



Mental Health Specialty Conference

October 9-10, 2026
SUBURBAN CHICAGO

UPDATED 08/03/2026



Mental Health Specialty Conference

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Program at a Glance

ONLY KEYNOTE, CONCURRENT, AND CLOSING ARE CLOSED CAPTION.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2026

8:00 am–5:00 pm	Registration
9:00 am–5:00 pm	Pre-Conference Session #1 <i>Mental Health First Aid: Empowering Occupational Therapy Practitioners as Mental Health Responders</i>
1:00 pm–5:00 pm	Pre-Conference Session #2 <i>The Magical Use of Tabletop Role Playing Games (TRPGs) in Occupational Therapy Practice</i>

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2026

8:00 am–5:00 pm	Registration and Exhibits
8:00 am–9:00 am	Breakfast
9:00 am–9:45 am	Keynote
10:00 am–11:00 am	Concurrent 101 OR Concurrent 102
11:15 am–12:15 pm	Concurrent 103 OR Concurrent 104
2:00 pm–3:00 pm	Concurrent 105 OR Concurrent 106
3:15 pm–4:15 pm	Concurrent 107 OR Concurrent 108
4:30 pm–5:30 pm	Poster Sessions OR Conversations That Matter

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2026

8:00 am–4:00 pm	Registration
8:00 am–9:00 am	Breakfast
8:00 am–2:00 pm	Exhibits
9:00 am–10:00 am	Concurrent 201 OR Concurrent 202
10:15 am–11:15 am	Concurrent 203 OR Concurrent 204
11:30 am–12:30 pm	Concurrent 205 OR Concurrent 206
2:00 pm–3:00 pm	Concurrent 207 OR Concurrent 208
3:15 pm–4:00 pm	Closing

Bring a mental health lens to every client interaction.

Join more than 300 mental-health minded OTs and OTAs this October for AOTA's Mental Health Specialty Conference where you'll learn about trauma-informed interventions, addiction recovery, social prescribing, pediatric mental health, eating disorders, intimacy, self-care and more!

Earn up to 10.75 contact hours with the following session types:

Pre-Conference Workshops

Multi-hour sessions on Thursday, October 8 that give you deep, hands-on learning in your areas of interest.
*Separate registration required.

Concurrent Sessions

One-hour sessions that feature content in a specific area of mental health practice. Choose the topics that are most relevant to you.

Poster Sessions

Cutting-edge research and the opportunity to discuss the findings one-on-one with the presenters.

Conversations That Matter

An interactive session, where moderators introduce a specific topic related to mental health and occupational therapy practice and then facilitate discussion from you, the participant!

Register today at
aota.org/events

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Thursday | October 8, 2026

Pre-conference workshops give you hands on learning in a smaller group setting and require separate registration. Already registered and want to add a workshop to your registration? Email us at events@aota.org for assistance.

9:00 am–5:00 pm

WORKSHOP 1 | Salt Creek

Mental Health First Aid: Empowering Occupational Therapy Practitioners as Mental Health Responders

Christine Urish, Professor and Doctoral Capstone Coordinator, Drake University, Des Moines, IA

Fewer than half of Americans know how to support someone in a mental health crisis. This preconference session, Mental Health First Aid, is an evidence-based framework aligned with occupational therapy's commitment to holistic, occupation-centered care.

1:00 pm–4:00 pm

WORKSHOP 2 | Monarch

The Magical Use of Tabletop Role Playing Games (TRPGs) in Occupational Therapy Practice

Sarah Fried, OTR/L, Momentum for Health, San Jose, CA

Explore Tabletop Roleplaying Games (TRPGs) as a tool for development of identity, self-esteem, and social-emotional skills. Learn how occupational therapy's expertise in accessibility, adaptive thinking, and social dynamics play a role in innovative groups.



