

One True Calling

How a traumatic hand injury changed the course of an OT's career

By Alta Fried, OTS

My ambition to become an occupational therapist was kindled at a young age, when I developed a deep connection for special needs children while working at my sister's after-school program. Growing up, my knowledge of the occupational therapy profession was limited to treatment of the special needs community. At age 20, I learned the hard way that my comprehension of the scope of this field was limited.

On March 16, 2010, I was involved in a devastating car accident that nearly took my life. Miraculously, I survived; however, I emerged with a severely mangled left hand. I was rushed into emergency surgery that night, and thankfully a crisis team was able to save my hand.

My injuries were extensive. My hand was utterly crushed. My hamate bone was shattered, both sensory nerves to the thumb were missing with large gaps in between, the thenar musculature was gone, my skin was shredded, and my palm was full of debris that required extensive debridement.

I underwent six subsequent surgeries over the span of three years, and I was fortunate to be treated by three renowned plastic orthopedic surgeons. I also endured two-and-a-half years of grueling yet rewarding hand therapy sessions.

Wound Care and Contractures

During the initial few weeks, my entire arm was heavily bandaged save for the tips of my fingers. My fingers swelled to large proportions, and I had to relearn how to move each finger. Every time my therapist attempted to elicit movement from my fingers, I would scream out in pain.

During subsequent weeks, I painstakingly learned how to care for and clean the large open wound on the palmar side of my hand. Sadly, I became a pro at pulling out my stitches with precision. Finally, when the skin

grew back with the help of a "wound vac," the therapist worked on stretching my thumb and combating the heavy contracture and limited web space at the thumb area.

All these efforts proved futile due to the severity of the contracture. Left with no other recourse, I consented to undergo another surgery. The surgeon attempted to release the scar by performing a "Z-plasty" procedure.

After six weeks of no visible improvement, I consulted with several physicians, and we opted to go for a skin graft and tendon transfer surgery at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. My severe contracture was released via a radial forearm flap, and the doctor transferred a tendon from my ring finger to my thumb.

With this procedure I was able to begin therapy to expand my web space and oppose my thumb. At long last, I was able to grip objects for self-care, maneuver my hand around a steering wheel, open jars, and even text using both of my hands.

Dealing with the Pain

A year after my final surgery, I presented with tremendous improvement in my motion, but I still lacked sensation in my thumb and suffered

from hypertrophic scars. I also experienced intense shooting pain that traveled from my thumb, up my arm, and toward my neck.

At that point, I conducted extensive research about my remaining injury and the doctors that specialized in this field. Thankfully, I was guided to the chief hand surgeon at NYU Langone Medical Center. The surgeon performed a sural nerve graft to replace the median nerve in my arm. He also released the ulnar, radial and median nerves that were encased in thick fibers of scar tissue.

These encasements had compressed the nerves and caused severe pain in my arm that traveled all the way up to my shoulder, and slightly down my back. I was hospitalized for a few days while my arm and leg were heavily bandaged, and I remained on extremely high doses of painkillers.

When my cast was removed after the sural nerve graft surgery, I realized that the pain in my thumb, arm and neck area was completely gone. I was flabbergasted. I had never believed that my arm could be pain-free again. That was the defining moment when a world of opportunities opened up for me.

I made a decision; I would dedicate my life to



Alta Fried's left hand was severely damaged in a 2010 automobile accident that nearly took her life. Six surgeries and three years of intensive therapy have returned function to her arm and hand, and ignited a desire to help others with similar injuries.

becoming a certified hand therapist. I would help patients recover from traumatic hand injuries, and I would be able to understand their concerns, fears, worries and pains better than anyone else. In August 2012, I took the first steps toward making that dream a reality, as I entered the inaugural occupational therapy class at Salus University in Elkins Park, Pa.

A Rare Perspective

As a Salus student, I was imbued with ethics and patient relationships, as well as educated on the profession of occupational therapy. The university also offers the opportunity for interdisciplinary education. This creates an environment that promotes a holistic approach to the care of the total person, as well as encouraging the sharing of information and the teamwork found in today's rehabilitation professionals.

Learning to collaborate with other health professionals is particularly important for a hand therapist, who is constantly communicating with physicians, and may ultimately work alongside a hand surgeon.

Throughout this journey, when I eventually mastered physical accomplishments that were beyond my therapists' expectations, I gained rare insight that will guide me as I embark on my hand therapy career. The grueling hours I endured in hand therapy created memories that I will draw upon so that I can share in a patient's pain and offer genuine sympathy.

I was privileged to be treated by therapists who model "best practice." They accommodated my needs and preferences, and were culturally sensitive throughout. Each visit was a new learning experience for me, as they displayed creativity, flexibility, and innovative ways for me to achieve occupational performance. They were always focused on my pain and my occupational needs simultaneously.

Measurable Momentum

My rehabilitation team measured progress often, and each seemingly small improvement that they charted infused me with confidence. My therapists remained focused on the big picture of my progress, and sensitively yet firmly communicated only realistic visions of hope. This was a crucial component of emotional recovery for my family and me.

I learned to appreciate home exercise plans and I realized the profound impact that each session contributed to my recovery. My therapists facilitated clinical reasoning to go beyond the therapy protocol and consider my evolving needs, strengths and weaknesses. We developed a therapeutic relationship that allowed for shared decision making and mutual goal setting.

In the open clinic environment, I was afforded the opportunity to observe the treatment of other patients. It was humbling and edifying to note how each patient was treated as a unique entity and administered an individual treatment protocol based on sound clinical reasoning, skill and judgment. No two diagnoses were treated the same, and each patient's progress was distinctive and evident.

At this juncture, I am able to engage in nearly all functional activities. I feel honored to have gained so much insight into hand therapy. Its client-centered approach is what spurred me on, lifted my spirits throughout the most painful moments, and ultimately paved the road to recovery.

Each day I celebrate my accomplishments and I have learned to appreciate

every minute improvement. I've realized that although medical techniques have advanced greatly, a damaged limb will never be the same again. Similarly, my outlook on my chosen career path will never be the same.

Hand Therapy: A Noble Pursuit

During these past three years, I have gained a new perspective on what occupational therapy is all about, and how vital a person's hand is for daily function. In response to my budding interest, I discussed with my hand therapists many different injuries, and the ways to treat them.

My hand therapist was extremely patient and so devoted that I attribute the movement I regained and the knowledge I acquired to her attitude. She inspired me with the strength to move on, and never give up the fight to use my hand to its utmost.

I yearn for the day that I will be the one on the giving end, assisting patients to regain strength, mobility and the use of their hands. I will be able to offer emotional support through my story. My childhood dream to be an occupational therapist has remained the same, but its significance has taken on a broader meaning.

Life threw me curve balls, yet I triumphed. Using my arm was my first conquest. My second will be when I become an occupational therapist, helping people live life to the fullest. ■

Alta Fried is a May 2014 graduate of the occupational therapy program at Salus University, Elkins Park, Pa.



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