTs practising in paediatrics. In absolute numbers of OTs, the largest growth has been in the field of paediatrics. Alternatively, rehabilitation has seen the largest percentage decrease over the same time period at a decline of 6%[2].

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[1] ***Occupational Therapy Board of Australia.*** *(2025, June 30). Registrant data: Reporting period 01 April 2025 to 30 June 2025 – Registration type by principal place of practice (p. 4). Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. https://www.occupationaltherapyboard.gov.au/About/Statistics.aspx*

[2] ***Occupational Therapy Australia.*** *(2023). Occupational therapy national workforce data report (p. 15). https://otaus.com.au/resources/occupational-therapy-national-workforce-data-report-2023*

Occupational Therapists – Scope of Practice (2021)



Source: ***Occupational Therapy Australia.*** *(2023). Occupational therapy national workforce data report (Figure 5-2, "Occupational Therapists – Scope of Practice 2021," p. 17). https://otaus.com.au/resources/occupational-therapy-national-workforce-data-report-2023*

Inside Australia's Participation Gap

How large is the Participation Gap?

The participation gap touches nearly every Australian household. For many, the impact stretches on for months, cutting people off from roles that provide purpose, connection and security.

More than half of Australians know someone who has been forced to step back from work or community life due to health challenges – and for many it's not an isolated case, but something they see play out in families, workplaces and neighbourhoods every day. This is a widespread social and economic challenge – and a practical opportunity to help people get back to what matters.

Key findings

- Over two in five Australians (42%) say they have had to significantly cut back on work, study, caring for family members or community activities in the past due to a health issue, injury or disability (this equates to over 7.5 million Australians).
- Over one in two Australians (52%) know someone who has had to significantly cut back on work, study, caring for family members or community activities in the past due to a health issue, injury or disability.
- Australians who have been personally impacted are much more likely (75%) to also know someone else affected – showing how interconnected and visible this issue is within families and communities.
- Nearly one in five Australians (19%) have been impacted for longer than 3 months (over 3.4 million Australians) while 17% have been impacted for between 1 week to 3 months and 6% have been impacted for less than a week.
- One in four Australians (25%) know someone who has had to stop completely, while nearly one in three 32% know someone who has had to reduce their involvement in work or social activities.

The human and economic cost

Seven in ten Australians say the biggest impact of being sidelined is financial strain, followed by mental health, loss of confidence and social isolation – showing how the participation gap hits both households and the wider economy.

Key findings

- Over seven in ten Australians (71%) view loss of income/financial strain as one of the top two impacts of having to stop or reduce work/study/community activities due to health issues (this equates to over 12.7 million Australians).
- Social and mental impacts are also frequently noted, with a negative impact on mental health (37%), loss of confidence/independence (30%), and social isolation/loneliness (26%) among the top selections. Together, these results indicate that over eight in ten Australians (78%) note a social or mental impact as one of their top two impacts on quality of life.



Equity and vulnerability

The participation gap does not affect all Australians equally. Women, those from low-income households, and those with lower education levels are more likely to be sidelined for three months or longer, while different groups experience sharper impacts – from mental health pressures for women, to loss of confidence among older Australians, to isolation among those without children.

These inequities highlight the urgency of improving access to occupational therapy across all parts of the community.

Key findings

- Women have felt more long-term impacts with a larger amount having been impacted for longer than 3 months (23% women and 15% for men).
- Australians whose highest level of education is TAFE/College are more likely to have been impacted for longer than 3 months (TAFE/College 24%, Up to Year 12 18%, Tertiary Education 14%).
- Boomers are more likely to believe the loss of confidence/independence as a major impact (42% Boomers, 25% GenX, 26% Millennials, 22% GenZ).
- Women are more likely to note the negative impact on mental health (41% women, 32% men).
- Nearly one in three (29%) of Australians in the lowest household income bracket (<50k per year) have been out of work for longer than 3 months in the past due to health, injury or disability (compared to 18% among 50–99k, 19% 100–149k and 12% 150k+).
- Boomers are more likely to believe the loss of confidence/independence as a major impact (42% Boomers, 25% GenX, 26% Millennials, 22% GenZ).