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Friday | October 9, 2026

9:00 am–9:45 am

KEYNOTE | Ballroom F-J

From 3% to More: Strengthening Mental Health Occupational Therapy Workforce Development

Halley Read, PhD, OTR/L, Western Oregon University, Monmouth, OR; Nuriya Hefron, MS, OTR/L, Stanford University, Stanford, CA



Halley Read, PhD, OTR/L



Nuriya Hefron, MS, OTR/L

This session engages practitioners, researchers, and academicians to identify barriers to clinical education and job shadowing in mental health. With ~3% of occupational therapy practitioners in mental health settings, participants will explore solutions to expand learning and workforce pathways.

10:00 am–11:00 am

Concurrent 101 | Ballroom F-J

Prescribing Connection: Opportunities and Risks of Social Prescribing (SP) for Mental Health Occupational Therapy

Carol Lambdin-Pattavina, OTD, MSOT, OTR/L, CTP, FAOTA, University of New England, Portland, ME; Ivory Rose, OTD, Century Villages at Cabrillo and Social Prescribing USA, Long Beach, CA; MaryBeth Gallagher, PhD, OTR/L, Duke University, Chapel Hill, NC

Social prescribing connects people to community-based activities to foster well-being and mitigate social determinants of health. This session explores SP's global landscape, intersection with mental health occupational therapy practice, and emerging roles, opportunities, and risks for occupational therapy practitioners in the US.

Concurrent 102 | Salt Creek

Building Capacity for Trauma Stewardship in Occupational Therapy Education and Practice: The Ethical Responsibility of Self-Care

Amy Kashiwa, OTD, OTR/L, Elizabeth Sherman-Thomas, PhD, OTR/L, both of University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, WA

This session explores the impact of trauma in occupational therapy education and clinical practice, and offers opportunities to develop strategies and resources, emphasizing self-care as an ethical responsibility to support daily trauma stewardship practice.

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Friday | October 9, 2026

11:15 am–12:15 pm

Concurrent 103 | Ballroom F-J

Engaged in Everyday Life: Emotional Connections to Daily Occupations in Individuals with Anxiety and Depression

Karen Hebert, PhD, OTR/L, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD

The value of engagement in daily occupations as a means of promoting positive and negative emotional regulation among individuals living with anxiety and depression is presented through relevant research, assessment, and intervention recommendations.

Concurrent 104 | Salt Creek

Beyond Coping Skills: Designing Occupation-Based Intervention in Mental Health Practice

Allison Sullivan, DOT, MSOT, OTR/L, American International College, Springfield, MA

Reframes coping as an outcome of system and intervention design. Participants use goal banks to develop measurable, occupation-based interventions aligned with cognition, context, and recovery.

2:00 pm–3:00 pm

Concurrent 105 | Ballroom F-J

Building a Sustainable Cross Training Program to Support Mental Health Service Delivery Across Inpatient Care

Stephanie McCammon, Senior Occupational Therapist, Naomi Frisch, OTD, OTR/L, both of Rush University Medical Center, Chicago, IL

Cross-training occupational therapy practitioners in acute and behavioral health improves access, competence, and collaboration. This course provides a scalable, reflective model to expand mental health practice and strengthen workforce development across settings.

Concurrent 106 | Salt Creek

Regulation in Real Time: Applying the 6 Rs in Acute Care Pediatric Mental Health

Laura Smith, OTD, OTR/L, University of North Alabama, Florence, AL

Children with adverse experiences often present with dysregulation in acute mental health settings. This session explores trauma-informed, occupation-based strategies for real-time co-regulation and de-escalation to support safety and participation.

