Occupational therapist Fatigue in Private Practice
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Private practice is an attractive option for occupational therapists who are seeking both autonomy and flexibility in their working conditions and schedule. While these work life aspects are important and in fact have the potential to mitigate stress, fatigue and burnout, there are other aspects of private practice that can be trying and even exhausting.

This is certainly in part due to the fact that, unlike employment within an organization, working 'for yourself' does not guarantee:
- Consistent income source
- Benefits such as sick time and vacation pay
- Financial support for continuing professional development
- Inter-professional support and stimulation.

It is generally accepted that both the employer and the employee have shared responsibility for fatigue risk management. (Government of Alberta, Best Practices Guidelines for Occupational Health in the Healthcare Industry). In a situation in which an OT is self-employed he/she must assume the employer role in this regard. The OT herself is then responsible and accountable for monitoring, recognizing and mitigating her own 'workplace' fatigue, or that of her employees.

This involves examining not only one's own practice behaviors but also the work context and structure.

What is burnout/fatigue and what causes it?
A study conducted with occupational therapists in Ontario revealed that high levels of emotional exhaustion and cynicism, accompanied by low feelings of professional efficacy in occupational therapists were related to excessive demands on time, conflict, and lack of autonomy and respect (Gupta, Paterson, Lysaght, & von Zweck, 2012).

Interviews in 2014-15 with occupational therapists who have extensive and successful experience in private practice in Alberta confirmed the Gupta et al findings and provided pragmatic strategies for mitigating and/or addressing work fatigue and burnout.

Following is information to assist private practice occupational therapists in attending to this critical issue.

Identifying and Mitigating Worklife Fatigue
The first step is to identify whether you are fatigued or at risk of being so. There are a number of self-assessment tools in the resource section of the *Recognizing and Managing Fatigue in the Occupational Therapists' Workplace* website
http://www.otfatiguesaot.info/

Leiter and Maslach (2004) describe 'burnout', as experiencing feelings of exhaustion, cynicism, and a sense of ineffectiveness and failure and have developed scales to measure both your own 'burn-out' and the factors in your work life that may be contributing to it. The term burnout is defined as a state of emotional exhaustion brought about by overwork (Freudenberger, 1974).

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and its companion survey – the Areas of Worklife Survey (AWS) are available at: http://www.mindgarden.com/products/mbi.htm. The MBI evaluates your personal level of burnout while the AWS measures your practice environment.

Results will identify the aspects of your situation that require your attention. These will be related to one's own stress and fatigue management which is discussed in other areas of this web-site AND to your practice context and structure, which is discussed here.

The Maslach approach promotes the discovery of solutions to the problem of fatigue and burnout that address the design of the work setting or environment (policies, procedures etc) to support the positive development of work engagement and effectiveness.

Work Overload
This can occur simply because your practice is receiving more referrals than you can manage or in situations in which you dare not refuse referrals fearing that your income will be insufficient. Ways of addressing this include:
* Ensure your business plan reflects a 'real' client/consumer need that individuals and third party payers are willing to fund
* Determine income required to cover overhead and pay yourself a fair salary - set your rates accordingly
* Identify the trends of your work requests and set quotas for accepting referrals
* Determine what kind of waiting list you can comfortably live with and cap it as needed
* Establish policies that ensure work life balance and stick to them (vacations, professional development, interactions with like - minded colleagues)

Conflict
Conflict can occur in private practice when, due to third party reimbursement and/or contractual structures, there is a gap or discrepancy between one's personal and professional values and those of the payer. This may be particularly relevant when occupational therapists are constrained from using interventions of choice or applying a truly client-centered or individual empowerment approach to their practice.

For example, payers may have something definite in mind that they want the OT to do that in reality is not the relevant or appropriate intervention. Being constantly faced with knowing that clients may be missing out on a unique contribution that occupational therapy can make to individuals can wear on one's professional identity and sense of competence and efficacy, resulting in emotional exhaustion.

Strategies to mitigate such conflict include:
* Shape your work load such that it is consistent with your personal and professional values
* Clearly and accurately define the services you provide – maintain, protect and strengthen your professional identity (professional insecurity and role uncertainty is stressful and exhausting)
* Allow time and resources to educate payers about your competencies and potential contributions
* Maintain flexibility in the customization of your practice to match available opportunities and resources in your community (if you not able to move). This includes open and honest dialogue with funders.

Isolation
Private practice OTs usually work alone and are often caught between their professional/social support needs and the time and cost associated with leaving their practice to pursue such opportunities.

Research has consistently shown that a lively, responsive sense of professional community is incompatible with burnout. Collegial support has been shown to correlate closely with a sense of accomplishment and efficacy (Leiter & Maslach, 2004).

It can be challenging to access to opportunities for continuously update and expand your professional knowledge and skills. Although attending courses and reading journal articles help there is nothing like observation and discussion with colleagues to promote continuing growth and engagement (Pepping, 2003)

Strategies to address isolation include:

* Develop a journal club meeting with colleagues
* Review specific cases with other occupational therapists
* Develop an on-going consultation or mentoring relationship with a more experienced OT
* Attend local occupational therapy society/special interest group meetings – these can be an excellent source for up-dating clinical and research information and a potential source of referrals

There are many more strategies to reduce workplace fatigue discussed in the other presentations on this document's companion website http://www.otfatiguesaot.info/ and we encourage you to take a look there as well.

References

1. Government of Alberta, Best Practices Guidelines for Occupational Health in the Healthcare Industry. Retrieved April 17th, 2015 from http://work.alberta.ca/documents/WHS-PUB_bp009.pdf
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3. Leiter, M.P. & Maslach, C. (2004). Areas of Worklife: A structured approach to organizational predictors of job burnout. *Research in Occupational Stress and Well Being,* Vol 3, 91 – 134.
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