

# Bit by Bit

**Reclaim meaning, purpose and  
pleasure in every day life.**



**Colleen Rowe**



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*Reclaim meaning, purpose and  
pleasure in everyday life*

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workable living

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I dedicate this book to Saturday mornings:

I so look forward to our peer review group. It's a privilege to be part of an ever changing collective of people and ideas, never short of discussion about all things occupational therapy (and beyond). Your collective wisdom is a continual source of nourishment and inspiration for me.

The crossword and biting commentary of *The Saturday Paper* always provide a stimulating dose of the power of words.

And to the music-making of weekends. One of my great pleasures in life.



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## Chapter 1

# HOOK INTO MEANING, PURPOSE AND PLEASURE

*“What day is it?,” asked Winnie the Pooh.*

*“It’s today,” squeaked Piglet.*

*“My favourite day,” said Pooh.*

—*‘Winnie the Pooh’ by A.A. Milne*

### ***Life’s roller-coaster***

Do you look forward to your everyday life? The daily grind mixed with the highs and lows; each day adding to the next as life evolves? Or have health problems or major life events stopped you from living the life you desire?

Our experiences and everyday challenges change over time, often gradually and predictably or sometimes dramatically with no warning. The speed of these changes doesn’t necessarily equate to the impact they have on our lives.

A sudden injury or unforeseen change in circumstances can send you hurtling down a life-path that was not of your choosing. Equally, the slow insidious realisation of the impact of your life's challenges and choices can be bewildering and distressing. Your normal everyday life can become something you struggle to accept and enjoy.

I'm guessing that if you've picked up this book you, or someone you know, are facing a challenging time when the drudgery of everyday has overtaken the pleasures of life. Perhaps you are trying to cope with a roller-coaster of emotions, energy or pain that affects everything you do (and don't do). You may be dealing with a health diagnosis that seems to have lifted you out of the world you know, or a major life event that has blind-sided you. You may be at a point where you feel that life is, in some way, deficient, unsatisfying, and not what you had envisaged or hoped.

The good news is that to move forward in *your* life, you don't need to research the latest medical breakthroughs and treatment options. You don't need to (re)acquire new skills and you don't need to turn yourself into a pretzel trying to change the way you think about life. Instead, you can change *what you do* each day and *how you do* things to generate more meaning, purpose and pleasure in your daily life.

### *What is occupational therapy?*

I've been an occupational therapist for 30 years, and I love that occupational therapy focuses on the doing aspect

of living—on the things you *do* that *occupy* your time. Instead of concentrating on the result of your illness or circumstances, occupational therapists concentrate on the results of what you do each day.

After all, it is the outcome of your day that matters. The notion that, at the end of the day, you have a sense of achievement and satisfaction. Your day has in some way been enjoyable, fulfilling and enlightening; and you feel tomorrow has the potential to be so as well.

In this book, I'll tell you about an occupational therapy approach to living. This is based on the underlying proposition that what you actually do (or don't do) each day is the product of a host of interactions, not all of which relate to your personal skills and capabilities. These interactions are between what you do, how you do it, where and with whom, and what you want to achieve in your day. As you explore this approach, you will see that by simply changing one of these aspects, you can create a different outcome to your day.

A large part of what you'll see here explains the theory of occupational therapy. Over the years I have developed my own unique way of interpreting the theory and of using a mix of techniques and concepts with people across the spectrum of age, circumstances, and stages of life. So I'll tell you about the theory and I'll also talk you through putting that theory into practice, using terms and activities that bring the theory directly to you.

### ***What you will discover***

Our days are full of things we do, things we don't do, and all the other things we should, could or would have done. Sometimes you manage to do the things you want to do, and at other times you don't. You are more likely to do something when it is very enjoyable or when there is a very clear purpose that resonates with your expectations, hopes, and values. These are the hooks that pull you into doing the things you need to do and want to do in your daily life. In other words, it is not the tasks themselves that drive you—it's the meaning and purpose they have within your unique life. The pleasure, satisfaction and value that you derive from what you do are your hooks. Daily tasks allow you to survive, but it is the meaning, purpose and pleasure of those tasks that enable you to thrive.

