
AOTA's Guide to Culturally Inclusive Hair Care Services and Incorporating Cultural Humility Into Practice

Occupational therapy practitioners should provide culturally inclusive services by incorporating cultural humility into practice when working with clients with different backgrounds, cultures, religions, and traditions. There is a lack of knowledge and training in occupational therapy on the importance of the intersection between hair care and occupational identity. The lack of diversity and knowledge negatively impacts clients' health and well-being. These negative outcomes are a result of implicit bias in health care and affect clients socially, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Bias and systemic racism play a significant role in affecting the way one interacts with diverse individuals and can lead to occupational therapy practitioners furthering health inequities. Haircare is an important ADL that also supports participation in other occupations such as social and community participation. The following introduces specific hair care practices of different cultures, religions, and traditions and the importance of incorporating cultural humility into occupational therapy.

What is Cultural Humility?

Cultural humility is defined as a “lifelong, learning-oriented approach to working with people with diverse cultural backgrounds and a recognition of power dynamics in health care” (Agner, 2020). Key tenets of cultural humility include:

- Emphasizing the constant process of learning
- Recognizing gaps in knowledge without shame, and providing an opportunity for deeper engagement with clients
- Creating an expectation for differentiation between and within cultures
- Acknowledging implicit and explicit bias and prejudice as part of being human, and working toward identifying bias to promote positive change
- Recognizing power dynamics in health care, and their effects on clients and providers. (Agner, 2020)

AOTA encourages occupational therapy practitioners to approach client interactions by noticing, recognizing, and responding to different viewpoints on health, wellness, family, and role expectations. By doing this, occupational therapy practitioners see and learn about power dynamics; consider how occupational therapy practitioners influence engagement with clients; and practice a collaborative, client-centered, and empowering approach.

Hair Discrimination and Implicit Bias

Implicit bias is a “form of bias that occurs automatically and unintentionally, that affects judgements, decisions, and behaviors” (National Institutes of Health, 2022). Implicit bias is present in everyone, including health care professionals, and it affects the quality of care provided to clients especially when there is an implicit bias toward textured hair and its associated styles. Hair discrimination is rooted in systemic racism and is reflected in the “denial of employment and educational opportunities because of hair texture or protective hairstyles including braids, locs, twists, or bantu knots” (The CROWN Coalition, 2022). Hair discrimination can start at a young age and causes trauma in youth that continues to affect clients as they age. This can impact the occupational performance of diverse clients and further influence health inequities and sustain systemic racism.

Hair Types, Tools, and Products

There are four different curl patterns that are further categorized into subcategories based on tightness and looseness of the curl pattern. Figure 1 shows a visual of the different types of curl patterns in each “type” of hair.

Figure 1. Types of Hair and Curl Patterns



(Stanborough, 2019)

The *Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain & Process—Fourth Edition* (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2020; *OTPF-4*) addresses personal hygiene and grooming as an occupation. As occupational therapy practitioners, it is our professional responsibility to have the ability to help our clients achieve their goals when it comes to specific grooming tasks. An individual may present with multiple hair types, and products may vary depending on thickness and porosity of hair. Table 1 is an introductory list of different products and tools that can be used with different hair types. Always ask clients what products they use to ensure collaborative and client-centered care.

Table 1. Introduction to Products and Tools for Different Hair Types

Hair Type	Products & Tools <i>Chosen products should be designed to care for textured hair. *Do not use products with alcohols, silicones, sulfates, or parabens</i>
<p><u>Type 1</u>: Straight</p> <p><i>Washing hair too often can cause the scalp to overproduce oils; washing hair may occur every 3 days.</i></p>	<p>Products: Dry shampoo and anti-residue shampoos; do not use products heavy in oils</p> <p>Tools: Wide tooth comb and hairbrush</p>
<p><u>Type 2</u>: Wavy</p> <p><i>Washing hair may occur every 2 to 3 days.</i></p>	<p>Products: No-weight hair products, moisturizing products, curling creams, gels, leave-in conditioners, mousse</p> <p>Tools: Wide tooth comb and detangling flexi brush</p>
<p><u>Type 3</u>: Curly</p> <p><i>Washing hair may occur once a week to avoid losing moisture in curls. Using a wide tooth comb for combing and detangling prevents hair from breaking or snapping.</i></p>	<p>Products: Detangling products, curl creams, leave-in conditioner, moisturizing products, Jamaican black castor oil, raw shea butter, and raw coconut oil</p> <p>Tools: Wide tooth comb, detangling flexi brush, and silk cap/wrap for sleep, drying with microfiber cloth or t-shirt to avoid breakage</p>
<p><u>Type 4</u>: Coils</p> <p><i>This hair type needs a lot of moisture. Washing hair may occur once a week to avoid losing moisture in curls. Between washes, try co-washing hair with water and conditioner or a co-washing product to refresh curls.</i></p>	<p>Products: Detangling products, co-wash, deep conditioner, moisturizing products, hair masks, Jamaican black castor oil, raw shea butter, and raw coconut oil</p> <p>Tools: Wide tooth comb, detangling flexi brush, and silk cap/wrap for sleep</p>