The barriers to returning

Australians say the biggest barriers to returning to their roles include pain and fatigue, fear of re-injury, and mental health concerns – all areas where OTs have unique expertise to support people. Notably, one in five identify lack of professional support to help them adapt as a barrier, showing the need to better connect Australians with OT expertise.

Key findings

- Nearly three in five Australians (58%) see pain/fatigue as one of the largest barriers to the return to work (this equates to over 10.4 million Australians).
- Other barriers include the physical environment not being accessible (34%), and lack of professional support to help them adapt (20%).
- Over two in five Australians also see significant barriers in lack of employer flexibility or support (48%), lack of confidence/fear of re-injury (41%) and mental health concerns (40%).

The role of occupational therapy

Occupational therapy is already central to Australia's participation story, with most Australians aware of the profession and many who have been sidelined having direct or close experience of it. Awareness is not evenly spread, however, with gaps in lower education and income groups – the very people most at risk of being sidelined. This highlights both the reach of occupational therapy today and the opportunity to extend its impact further.

Key findings

- Over four in five Australians (79%) are aware of the role of occupational therapists (this equates to over 14 million Australians).
- Nearly half (49%) of those who have been sidelined by health challenges have either received OT themselves or know someone who has – compared with only 31% among those who have not been sidelined.
- Nearly two in five (39%) have either received occupational therapy in the past or know someone who has received occupational therapy (equating to over 6.9 million Australians).
- Australians whose highest level of education is Year 12 or less are less likely to be aware of occupational therapy with 25% having not heard of occupational therapy (compared to TAFE/College 18% and Tertiary Education 17%).

> *"When health challenges strike, occupational therapists are the key to keeping Australians connected to the roles that matter most."*
>
> - Samantha Hunter, Chief Executive Officer, Occupational Therapy Australia





Public mandate for support

Australians overwhelmingly back access to professional support to adapt or regain independence when health issues disrupt their lives: 85% say it's important, and those who have experienced occupational therapy themselves are almost twice as likely to see it as very important, showing the lasting impact of occupational therapy.

Key findings

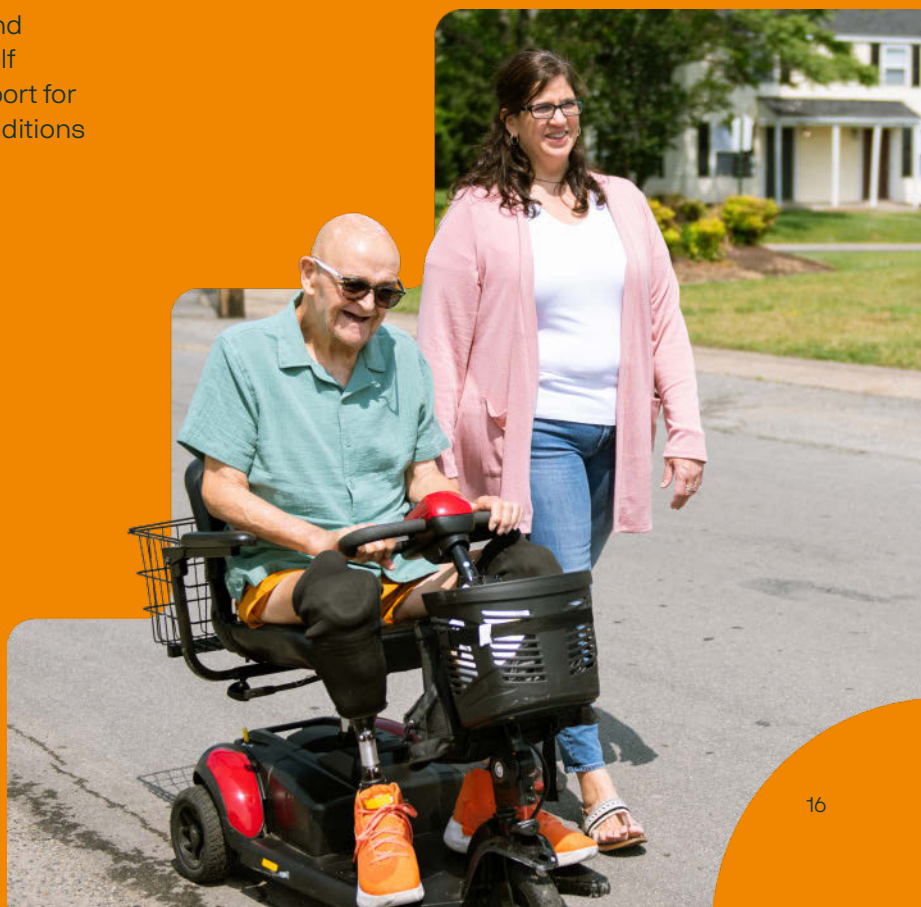
- Over four in five (85%) say it is important to have professional support available to adapt and regain independence if they/a loved one were unable to work/study/volunteer due to a health issue. This included over half of Australians (54%) who feel it is very important.
- Crucially, Australians who have received occupational therapy themselves are far more likely to view the availability of professional support as very important (71%) compared to those who are only aware of occupational therapy but have neither used it nor know someone who has (37%). This demonstrates the tangible impact of occupational therapy and how experience builds recognition of its value.