This book will help you discover what hooks you into doing the things you actually get around to doing, and what is missing when you don't do things you know you "should" or "would" like to do.

Over the years, the theory and practice of all the helping professions have changed and evolved. There is no "one size fits all", yet book shelves continue to bulge with works prescribing the latest, newest, different techniques to try. The beauty of the approach in this book—my approach to occupational therapy—is that it gives you a scaffolding from which you can develop your own understanding of what is likely to work for you. By examining the context of your life's roles and activities, your expectations and

aspirations, your needs and limitations, you construct your own frame of reference from which you can develop daily routines and lifestyle choices. You will find safe, healthy, efficient and inspired alternatives to make sure you are not spending all your precious energy on just surviving day-to-day.

You will also discover that you can have more control over your emotional responses to life without expending huge amounts of energy to do so. You will discover how to do things differently to lessen the drain on your emotional reserves. You will then be able to take on and sustain change without it becoming overwhelming, which will ensure you have the energy you need for the rest of your day—particularly the fun parts.

***In chapters two through five*** I will talk you through the concepts of my approach when working with my clients. This is a crash course in the theory of occupation and a model of practice that I have adapted within my work style. I'll introduce the umbrella analogy.

***In chapters six to eight*** I will give you a taste of what it's like to work with me in this way. I will give you some practical things to do to get you started—to dip your toe in the water of working with umbrellas.

By doing things differently or doing different things, you will have different outcomes. The approach outlined in this book will have you reclaiming meaning, purpose, and pleasure in your daily life.

## Chapter 2

# THE MEANING OF OCCUPATION— AN UMBRELLA CANOPY

*“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men  
to gather wood, divide the work and give orders.  
Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and  
endless sea.”*

*—Antoine de Saint-Exupery*

### **What is occupation?**

The things we do each day shape our lives and give our lives meaning and purpose (or not). What is it that makes what we do meaningful? Why doesn’t putting more effort into life make it more rewarding? Will life be more satisfying if I do more or if I do less?

Occupation—from an occupational therapist’s point of view—is described as the things you **do** that **occupy** your



time. The theory talks about occupation as being more than just a task or an activity; it is something you do that has meaning and purpose beyond the actual activity itself. For example, the movement of picking up a pen or pencil becomes a task when you write words on a page or write a letter that communicates a message. It is only when the letter becomes a job application or a note to a friend that it becomes an occupation that has context and meaning within the broader scope of your life and has an impact beyond the here and now. More than words on a page, a note to a friend has a connection, a message, and has a very different purpose to a job application. It uses a different style of language. A note to a friend may use a colourful, decorative card instead of plain copy paper that you would use for a job application. A friendly letter will look and feel different to a job application and will elicit a very different response from the reader. Both activities require the same physical movements and language skills, but the reasons you engage in the task and the hopes of how the outcome will add to your life's experiences are vastly different. The intent and the hoped-for outcome are what turn a task or activity into an occupation.

“Doing nothing” can also be an occupation. It certainly occupies your time and, in most cases, serves a specific purpose—albeit not always achieving the result you would like. Spending long hours in bed with time passing may be exactly what your body needs in the early stages of recovery from illness or injury. It may be what your brain needs during a particularly stressful time to calm heightened

emotions and to clear the fog in your head. At other times, it may be what you “do” in the hope that your brain or body will improve or change. In some cases, spending long hours in bed only serves to allow you to ruminate over all the thoughts swirling in your mind, which leaves you feeling less impressed with yourself than when you started. Similarly, standing staring out of the window at the ocean on a rainy day might be a signal of hopelessness or despair for someone who is overwhelmed with the challenges of the day ahead; whereas in different circumstances or for a different person, it may be a very deliberate form of relaxation and rejuvenation, of taking pleasure in watching the movement of nature, or becoming inspired for creative endeavours.

So we can see that it is not the task, the movement, the busy-ness or inactivity itself that creates an occupation. It is the meaning and purpose behind the activity. Simply participating in a task or activity doesn't necessarily give it meaning; it is the purpose, the context, and the hoped-for outcome that define it as an occupation. It is your occupations that give your life meaning, purpose, and pleasure.