Friday | October 9, 2026

3:15 pm–4:15 pm

Concurrent 107 | Ballroom F-J

Designing Occupation-Based Groups for Addiction Recovery: From Theory to Practice

Ryan Thomure, OTD, OTR/L, LCSW, University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago, Illinois; Cameron Honsa, OTD, OTR/L, QMHP, Ascension Housing and Health Alliance, Chicago, Illinois; Ray Cendejas, COTA/L, Ascension Housing and Health Alliance, Chicago, Illinois

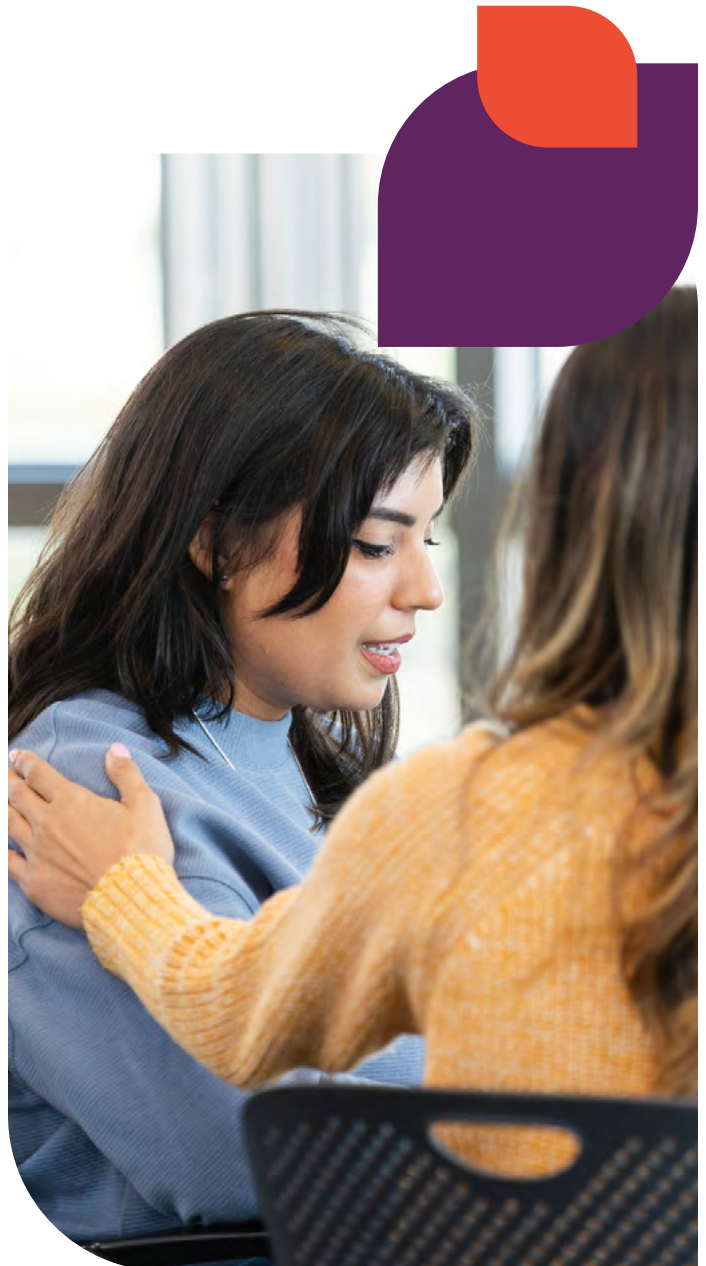
This session equips practitioners with a framework for designing occupation-based groups in addiction settings, grounded in group theory and illustrated through field-tested protocols. Participants leave with replicable structures for immediate use.

Concurrent 108 | Salt Creek

Moving from Social Isolation to Social Participation and Connection: Community-based Occupational Therapy with Disabled People Moving from Institutions to the Community

Joy Hammel, PhD, OTR/L, University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago, IL; Kathryn Gallagher, OTR/L, Association House of Chicago, Chicago, IL; Rachel Montoya, Chicago, IL

People with disabilities moving from institutions to the community face social isolation, affecting health and community living outcomes. This course highlights research and community-based occupational therapy to support social participation, including capstone projects.



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Conversations That Matter | 4:30 pm–5:30 pm

Ballroom F-J

CTM 101

What's Working and What's Missing: A Pediatric Mental Health Conversation

Erin Epley, OTD, OTR/L, Elmhurst University, Elmhurst, IL

Pediatric mental and behavioral health needs are growing and occupational therapy practitioners are responding. Participants share what's working in practice, what's missing, and identify supports needed from AOTA and state organizations to advance occupational therapy's role in this arena.