Adapted from Defino, 2018; NaturallyCurly, 2021; Price, 2022

Hair Care in Different Religions, Cultures, and Traditions

For many cultures and religions, hair is considered a part of one's identity. The following are just a few cultures, religions, and traditions occupational therapy practitioners are likely to encounter when working with clients. It is important to talk with clients about what they need and what's important to them, in addition to gaining a basic understanding of different cultures; it is still essential to account for individual differences.

African, Black, Black American, Caribbean American, and Afro Latina

Although each nationality listed in this section has different ethnic backgrounds, they can have similar hair textures and hair care practices. African hairstyles continue to play a role in today's society. Hair expression is a powerful way for Black Americans to honor the story of the Black experience across the world. Black Americans have shown their resilience, resistance, pride, joy, and courage by preserving, evolving, and reclaiming historical hairstyles. Throughout history, hair traditions aimed to create a sense of beauty signified by marital status, age, religion, wealth, and rank (Know Your Hairitage, 2022).

Older Women

Some older women go to the salon weekly to get their hair done as part of their routine. Weekly salon visits for elderly women are important to their self-esteem, dignity, and overall mood. It also helps with preventing depression and isolation and provides an opportunity for socialization (Haircuts on Wheels, 2021). An elderly woman's weekly hair salon appointments are equally as important as their ADLs such as bathing, eating, and dressing.

Men with Facial Hair

Shaving with razors can often irritate men with sensitive skin, especially for Black men who are generally prone to developing pseudofolliculitis barbae (PFB), which is the irritation of the skin due to hairs that penetrate the skin before leaving the hair follicle or leave the hair follicle and curl back into the skin (Levinbook, 2022). Some men use depilatory creams as a way to chemically remove hair to prevent irritation (Oresajo et al., 2009; Gray et al., 2016). It is important to pay attention to specific shaving irritation such as burning, itching, and stinging in men with curly, wavy, coarse hair or exceptionally curly hair phenotype.

Muslim Women

In Islamic teachings, Allah asks women to wear hijab to achieve modesty and redirect the focus of both women and men from the materialistic world towards a more spiritual world of Allah. This is a way for women to show their submission to Allah's command, and in doing so they feel closer to Allah and spiritually more satisfied. By wearing hijab, women can construct their own identity and decide how others will interpret their identity (Hwaij, n.d.). When interacting with a male health care practitioner, women are not allowed to be alone or remove their hijab, to maintain their dignity and modesty.

Native American

In Native American culture, hair is a physical manifestation of a person's thoughts and an extension of themselves. Many Holy men and Holy women are recognized by the length of their hair. The cutting of hair represents the submission and defeat of their people, through humiliation by oppressors. The way that individuals style their hair portrays and announces participation in various events and feelings expressed. Cutting hair symbolizes cutting off the flow of thought and usually only occurs when individuals choose to make a major change in their lives. Braids symbolize oneness and unity; by connecting strands of hair together, it physically demonstrates the strength of oneness: "one heart, one mind, one soul" (Johnstone, 2019).

Orthodox Jewish Women

In Orthodox Jewish culture, women cover their hair after marriage, upholding tradition and embracing their new status as a wife and eventually, mother (Milligan, 2014). Women may use hats, wigs, or scarfs to cover their hair when outside of their home. A woman's head covering is essential to her dignity and modesty. In everyday life not all orthodox women will cover their hair but when attending service, they will do so. Not all orthodox Jewish women practice covering their hair; however, all Hasidic Jewish women cover their hair. Hasidic Jewish women are not allowed to be in a room alone with a male health care practitioner without their husband present to maintain their dignity and modesty, and to follow Jewish law.