What do OTs do?

Occupational therapists support people of all ages overcome physical, mental or environmental barriers so they can take part in the everyday activities that matter most – at home, at work, at school and in the community.

Examples include:

- helping people manage pain, fatigue and energy so they can keep up with daily routines
- supporting mental health and wellbeing – working with people experiencing stress, grief, anxiety or depression to rebuild routines and social roles
- adapting environments and activities – recommending home modifications, assistive devices or task adjustments to make life safer and easier
- working with children to build skills for learning and participation, including fine motor control, social skills and classroom routines
- supporting older adults to stay independent – providing strategies, equipment and exercises to manage age-related changes, mobility and self-care
- helping people with injury or disability return to or enter the workforce, volunteering or community life by finding new ways to participate
- providing expertise such as hand therapy, driver rehabilitation, self regulation approaches, or support for people with complex health conditions



Expanding access to occupational therapy

Australians identify multiple barriers when it comes to returning to work, caring or community life after illness, injury or disability. Pain and fatigue (58%), lack of employer flexibility (48%), fear of re-injury (41%) and mental health concerns (40%) are the most common obstacles. One in five (20%) also point to a lack of professional support to help them adapt, underscoring the need for greater access to the right expertise at the right time.

Many of these barriers are precisely the practice areas where occupational therapists have unique expertise. OTs support people to rebuild routines, address fatigue and pain, regain confidence after injury, and manage the mental health impacts of disruption. Yet systemic and funding challenges mean that not everyone who could benefit from OT is able to access it.

Across health and community systems, policy and pricing issues are compounding these access challenges. In the NDIS, frozen therapy support rates and reduced travel funding are threatening the viability of OT services, particularly in regional and rural Australia. Preliminary OTA survey data shows 14% of OT businesses working in the NDIS are already planning to close, and another 50% are considering exiting the sector within three years[3].

The Department of Veterans' Affairs fee schedule is well below comparable schemes, rendering it financially unsustainable for providers practising under the scheme. OTs do this work out of a passion to support those who have served but it is difficult to cover costs[4].

In mental health, OTs are often paid less than other professionals for the same work[5], making workforce retention difficult. And unpaid or underfunded student placements mean that new graduates, particularly those from low-income or regional backgrounds, face additional hurdles in entering the profession.

Occupational Therapy Australia is advocating for concrete actions to address these barriers – from expanding the Commonwealth Prac Payment to OT students, to fast-tracking overseas registration, to strengthening supervision support for new graduates. OTA is also working with government to improve system efficiencies and ensure OTs can work to their full scope of practice. These changes would expand access to occupational therapy, ensuring more Australians can get the support they need to overcome barriers and return to the roles that matter most.