CTM 102

Opening the Dialogue: Empowering Occupational Therapy Practitioners (OTPs) to Address Sexuality and Intimacy

Jennifer Summers, OTD, OT/L, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL

This interactive discussion examines barriers to addressing sexuality and intimacy in mental health practice and prepares OTPs to confidently advocate for their role in supporting these vital dimensions of participation and well-being.

CTM 103

Beyond Feeding Disorders: Does Occupational Therapy Have a Role in Treating Eating Disorders?

Kelly Farrell, OTR/L, Columbia University, New York, NY; Maddie Duzyk, OTR/L, OTD, Positive OT, LLC, Fort Mitchell, KY; Rebecca Willman, OT, OTD, OTR, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO; Caroline Stanton, OTD, OTR/L, Prisma Health, Greenville, SC

This interactive session aims to facilitate a conversation about occupational therapy's role in eating disorder care. Through guided discussion, participants will share their experiences and common challenges, identifying actionable insights for clinical applications.



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Posters | 4:30 pm–5:30 pm

East and South Foyer

Poster 101: Elevating Occupational Therapy Through the ELEVATE Model

Lynne Clarke, OTD, OTR/L, Rockhurst University, Kansas City, MO

This presentation highlights how occupational therapy practice aligns with the ELEVATE Model. Evidence-based and occupation-centered approaches, including prevention, wellness, and positive behavior change, will be described.

Poster 102: Oral Health, Mental Health, and Functional Outcomes in Adults with Serious Mental Health Conditions

Danielle Losonci, MS, OTR/L, Touro University, New York, NY

This cross-sectional study of 212 adults with serious mental health conditions found poorer oral health-related quality of life is linked to worse overall health, more mental and physical 'unhealthy' days, and greater difficulty with daily function.

Poster 103: The Feasibility of Implementing Occupational Therapy Services in Emergency Homeless Shelters

Serena Blank, MOT, OTR/L, CHI, Omaha, NE; Contributing Author: Halley Read, PhD, OTR/L, Western Oregon University, Monmouth, OR

The purpose of this project was to explore the opportunities and challenges of implementing occupational therapy services in emergency homeless shelters.

Poster 104: Exploring Impact of Community Sensory Yoga Intervention on Stress, Anxiety, and Relaxation

Nicole Halliwell, DSc, OTR/L, Monmouth University, West Long Branch, NJ

Studies show a positive impact of consistent yoga intervention over time, yet providers may use it differently. This study explores the impact of a single sensory-yoga session on relaxation, stress, and anxiety for members of a university community.

Poster 105: Perceptions of Adults with Serious Mental Illness (SMI) Regarding the Selection and Use of Sensory Strategies

Jennifer Allison, OTD, OTR/L, BCMH, FAOTA, CCAP, Brenau University, Gainesville, GA; Rachel Beckey, MS, OTR/L, Peachstate Pediatric Therapy, Buford, GA; Taylor Lancaster, MS, OTR/L, Northside Hospital, Cumming, GA; Madison Pittman, MS, OT/L, Advocate Health, Macon, GA; Raegan Waters, MS, OTR/L, Pruitt Health, Buford, GA

This qualitative study examined how adults with SMI choose and use sensory strategies at a community mental health center. Three themes emerged: supporting factors, modulation, and mind-body impact.

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East and South Foyer

Poster 106: Occupational Therapy Graduate Student Experiences Managing Stress During Level II Fieldwork

Lauren Perkinson, University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, WA; Contributing Authors: Andee Spehar, DrOT, OTR/L, University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, WA; Kirsten Wilbur, EdD, OTR/L, University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, WA

Research was completed to examine how occupational therapy students experience and manage stress during Level II Fieldwork. Students are generally experiencing moderate levels of stress due to chronic contributors and managing their stress using personal resources.

