

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON ACUTE CARE OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS



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BACKGROUND

Background: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the burden of care is profoundly increased for the healthcare professional resulting in anxiety, stress, hopelessness, and compassion fatigue.¹ This emotional turmoil in the workplace can negatively impact work and social relationships and overall worsen quality of life.² Occupational therapy is already an emotionally demanding profession with research showing high levels of burnout among occupational therapy practitioners due to emotional exhaustion.³ Despite the increased emotional load currently placed on healthcare workers as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is little literature available investigating the lived experience of acute care occupational therapists during this time.

PIO QUESTION

Due to the increased burden of care placed on healthcare professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic, do acute care occupational therapists experience psychological distress resulting in occupational burnout and decreased quality of life?

SIGNIFICANCE

Project Goal

- To further identify, understand, and spread awareness regarding the lived experience of occupational therapists during the COVID-19 pandemic;

Project Focus

- To examine burnout and quality of life among acute care occupational therapists during the COVID-19 pandemic;

Professional Contribution

- To provide information and knowledge concerning the lived experience, professional burnout, and quality of life impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on acute care occupational therapists;
- To disseminate findings through professional sources and increase awareness of the pandemic impact on occupational therapy practice.

FRAMEWORK

Life Balance Model (LBM): The conceptual model of practice to support this project is the Life Balance Model (LBM).⁴ This theoretical model proposes that the combination, or configuration, of everyday activity should enable people to meet four-basic needs including (1) sustained biological health and physical safety, (2) rewarding and self-affirming relationships, (3) engagement, competence, and challenge, and (4) meaningful and positive identity.⁴ Within this model, high stress, unmet needs, and low subjective well-being, as influenced by environment and context, can lead to life imbalance resulting in negative physical and mental health outcomes.⁵

LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of the literature revealed six common themes experienced by healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Stress, anxiety, depression-** increased work and emotional load, long hours, lack of personal protective equipment, risk of infection ^{1,2,6-11}
- Fear or concern for safety-** risk of infecting self and others, sense of duty to provide patient care, lack of clear and current information, inadequate staffing, lack of personal protective equipment ^{6,7,10,12}
- Occupational burnout-** increased psychological distress, increased workload, lack of personal and institutional support ^{1,2,6-11,13}
- Post-traumatic stress disorder-** threat to personal safety, lack of mental health support, unaddressed acute stress ^{6,7,9}
- Lack of support-** lack of staff, space, organization, communication, planning, job control, personal protective equipment, psychological support ^{1,2,6-13}
- Coping interventions-** future research needed ^{2,6}

METHODS

Setting: Acute therapy department of a 600-bed, level I trauma hospital in Springfield, Missouri with four COVID-19 specialty units including one intensive care unit, one step-down unit, and two general medical units

Participants: Two full-time acute care occupational therapists working in the acute therapy department

Data Collection: Mixed methods approach

- Unstructured, informal interview
- Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI)
- World Health Organization Quality of Life (WHOQOL-BREF)

Implementation: After informed consent was obtained, participants took part in a 30-minute, face-to-face meeting with the principal investigator of this evidence-based doctoral capstone project in the Acute Therapy Department at Mercy Hospital, Springfield. During this meeting, participants completed the 10-minute audio recorded interview and OLBI and WHOQOL-BREF inventories.