### ***Exploring your own occupations***

The first step in reclaiming meaning and purpose in your life is to explore your own occupations—to clearly understand why you do the things you do. This isn't always obvious

even on a very basic level of identifying the true meaning behind your daily routines and everyday tasks.

The meaning of an activity, at this particular point in time, is tied to what you have done in the past and why. At any point in time, you are the sum of your life's experiences, what you have done in the past, your connections with people, your values, your beliefs, and aspirations. These all come together to give what you do a particular meaning at a particular point in time. The things you do, the things you don't do, and doing nothing all occupy your time, and have different meanings in different circumstances and stages of your life.

When challenged to think about the concepts of the meaning and purpose of what you do, it is easy to skip straight to whether you are satisfied with what you've done. Has it been enjoyable, fulfilling, entertaining, and successful? This is actually the next step. You have to know why you are doing something and what you hope to achieve before you can determine if you've been successful. Only then can you decide whether you are happy with the result. This chapter helps you explore the "why" of what you do and helps you clarify some of the broad concepts of why you do things. The next chapter—the ingredients of occupation—deals with "how well".

### ***The four categories of occupation***

There are a myriad of things we do throughout our daily lives and a multitude of reasons for doing them. To simplify the process of exploring your own occupations, you can divide all the things you need to do and want to do into categories based on meaning and purpose—the theorists call these categories “occupational domains”. Note the use of the term “occupational”, which signifies purpose, context and intent; not task or activity.

If you’ve been in a hospital or rehabilitation facility in Australia you will probably be familiar with people talking about your self-care, domestic tasks, and community tasks; or self-care, productivity and leisure. These are some of the categories that occupational therapists have traditionally used and they have become part of the language used by health and support services.

However, the concepts of how we categorise occupation have changed over the last decade, partly because of the evolving nature of lifestyles and community services. It is true also that the naming of categories, such as those mentioned, has tended to draw together a set of specific tasks rather than bring together an over-arching idea of the purpose and value of activities. In naming my categories, I have, therefore, used terms that relate to intent and not to groupings of tasks or of places (home, community, work). When categorising your occupations, it is important to always keep in mind meaning and purpose, not movement or activity.

In this book, I use four domains of occupation based on four very broad categories of the reasons we do things. The four categories are:

- Survival and Health
- Connecting and Contributing
- Leisure and Learning
- Rest and Recuperation.

### **Survival and Health**

Survival and health tasks are the things we need to do to stay alive and healthy—food, water, shelter, warmth and hygiene. The survival tasks include getting showered and dressed, preparing and eating meals (including shopping for same), organising and paying for appropriate accommodation, managing medications and other activities that help maintain a healthy physiology—not forgetting collecting the mail and dealing with the rubbish, paying bills, managing laundry and house cleaning. Conceptually all these tasks relate to health maintenance—if you don't do them on a regular basis, be that daily, weekly, or annually, then you will eventually become ill.

The literature variously calls this self-care, health maintenance, self-maintenance, self-help—all of which have been bandied around by different professionals in different contexts and which no longer have a clearly defined meaning. In particular, the term “self-care” is used by so many different people and organisations in vastly

differing contexts that it is often difficult to know exactly what is meant. So I prefer to use the term survival and health to signify the tasks' purpose.

These tasks are often centred around the home, but not always. Particularly over the last decade as the internet has changed our lifestyles so significantly, daily tasks that were previously “home-based” or “community-based” have shifted their geographical base for many people and for changing lifestyles. This is another important reason to understand the domains and not restrict your thinking to traditional geographically-based activities or standard lists of tasks. The survival and health tasks are the things you need to do to stay healthy, regardless of whether you want to do them or not. They are the tasks that create a healthy physiology that, in turn, forms the basis on which you can engage in the other three categories.

### **Connecting and Contributing**

This category is the things we do that contribute to society and connect us to our community. While the first domain, survival and health, relates to our own health and survival, this category relates principally to other people. It describes our connections with other people and our place within society; contributing, participating, connecting with others, creating families and communities, fostering cultural continuity.

