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# Embracing Creativity in Occupational Therapy

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# Embracing Creativity in Occupational Therapy

## **Abstract**

Jen Gash, an occupational therapist and creativity coach living in the UK, provided the cover art for the winter 2015 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*. The picture is titled "Over the Exe." Jen uses her inspiration of the Kawa River model in this painting. The painting is of her husband and daughter standing where the river meets the sea. This is a metaphoric representation of rejoining the greater collective. In addition, Jen has a passion for occupational therapists to encompass creativity. A core aspect of occupational therapy is the multi-dimensional concept of occupations; it allows for occupational therapists to incorporate creativity into daily practice. Jen's goal is for occupational therapy to embrace its creative theoretical roots.

## **Keywords**

Occupational Therapy, Kawa River model, Occupation, Creativity, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

## **Credentials Display**

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The cover art for the winter 2015 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) is by Jen Gash, an occupational therapist and creativity coach living in the UK. The piece, titled “Over the Exe,” is a 600-square centimeter painting on oil board (see Figure 1). While on holiday in South Devon, England, with her family, Jen was exploring a river called Exe and the surrounding landscape in the town of Exmouth. The man in the painting is her husband and the child next to him, with a fishing net, is her daughter. The piece of artwork has great meaning for Jen for many reasons. At the time that she created the piece, she was recovering from the end of a relationship. The painting also represents the “flow” of an occupation. Her husband and daughter got into the flow while exploring the rock pools. In addition, they are where the river meets the sea. This is a metaphor in the Kawa River model (Wada, 2011) for rejoining the greater collective. In this instance, it represents the collection of family; also, at times, it may represent death.



*Figure 1.* Over the Exe by Jen Gash

## **Becoming an Occupational Therapist**

Jen did not have a clear path that led her to occupational therapy (OT) as a career. After graduating from high school in Kent, Jen moved to London in order to pursue a “traditional” job because she was worried a career in art would not support her financially. She worked jobs in various fields, including in Human Resources and technology. After marrying at the age of 21, Jen realized she was not happy with the lack of art in her career. A job without art did not ignite her passion. She had always been interested in art; however, she did not formally become involved in art until the age of 15 during an art class. Her teacher gave her oil paints and three 8 by 10 foot boards with which she created her first large-scale piece of artwork. This significant experience marked the beginning of a lifetime relationship for Jen with art and painting. She became interested in OT when she realized that it is a comprehensive occupation that involves her love of creativity and helping others. Jen’s mother had heard of OT and encouraged her to pursue it. After further inquiry, Jen appreciated her mother’s wise recommendation and OT became her career.

## **Occupational Therapy and Occupation**

OT is comprehensive; there is no simple definition that accurately depicts the positive impact and power an OT intervention has on an individual. Jen was drawn to this theoretical foundation of OT. At its roots, OT improves health and well-being by allowing an individual to engage in meaningful occupations (Law, Steinwender, & Leclair, 1998). OT revolves around the idea of an occupation (Yerxa, 1998). The term occupation has a broad

scope; there is no universal definition that has been widely accepted in the OT literature (Dickie, 2009).

According to the *Canadian Association of Occupational Therapy Position Statement: Occupations and Health* (2008), occupations “include everything that people do to occupy themselves, including looking after themselves (self-care), enjoying life (leisure), and contributing to the social and economic fabric of their communities” (<http://www.caot.ca/default.asp?pageid=2326>). Every OT intervention is highly individualized; therefore, each treatment intervention, or occupation, can differ significantly.

The wide variety of meaningful occupations an individual may have intrigued Jen. She found great meaning in being an OT, as there is great value in improving a client’s well-being by fostering engagement in a meaningful occupation. It was not until Jen’s own well-being was threatened that she discovered how art held a crucial role in her life. In addition, this process allowed Jen to discover the pivotal role creativity plays in occupational therapy. At this stage of her career, Jen’s life was transformed.

### **Kawa River Model**

Jen discovered the Kawa River model and began to use it in her own personal life during troubled times. Life stressors had threatened her personal well-being. Her use of the Kawa River model helped to increase the flow in her river, thus improving her overall well-being. Jen’s artwork and associated descriptions of her Kawa Rivers, from 2008 to 2013, can be seen at <http://www.jengash.co.uk/kawa/>.

Michael K. Iwama developed the Kawa River model (Wada, 2011). He wanted to create an OT tool that accurately depicted OT concepts in a culturally sensitive manner (Wada, 2011). The river is a metaphor for life; the overarching goal of an OT intervention is to maximize a client’s flow. The client is asked to draw his or her own river with guidelines. In addition, a dialogue is encouraged between the client and therapist. The river represents one’s life; the beginning of the river represents birth, while the end of the river represents death. Rocks represent barriers in one’s life, such as life circumstances (Muñoz, 2011). Driftwood can either enhance or impede your river (Wada, 2011). The physical structures of the river represent the physical and social environments of an individual (Muñoz, 2011). The more space an individual has in his or her river, the greater his or her flow; a higher flow correlates to a higher well-being (Wada, 2011).