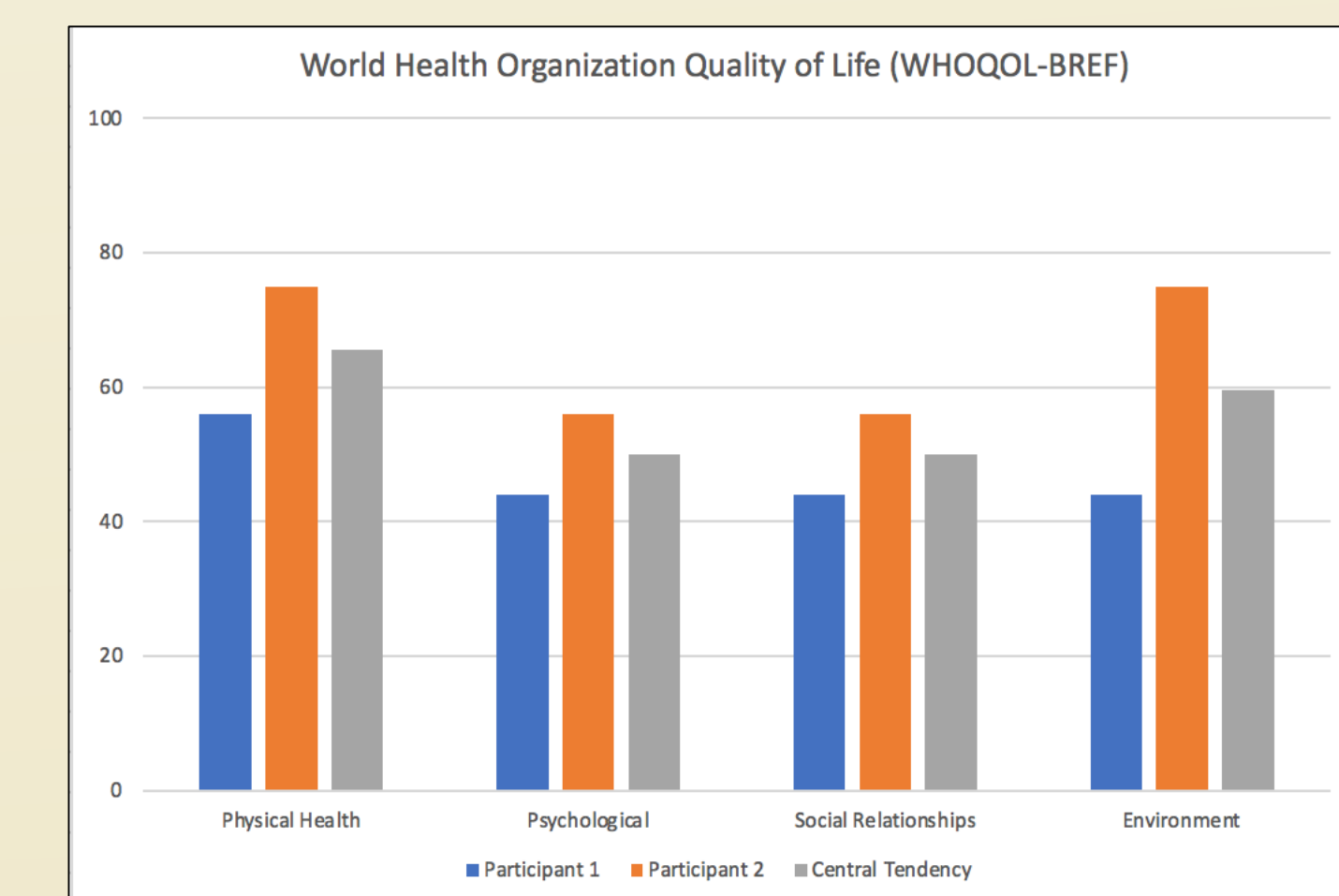
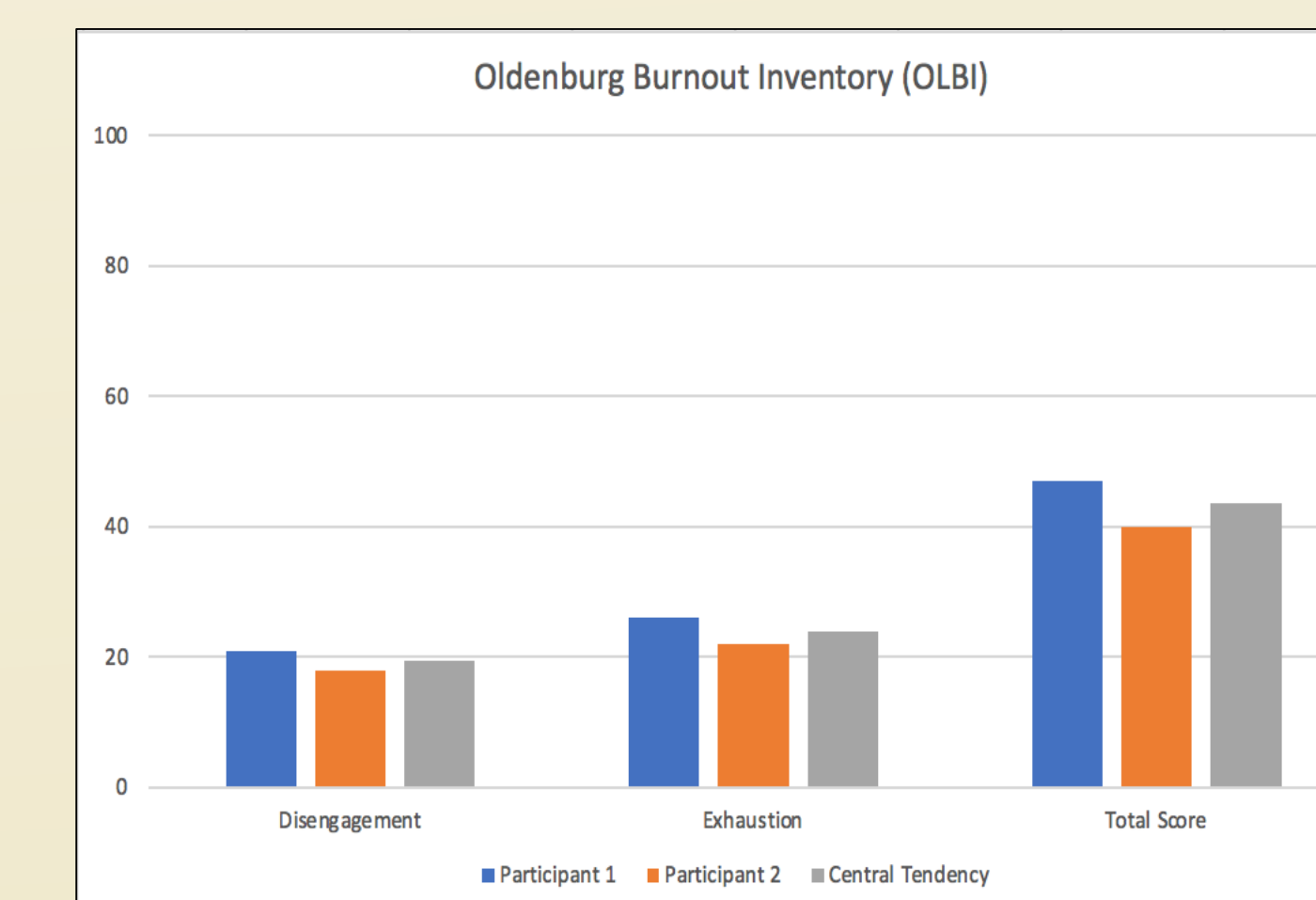
Data Analysis:

- Interview:** guided by Colaizzi's (1978) ¹⁴ method of qualitative data analysis, interviews were transcribed and reviewed to understand and extract significance. From that, meaning was formulated, and common themes were identified and described.
- Written Instruments:** central tendency ¹⁵

RESULTS

Common themes identified through interview:

- Stress-** productivity demands, increased caseload, poor staffing, claustrophobia with personal protective equipment
- Fear or concern for safety-** infecting self or others, frequently changing safety and infection guidelines
- Lack of support-** little guidance with COVID disease process, little guidance with appropriate treatment interventions, and inappropriate referrals
- Sense of duty-** ethically and professionally responsible to patient care despite psychological distress
- Emotional exhaustion-** lack of interest in leisure occupations
- Pride of profession-** would not have changed career path if had known about global pandemic beforehand



SUMMARY

Results: Due to the increased burden of care placed on healthcare professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic, acute care occupational therapists experienced psychological distress resulting in occupational burnout and decreased quality of life.

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