This is the category where most people would include paid work; although some might be tempted to put work

in the survival domain if they view their work as purely a means of funding the rest of their life. Remember that in categorising the things you do, you look at the intent of your involvement in the task, not your satisfaction or enjoyment—looking at those aspects comes later. Work connects us to a community. Even if you work from home sitting alone at a desk, you still connect in some way to people through work and work contributes to society. Commercial interactions of any nature have an impact on other people. Regardless of whether you enjoy your job, or whether you feel fulfilled or energised by it, it is fundamentally a connection to society.

This category also includes our family roles and relationships. These are the things we do to care for other family members, parenting and ensuring our children are safe and healthy, activities that create the bonds of families. It also includes our involvement in community groups, sporting clubs, cultural activities, and gatherings of friends. These are the things you do to express your aspirations in life and that reflect your values. In previous literature, this was often referred to as “work” or “productivity”; but again these words mean different things to different people, particularly in the political and commercial world. This category exemplifies the richness of experience, pleasure and reward from interactions with others, an outcome that has value to others and activities that foster relationships and communities.

## **Leisure and Learning**

The third domain is leisure and learning. These are the things that provide pleasure and inspiration from the activity itself rather than from interactions with other people. These tasks are opportunities to engage your creativity, to learn and develop new skills, to do things purely for self-satisfaction and self-advancement. In other words, ‘me-time’—even though the me-time might be spent with other people. If you enjoy landscape painting you might choose to sit in your backyard while drawing aspects of your garden or you could join a group of artists who gather in your local park. There might be very little discussion while everyone paints or there might be lively banter (art related or not). Or you might join a more formal art class and have individual tuition or group lessons. Each of these activities will fulfil your pleasure of painting and provide leisure and learning; they have varying degrees of connections and social interactions with others. But they are all ‘me time’.

There’s no limit to the activities that can fit into this category—what matters is what they mean to you at this point in your life.

## **Rest and Recuperation**

Finally, the fourth domain is rest and recuperation. This domain recognises the need for good sleep patterns and the importance of sleep to manage all the other areas of our daily life. It’s very difficult to function well throughout the



day after a poor night's sleep, particularly after a succession of nights of poor or interrupted sleep. Tied in with sleep is your ability to relax and to recuperate, to have a break from the other three categories, to re-energise or to be calm. This is a category that is often missed by health professionals and is generally not well “treated” within our current health systems, and yet it has an enormous impact on all other aspects of our lives. This category looks at your sleep habits and patterns, whether you wake feeling refreshed in the morning. It looks at your ability to recognise your need for rest, and what you do to recuperate (physically as well as emotionally) and re-energise. It is the category that incorporates the things you do and don't do to soothe and be calm.

### ***Same task—different domains***

A particular task could fall into different domains for different people or fall into more than one domain for the same person. Cooking is a good example of this. Food preparation is part of the survival domain—we need to eat to stay alive; we need to have a healthy diet to maintain optimal health. Even if this simply involves going to a café or buying pre-prepared meals, there is still time and effort needed to do this. For some people, cooking is simply something that has to be done each day; for others it is a pleasure, part of the me-time, a time to relax, to be by yourself, to think and ponder (or not), to be stimulated by all the colours and smells and textures of food. For others,

it is an integral part of family life and family connections—part of the role of providing for other people's needs, or a regular opportunity to talk about your daily happenings with the people you care most about. It may be your creative bent, an opportunity to experiment, to learn (or teach). It may be your profession or your livelihood that is a means to a different end. And so the same activity has a different meaning and purpose for different people and may be in more than one category, or may be in different categories at different stages of life.

So we see that it is not the activity or task or role *per se* that helps categorise the things you do, but the meaning those things have to you individually within the context of your daily life and lifestyle at this point in time. It is the purpose that a particular task or activity serves in the overall picture of your life.