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[3] ***Occupational Therapy Australia.*** *(2025, September 1). OTA's survey of OTs shows dire consequences of NDIS pricing decision. https://www.otaus.com.au/news/otas-survey-of-ots-shows-dire-consequences-of-ndis-pricing-decision*

[4] ***Occupational Therapy Australia.*** *(2025). OTA's Federal Election statement 2025. https://otaus.com.au/ota-2025-federal-election-toolkit*

[5] ***Occupational Therapy Australia.*** *(2025, May 6). Occupational therapy peak body urges Vic Government to address growing pay gap between OTs and nurses [Media release]. https://otaus.com.au/news/media-release-occupational-therapy-peak-body-urges-vic-government-to-address-growing-pay-gap-between-ots-and-nurses*



These findings show just how critical occupational therapists already are to Australia's workforce and communities. Whether it's helping someone return to work after injury, adapt their home to stay independent, or rebuild confidence after mental health challenges, OTs provide practical solutions that help people get back to the roles that matter most. With demand growing, ensuring Australians can access OT support when they need it is key to closing the participation gap and strengthening both our communities and our economy."



- Samantha Hunter, Chief Executive Officer, Occupational Therapy Australia

Appendix: Survey information

Q1. Have you ever had to stop or significantly cut back on work, study, caring for family members, volunteering or community activities because of a health issue, injury or disability? If yes, please think about the longest single period when this happened.

Please select the option that best applies.

1. Yes – for less than a week
2. Yes – for between 1 week and 3 months
3. Yes – for longer than 3 months
4. No, I have not had to stop or cut back

Q2. Do you personally know someone (family, friend, colleague) who has had to stop or reduce participation in work, study, family or community activities due to a significant health issue, injury, or disability?

Please select all options that apply.

1. Yes, they had to stop completely
2. Yes, they reduced their involvement
3. No

Q3. Which of the following, if any best describes your experience with occupational therapists (OTs) who help people get back to work, study, volunteering, and community participation after illness, injury, or disability?

Please select all options that apply.

1. Yes I am aware of the benefits of OTs, and I have received occupational therapy in the past
2. Yes I am aware of the benefits of OTs, and someone I know has received occupational therapy
3. Yes I'm aware of the benefits of OTs, but neither myself nor anybody I know has received occupational therapy
4. No, I've not heard of nor aware of the benefits of occupational therapists

Q4. In your opinion, what do you think are the biggest barriers to returning to work, study, family or community activities following a significant health issue, injury, or disability?

Please select up to 3 options in any order.

1. Pain or fatigue
2. Physical environment not accessible (e.g. stairs, equipment, transport)
3. Lack of confidence / fear of re-injury
4. Mental health concerns
5. Lack of employer flexibility or support
6. Lack of professional support to help me adapt
7. Other (please specify)
8. Don't know

Q5. If you or a loved one were unable to work, study, or volunteer because of a health issue, how important would it be for you/them to have professional support to adapt and regain independence?

Please select the option that best applies.

1. Very important
2. Important
3. Somewhat important
4. Not important at all

Q6. If you or someone you know has had to stop, reduce, or put a stop to work, study, or community activities due to health issues, what do you think have been the biggest impacts on your/their lives?

Pick your top 2 options in any order.

1. Loss of income/financial strain
2. Unable to meet caring responsibilities
3. Loss of confidence/independence
4. Social isolation/loneliness
5. Negative impact on mental health
6. Other (please specify)
7. None of these/ don't know

Q7. Which of the following would you find most important to keep doing if your health situation changed?

Select up to 2 options in any order.

1. Paid work
2. Caring for loved ones
3. Study
4. Exercise and wellbeing
5. Healthy eating and nutrition
6. Time with family and friends
7. Hobbies/leisure activities
8. Community groups and volunteering
9. Maintaining a daily routine/daily habits
10. Other (please specify)

For further information about OTA's policy and advocacy work, visit otaus.com.au/advocacy.

For further information about this survey, please contact communications@otaus.com.au.

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