Case Study

Example	Occupational Therapy Response	Considerations
<p>A young adult who identifies as a Cameroonian woman, mother, and wife recovering from acute disseminated encephalomyelitis. Her hair and hair care routine was a significant part of her identity.</p>	<p>For rehabilitative treatment, the client's occupational therapist worked on ADLs and IADLs such as cooking, doing laundry, bathing, toileting, dressing, and demonstrating safety to go back into the home.</p> <p>The occupational therapist did not address haircare which was an important ADL to the client.</p>	<p>Committing to practice collaborative, client-centered care, and self-educate oneself on diverse hair types.</p> <p>Recognizing a need to include culturally inclusive services and awareness from occupational therapy practitioners, whose hair care practices are different from their clients'.</p> <p>Considering the impact of the intervention treatment plan on the client's occupational and social identity to ensure success and build trust between client and practitioner.</p>

Why should occupational therapy practitioners practice culturally inclusive services?

Shifting the profession from being culturally competent to incorporating cultural humility into everyday practice can increase the effectiveness of health care interventions, reduce health disparities that fall along cultural lines, and increase the relevance of occupational therapy as it develops globally (Agner, 2020); it can also increase quality of care, rapport with clients, and client experiences/outcomes. By educating oneself on different cultural practices and routines and actively incorporating cultural humility into practice, occupational therapy practitioners will become more inclusive and provide equal and equitable care to their clients.

Hair Discrimination and Implicit Bias

Listed are a few considerations and questions that occupational therapy practitioners can use during intake or initial assessment when working with clients who have a different cultural backgrounds to increase quality of care.

Considerations

- Commit practice collaborative, client-centered care, and self-educate oneself on diverse hair types.
- Recognize a need to include culturally inclusive services and awareness from occupational therapy practitioners, whose hair care practices are different from their clients'.
- Consider the impact of the intervention treatment plan on the client's occupational and social identity to ensure success and build trust between client and practitioner.

Questions

- Are there spiritual or cultural practices that we can facilitate or assist with for you?
- Are there certain cultural courtesies we should practice when we come to visit/work with you?
- Are there any cultural or religious hair care practices that we should be aware of when working with you?

Adapted from Narayan, 2003

Next Steps

As health care professionals, occupational therapy practitioners must incorporate cultural humility into practice and provide culturally inclusive services for our clients to ensure equal and equitable care. As a profession, we must practice cultural humility in all settings.

- Incorporate formal and informal training in using cultural humility in practice within entry-level and post professional occupational therapy programs for students and practitioners, and practice cultural humility as a core skill for effective practice.
- Explore AOTA resources and toolkits to increase understanding of culturally inclusive services and incorporate cultural humility into practice.
- Ask clients questions relating to their hair care practices and traditions when addressing grooming to ensure collaborative and client-centered care.
- Prioritize building a trustworthy and supportive relationship with clients to provide a space for them to discuss their needs when pertaining to hair care.
- Acknowledge one's privilege and lack of knowledge on hair care practices from a different culture, religion, or tradition.
- Hold peers and colleagues accountable in the presence of systemic discrimination such as hair discrimination and implicit biases.
- Advocate for one's organization to acquire combs, brushes, shampoos, conditioners, products, sleep wraps, hair drying towels, head covers, and no rinse shower caps to fit-diverse types of hair.

Glossary

Bantu Knots—*Bantu* is a term that is used for many ethnic groups. Bantu knots are a protective style where the hair is parted into smaller sections and coiled into small buns.

Box Braids—A protective braided hairstyle for natural hair, achieved by sectioning off the hair into squares, or “boxes” and plaiting/braiding.

Co-washing—Washing hair only using conditioner.

Coily—Hair that has tight curls.

Cornrows—Cornrows or braids, also known as *canerows*, are a simple style of hair braiding. It involves parting and plaiting hair, oftentimes with different patterns along the scalp.

Deep conditioning—The use of a moisturizing formula, usually combined with steam or moist heat, to further the penetration of the formula into one’s hair. Used to give one’s hair TLC.

Detangling—The use of a wide-tooth comb or spread fingers to go through the hair and ensure that there are no knots in it.

Hair mask—Similar to a face mask, except for one’s hair. It is an intense conditioner to soak and cover the hair to help it get better and stronger, whether it’s dry, heat-damaged, chemically colored, curly, or simply aging.

Jamaican Black Castor Oil—This heavy oil is derived from Jamaican castor beans. Castor oil is rich in ricinoleic acid, which is known for its anti-inflammatory effects. This makes it stay on the surface of the hair to act as a barrier to water loss. At the same time, it acts as a gatekeeper, allowing vitamins in to help strengthen the hair shaft.

Leave-in conditioner—This is also known as no-rinse conditioner. It is usually applied to towel-dried hair to moisturize and protect it from damage. This should be applied and combed through the hair with a wide-tooth comb after the hair has been washed and conditioned, and before styling.