### **Your umbrella canopy**

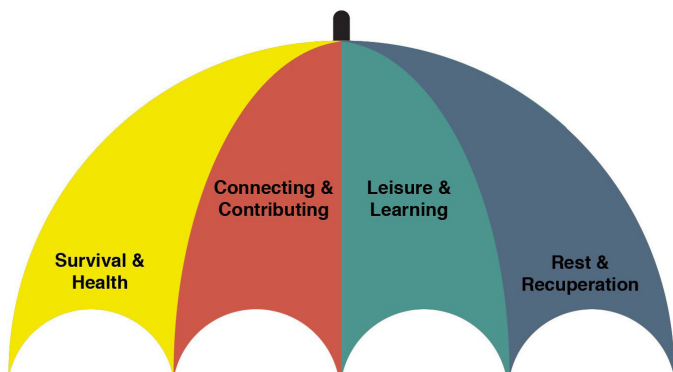
When you collate all the things you do that occupy your time, and separate them into the four different domains, they collectively form an overarching picture of your life's meaning and purpose.

They create an umbrella of the meaning of the things you do that occupy your time.

A crucial feature of any umbrella is to have a complete canopy over your head. Just as an umbrella with only one section of fabric is little use on a rainy day, the umbrella

of meaning and purpose is only useful when it covers all four domains. When you know that you are not spending all your energy on just surviving day-to-day; when you recognise the importance of connecting with people around you and with your community, of having time and resources for leisure and learning and opportunities to recuperate and re-energise.

When you are consciously aware that survival tasks might not be enjoyable but are maintaining your health, they become more doable. Especially when you can clearly see other activities in your umbrella that provide you with pleasure and satisfaction. Having a clearer understanding of why you do things, and which activities provide enjoyment and vitality can help you prioritise where to spend your time and energy. This will hook you into doing more of the things that give meaning, purpose and pleasure to your every day.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I've been an occupational therapist for 30 years now, and have been privileged to work with people of all ages and stages of life. I have worked in hospitals, rehabilitation facilities and community settings; in home, office and industrial environments; in cities, country towns and remote communities.

I love that occupational therapy concentrates on the “doing” side of living. Life's experiences and everyday challenges change over time—often gradually and predictably; sometimes dramatically with no warning. My aim in writing this book is to lessen the impact these challenges impose on you, to find ways to enrich the valued aspects of your lifestyle.

I have reached the stage in my life when my children have left home, so I now have the freedom to move around and experience lifestyles in varied places. I like that this provides a benefit to my readers and clients—of providing

flexibility for conversations and consultations. Just as I am not tied to a specific city and time zone, our connections are no longer tied to a clinic location and local business hours. I'd love to hear your thoughts about ***Bit by Bit***.



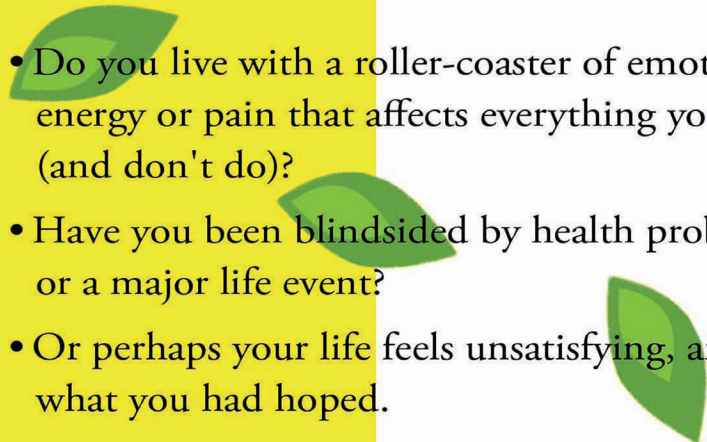
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- Do you live with a roller-coaster of emotions, energy or pain that affects everything you do (and don't do)?
  - Have you been blindsided by health problems or a major life event?
  - Or perhaps your life feels unsatisfying, and not what you had hoped.

Bit by Bit shows that you can change what you do and how you do it to create more meaning, purpose and pleasure in your daily life. (You won't need to learn the latest remedies, or change who you are or how you think.)

Colleen Rowe is an occupational therapist with 30 years experience working with people of all ages and stages of life; in cities, country towns and remote communities.

Read her approach, try the practical exercises. Start right now on your journey towards reclaiming meaning, purpose and pleasure – Bit by Bit.

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