Poster 107: Ethical and Effective Use of Artificial Intelligence for Intervention Planning in Mental Health Practice: A Pilot Workshop for Occupational Therapy Students

Ricardo Ramirez, OTD, OTR/L, Rush University, Chicago, IL

With artificial intelligence continuing to proliferate, it is crucial we train the next generation of occupational therapy practitioners how to best use it for intervention planning to support client mental health.

Poster 108: Mindfulness in Occupational Therapy: Introducing the Assessment of Mindfulness Expectations to Reduce Misalignment and Risk

Sarah Garrison, DHSc, OTR/L, Radford University, Roanoke, VA

Mindfulness is not a neutral, risk-free intervention. The recently validated Assessment of Mindfulness Expectations can serve as a tool to explore client expectations, risk factors, and alignment between practitioner capacities and client needs.

Poster 109: Adjustment Disorder, Life Transitions, and Occupational Disruption: Implications for Preventive Occupational Therapy Practice

Susan Persia, OTD, MS, OTR/L, CASI, RYT500, Widener University, Chester, PA

This poster examines adjustment disorder through an occupational lens, highlighting how life transitions disrupt routines, roles, and participation. Findings support preventive occupational therapy approaches that promote adaptation and wellbeing.

Poster 110: Fostering Mattering in Occupational Therapy Education: A Student-Faculty Co-Authored Analysis of Mental Health Course Classroom Activities

Danielle Losonci, MS, OTR/L, Touro University, New York, NY

This faculty-student project examined mattering-based activities in a mental health course. Findings suggest improved student engagement, sense of mattering, and strengthened professional identity, supporting student-centered pedagogical approaches.

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East and South Foyer

Poster 111: Helping Students Thrive Across Environments: Tier 2 School-Based Pilot Intervention

Sarah Greene, OTD, OTR/L, Margaret Andrews, Stephanie Friedrich, all of St. Catherine University, St. Paul, MN

Contributing Authors: Adyson Bellis; Alexis Polinder

Thrive Time OT is designed for elementary-aged students who may benefit from additional support through a Tier 2 after-school program. Preliminary findings from the piloted program, run by occupational therapy practitioners and students, during the 2025-2026 school year, will be presented.

Poster 113: Building Resilience by Design: Scaffolding Evidence-Based Burnout Prevention Across the Occupational Therapy Curriculum

Ryan Thomure, OTD, OTR/L, LCSW, Jenica Lee, OTD, OTRL, Toni Van Denend, OTD, OTR/L, Caitlin Smith, OTD, OTR/L, CLT-UE, Dalmina Arias, OTD, OTR/L, Lisa Shuskus, OTD, OTR/L, all of University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago, IL

Burnout prevention deserves more than a single wellness lecture. This session presents a curricular model that scaffolds evidence-based resilience tools across foundational, professional development, and fieldwork touchpoints in occupational therapy education.

Poster 114: From Resilience to Collective Care: Applying a Caring Communities Framework to Occupational Therapy Education

Caitlin Smith, OTD, OTR/L, CLT-UE, Dalmina Arias, OTD, OTR/L, both of University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago, IL

Rising student stress calls for guided intervention. This poster applies the Care-Inducing Setting Framework to occupational therapy education to build caring communities that foster belonging, support mental health, and develop resilient students and practitioners.



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9:00 am–10:00 am

Concurrent 201 | Ballroom F-J

“Expected to Absorb It”: Racism, Emotional Labor, and Clinician Well-Being in Inpatient Psychiatry

Elnaz Alimi, PhD, OTD, OTR/L, University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago, IL; Faith Brown, OTD, OTR/L, Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Chicago, IL

This session examines patient-perpetrated racism toward clinicians of color in inpatient psychiatry and its impact on clinician well-being, emotional labor, workplace safety, and equitable organizational response.