Locs—The locking process allows hair to become tangled and causes other strands to be coiled around themselves, creating fused units in the hair.

Natural hair—Afro or curly hair that naturally grows from one’s scalp that has not undergone a process to change its texture.

Perm—Short for *permanent*. A perm introduces chemicals to change hair texture, resulting in either wavy or curled hair.

Porosity—The hair’s ability to take in and hold onto moisture.

Protective hairstyle—Any style that keeps the ends of the hair tucked away and minimizes manipulation. Protective styling gives the ends of hair break from weather conditions and everyday styling. These styles tuck away delicate ends and usually group the strands together.

Relaxer—Strong chemicals used to straighten naturally curly hair.

Shea butter—Fat that is extracted from Shea tree seeds, found in east and west Africa. It is rich and creamy in texture, and is favored for its antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties.

Silk cap/wrap—A silk or satin head scarf or cap reduces friction between one’s hair and the pillow while sleeping, which keeps curls defined and hydrated, protects hair from split ends, and shields against frizz.

Two Strand Twist—A hairstyle where hair is parted and wrapped around each other to create a twist.

Adapted from Samuels, 2021

Contributing Author

Stephanie-Cara Durbano, OT/s
Boston University, Department of Occupational Therapy

References

- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2020). Occupational therapy practice framework: Domain and process (4th ed.). *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 74(Suppl. 2), 7412410010. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2020.74S2001>
- Agner, J. (2020). Moving from cultural competence to cultural humility in occupational therapy: A paradigm shift. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 74, 7404347010. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2020.038067>
- Defino, J. (2018, October 30). *20 best styling products for type 2 hair wavy hair*. <https://www.naturallycurly.com/curlreading/waves/20-best-styling-products-for-type-2-wavy-hair>
- Gray, J. & McMichael, J. (2016). Pseudofolliculitis barbae: understanding the condition and the role of facial grooming. *International Journal of Cosmetic Science*, 38(1), 24-27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ics.12331>
- Haircuts on Wheels. (2021, December 2). *How important is hair care for the elderly?* <https://www.haircutsonwheels.ca/blog/how-important-is-hair-care-for-the-elderly>
- Hwajj, O. A. (n.d.). The benefits of hijab. https://escholarship.org/content/qt4c09451z/qt4c09451z_noSplash_ba1b41d129fa055a367f21077e2aa9cb.pdf?t=mp9493
- Johnstone, P. L. W. (2019). *The significance of long hair in Native American cultures*. <https://www.cavernacosmica.com/the-significance-of-long-hair-in-native-american-cultures/>
- Know Your Hairitage. (2022). *African beauty traditions*. <https://knowyourhairitage.com/african-black-beauty-traditions-culture/?v=920f83e594a1>
- Levinbook, W. S. (2022). Pseudofolliculitis barbae. Merck. <https://www.merckmanuals.com/professional/dermatologic-disorders/hair-disorders/pseudofolliculitis-barbae>
- Milligan, A. K. (2014). *Hair, headwear, and orthodox Jewish women: Kallah's choice*. Lexington Books.
- Narayan, M. C. (2003). Cultural assessment and care planning. *Home Healthcare Nurse: The Journal of the Home Care and Hospice Professional*, 21(9), 611-618.
- National Institutes of Health. (2022, June 3). *Implicit bias*. <https://diversity.nih.gov/sociocultural-factors/implicit-bias>
- NaturallyCurly. (2021, April 20). *24 best moisturizing products for type 4 natural hair*. <https://www.naturallycurly.com/curlreading/coils/24-best-moisturizing-products-for-type-4-natural-hair>
- Oresajo, C., Recherché, L., Kindred, C., Yatskayer, M., & Halder, R. (2009). Comparative evaluation of men's depilatory products versus razor. *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*, 60(3), AB99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaad.2008.11.443>
- Price, J. (2022, March 24). *The most popular hair styling products for type 3 curls*. <https://www.naturallycurly.com/curlreading/awards/the-most-popular-styling-products-for-type-3-curls>
- Samuels, J. (2021, January 13). *The ultimate black & natural hair glossary*. <https://afrocenchix.com/blogs/afrohair/the-ultimate-black-natural-hair-glossary>
- Stanborough, R. J. (2019, August 30). *How to identify and style your hair type*. Healthline. <https://www.healthline.com/health/beauty-skin-care/types-of-hair>
- The CROWN Coalition (2022). *The official CROWN act*. <https://www.thecrownact.com>