During a turbulent time in Jen’s life, she also discovered other artists that inspired her. Kurt Jackson is an artist that has completed some work with the Kawa River. In these pieces, the river can be traced back to the sea. Jen finds parallel themes to Kawa in his artwork. His artwork also inspired her to begin self-exploration. Another artist that inspired Jen is Peter Doig. He is a figurative painter who played ice hockey in his early career. He inspired Jen to appreciate that there are different pathways one can take in life; no path is linear. In her mid-thirties, Jen learned through Peter’s artwork that it was acceptable to establish oneself as an artist. A person can have multiples roles throughout one’s life.

Jen's personal use of art and self-exploration uncovered her passion for creativity. Jen realized that for an occupational therapist, creativity and occupations are intrinsically connected. Jen has a passion for the OT world to take back its power in today's new paradigm. Jen has observed that in today's OT practice external demands, such as productivity, threaten the use of creativity.

### **Creativity and Occupational Therapy**

Creativity is a subjective term for Jen. She does not use it in the traditional sense of the word. Occupational therapists have used creativity to promote the restoration of function and have progressed to using it in problem solving. In current practice, occupational therapists need to solidify the use of creativity in both contexts. According to Jen, everywhere one turns in life, there is creativity. Through interview and video posts, seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNIMFGemMZI>, she has described creativity. Creativity is the core element of our behaviors; it incorporates an intrinsic motivation to complete a goal and taps into the innate desire for mastery we as humans instinctively possess. Creativity is involved in producing artwork, creating a poem, developing technology, coding a program, or solving a problem. Creativity is not stifled to one scope; it is a broad term that incorporates every type of occupation an individual finds meaningful.

During the time Jen was developing a passion for creativity, exploring artistic inspirations, and discovering the Kawa River model, she became a creativity coach. Creativity coaching allows Jen to train occupational therapists, as well as

individuals, in becoming creative in their own practice, life, or business. For Jen, coaching is a tool that allows a person to move from where they are now to where they want to be, as she describes in her video at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4pFy78y3qM>.

Creativity coaching focuses on an individual's strengths, and creating a dialogue between a coach and an individual is a pivotal concept. Coaching and OT have parallel themes: They both strive for individuals to achieve their goals and allow them to engage in meaningful occupations.

### **What Does This Look Like in OT Practice?**

A common example Jen uses in her video posts is procrastination. There are several reasons why an individual may procrastinate: fear of failure, lack of enjoyment, fear of the unknown, stress, and/or a lack of time. In contrast, a person may be procrastinating in order to formulate ideas. From a creativity coaching point of view, the therapist would collaborate with the individual and create a dialogue. A client may need to clean her basement and has been avoiding it for years, during which time boxes accumulate. The creativity coach would discuss and assist in identifying barriers that hinder the client from cleaning her basement. They would establish goals together; some of which may include taking smaller steps, cleaning one box at a time, or devoting 5 minutes daily to this task until the goal of a clean basement is achieved. This is one situational example, but the concept can be generalized to any meaningful occupation.

Jen is also familiar with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which she incorporates in her creativity coaching. ACT

consists of six main principles: defusion, acceptance, contact with the present moment, observation of self, values, and committed action (Harris, 2009). ACT tells us that we create unnecessary suffering for ourselves (Harris, 2006). In the case of the client cleaning her basement, the longer she procrastinates, the more unwanted feelings and emotions (e.g., stress, frustration) she accumulates. From an ACT framework one would not specifically focus on decreasing the unwanted feelings and emotions, but to reduce the negative impact these emotions may have (Harris, 2006). Specifically, ACT interventions focus on accepting uncontrollable and unwanted experiences, and pursuing actions that move a client toward living a valued life (Harris, 2006). In the case of the woman cleaning her basement, she would accept the uncontrollable negative thoughts and feelings and take steps to move toward her value of a clean basement. Examples are similar to those of creativity coaching and the concept can be generalized to any meaningful occupation.

Currently, Jen has businesses that are involved in creativity coaching that can be seen at <http://www.otcoach.com>, <http://www.craftyourlife.co.uk/>, and <http://www.discoveryparty.co.uk>. More of Jen's artwork can be seen at <http://www.jengash.co.uk/my-work/>. Jen's Kawa is ever evolving, much like her artwork and career. Art is a meaningful occupation for Jen; it has allowed her to pursue her passions and strive for OT as a profession to embrace its theoretical foundation. She believes occupational therapists need to be creative and courageous, and that they should not be bound by the medical model. After all, true occupational therapy is both an art and a science. The practitioners of this noble profession can use creativity to improve well-being by feeding the soul. This transformation in Jen not only has enriched her personal life, but also has enabled her to reach out and touch others.

**To view a video and samples of Jen's art work, visit:**

**[http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot\\_occupationandartist/](http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/)**

**To view Jen's videos, visit:**

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