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The Language of Professional Reasoning

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During a training session on outcome measurement for staff working in a National Health Service trust, one of the participants expressed concern that a particular client's score on an anxiety scale had not gone down after occupational therapy intervention. I suggested that occupational therapy is not so much concerned with levels of anxiety as with what people do, and asked whether the client was able to engage in more activities or be active for longer periods after the intervention program. The occupational therapist paused for a few moments and then said, in a surprised voice, "I thought occupational therapy hadn't worked for this woman, but she started shopping on her own and going out for coffee with friends. It was a success; she was doing the things she wanted to do, even though she was still anxious!"

To measure the effectiveness of occupational therapy, we have to be able to say what we are trying to achieve and how our goals differ from those of other professions. For this, we need a professional vocabulary that makes clear the difference between, for example, reducing anxiety and improving occupational performance.

This chapter is concerned with the language of occupational therapy and with the relationship between the words we use and how we think. *Language* is commonly understood as "a system of human communication using words, written and spoken, and particular ways of combining them" (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 2002). But language is also an important tool for making sense of the world and of our own interactions with it. In fact, the words we use to refer to things and events have a strong influence on how we perceive and react to them: Describing the glass as half full feels more positive than saying it is half empty.

To think is to "exercise the mind . . . in a positive, active way, [to] form connected ideas, meditate, cogitate" (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 2002). Thinking "includes such mental actions as applying rules, choosing, conceptualising, evaluating, judging, justifying, knowing, perceiving and understanding" (Creek, 2007b, p. 9). Some types of thinking do not require language and are