

## Presentation 2- The impact of OT fatigue on patient care (part 1) Selina Spessot, MScOT student

Increasing the fatigue-related occupational health and safety knowledge base of regulated occupational therapists in Alberta, Society of Alberta Occupational Therapists in partnership with Alberta Human Services, Occupational Health and Safety Program, Government of Alberta

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### Ethical Decision Making and Prejudice

Fatigue is caused by long hours of work, mental activity, physical activity, inadequate rest, and/or excessive stress. There are a **variety of symptoms** associated with fatigue, one of which is the impairment of mental tasks. People who are fatigued often have flawed logic, an inability to concentrate, increased memory errors, reduced motivation, and have an increased tendency for risk taking. Even just one week of reduced sleep is enough to produce fatigue and without prompt attention the cycle of fatigue and workplace stress can accelerate quickly.

The prefrontal cortex is essential for processes such as **self-regulating behaviours and executive functioning** but it is vulnerable to the effects of fatigue. Brain imaging shows that glucose levels in the prefrontal cortex are substantially lower in people who are fatigued and sleep deprived. Low glucose means the brain doesn't have enough energy to function optimally, which diminishes the ability to make good decisions.

**Ethical decisions** are made by evaluating and choosing among options in a way that is consistent with ethical principles. It is necessary to perceive unethical choices and suppress the desire to choose options that are desirable but unethical. This requires **self-control**, but fatigue hinders the ability to overcome impulses due to depleted cognitive resources. Sleep is positively linked to self-control.

Fatigue also impacts our ability to exert control over our thoughts, behaviours, and cognitions due to a process known as **cognitive depletion**. This has implications for occupational therapists' treatment of clients. **Stereotypes** and **prejudicial thinking** are cognitive shortcuts that allow us to make quick judgments about situations. Cognitive control helps prevent us from responding in ways that are not socially or ethically appropriate but fatigue diminishes this control. This can increase racial bias and prejudice. A study by Ma et al. (2013) examined the effects of fatigue on police officers' decisions to shoot. It found that when people were cognitively depleted due to fatigue there was a significant **racial bias** in decision to shoot. This has implications for occupational therapists. If fatigue increases the risk of prejudice and stereotypes, and reliance on these cognitive shortcuts, how does that impact patient/client service provision?

Occupational therapists work with some of the most **vulnerable and disadvantaged populations**. Occupational therapists are in a position to have a large impact on the lives of these people and need to ensure that it is a positive one. Fatigued occupational therapists are not working at their optimal cognitive capacity. This is harmful to the health and wellbeing of both the occupational therapist and the client.

Insufficient sleep is often at the foundation of workplace fatigue. Information on how to improve the quality of sleep, as well as the importance of reducing fatigue, can be found on the National Sleep Foundation website at [www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org).

## Key References

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