Concurrent 202 | Salt Creek

Occupation-Based Behavioral Health in Primary Care: Parent Coaching and Nature Prescriptions to Support Child Self-Regulation

Divya Sood, OTD, OTR/L, Catherine Macyko, Mary Vestal, OTD, all of Midwestern University, Downers Grove, IL; Jordan Jacobs, North DuPage Special Education Cooperative, Roselle, IL

Occupational therapy practitioners can address children’s self-regulation needs in pediatric primary care. This presentation highlights the outcomes of occupational therapy consultations with pediatricians to support children’s self-regulation needs.

10:15 am–11:15 am

Concurrent 203 | Ballroom F-J

Expanding the Occupational Therapy Lens in Substance Use Recovery: A New Foundational Campaign

Annette Hudson, Doctor, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN; Cathy Gerhart, OTD OTR/L, Mayo Clinic Health Systems, Mankato, MN; Maggie Hotch, OTR/L, 4 Ravens OT (self-employed outpatient practice), Alaska, Alaska

OTs fill a vital gap in SUD recovery but lack visibility. This course introduces a strategic video campaign to increase stakeholder awareness, applies clinical reasoning through case studies, and empowers OTs to expand their role in mental health.

Concurrent 204 | Salt Creek

Reducing Engagement Barriers for Neurodivergent Patients in Inpatient Psychiatry: An Occupational Therapy Approach

Elnaz Alimi, Ph.D., OTD, OTR/L, University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago, IL; Faith Brown, OTD, OTR/L, Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Chicago, IL

This session presents an occupational therapy-driven, neurodivergent-affirming approach to reducing sensory and communication barriers in inpatient psychiatry to improve patient engagement, supported by a clinical case.

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11:30 am–12:30 pm

Concurrent 205 | Ballroom F-J

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Medication Management in Inpatient Psychiatry: The Roles of Occupational Therapy and Pharmacy

Faith Brown, OTD, OTR/L, Erika Quesinberry, PharmD, Danielle Haubrich, all of Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Chicago, IL; Shaina Medjes, Rush University Medical Center, Chicago, IL

This session utilizes a clinical case to explore strategies for addressing medication management in the inpatient psychiatric setting through collaboration of occupational therapy and clinical pharmacy and the use of occupation-based interventions.

Concurrent 206 | Salt Creek

“Self-care is not optional, it’s mandatory”: Experiences of Occupational Therapy Students with Micro Self-Care to Promote Professional Resilience

Ricardo Ramirez, OTD, OTR/L, Rush University, Chicago, IL

Burnout continues to be pressing concern in the OT profession, especially with students. One way to promote professional resilience is through micro self-care via experiential learning opportunities that embed self-management and habituation.

2:00 pm–3:00 pm

Concurrent 207 | Ballroom F-J

Interprofessional Behavioral Health Training in Underserved Communities: Outcomes from the iHELP Fellowship Model

Francine Seruya, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, Cynthia Walley, PhD, NCC, both of Mercy University, Dobbs Ferry, NY

Presentation of an interprofessional behavioral health training model to highlight outcomes in collaboration and workforce readiness, advancing occupational therapy’s role in underserved youth populations.

Concurrent 208 | Salt Creek

The Role of Occupational Therapy and Sensory Modulation in Non-Suicidal Forms of Self-Injury (NSSI)

Margaret Flynn, OTD, Boston Medical Center, Brockton, MA; Victoria Morey, OTD, MGH Institute of Health Professions, Boston, MA; Kaitlyn Rego; Shayna Kennedy

Stigma around NSSI obscures its regulatory role and hinders equitable treatment. This session will use a sensory modulation lens to examine NSSI and offer trauma-informed, person-centered strategies to reduce maladaptive bx & improve functioning.

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3:15 pm–4:15 pm

CLOSING | Ballroom F-J

Advancing Occupational Therapy in Mental Health: Professional Identity, Resilience, and Workforce Development

Margaret Bolger, OTR/L, Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center, Lebanon, NH

Using an autoethnographic approach, this session examines barriers to occupational therapy practice in mental health and illustrates how professional identity and resilience drive advocacy, program development, and workforce advancement.

Earn up to 10.75 contact hours. [Register today](#) for the best price.

