

Worklife Fatigue – Advocacy

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Occupational therapists (OTs) are among the ten most stressed healthcare professionals in Canada with 47% reporting most days at work as being “quite” to “extremely” stressful (Wilkins, 2007). Stress is directly related to workplace fatigue (Work Safe Alberta, 2004), which in turn impacts negatively on the health care professional herself, the persons to whom she is providing care, and her organization as a whole (Scott, Arslanian-Engoren, & Engoren, 2014; Lockley, Barger, Ayas, Rothschild, Czeisler, & Landrigan, 2007).

It is broadly recognized that the responsibility for workplace fatigue management lies equally with the employer and employees (Work Safe Alberta, 2004). Employer-based strategies have been well documented in other documents referred to on the companion website- *Fatigue in the Occupational Therapists' Workplace*- <http://www.otfatiguesaot.info/>. Employee-based strategies usually include the many stress and fatigue management and coping approaches that we as occupational therapists recommend to, and enable, in our patients, and that we thus know well. This unit discusses a third (concurrent) approach to work fatigue management that speaks to the intersection between the health care provider and her employer/workplace - organizational advocacy.

Advocacy occurs when one serves as a voice for what he/she believes is good and important (Selling, 2001). It is said that life is a process of advocacy whether we like it or not!

By definition this is a necessary ingredient to performing at your best for yourself, your patients and your colleagues. If you believe that OT has an important role to play in the achievement of patient outcomes (your organization's goal), and if your work setting hampers your ability to provide these services (e.g. due to debilitating fatigue), then you OUGHT to advocate for change. In fact, as self-regulated professionals, you are responsible and accountable for doing so.

Organizational (self) Advocacy

The dictionary definition of advocacy is: “an act of pleading for, supporting, and recommending”.

In the context of organizational advocacy these actions MUST be combined with ‘**inquiry**’ where the goal is not to ‘win the argument’ but to ‘find the best argument’.

Advocacy is only effective when inquiry is naturally incorporated into it. The organizational (self) advocate is open to examining her own thinking and to consideration of the thoughts of others in order to reach the best, most productive outcome.

The organizational advocate is open to both learning from others and contributing to the learning of others (Selling, 2001) - hence the “inquiry” component.

Self-advocacy thus assumes an openness to examining one's own thinking and consideration of the thoughts of others in order to reach the best, most productive outcome.

Within this construct, a self-advocate is concerned with the welfare of oneself AND others. Like the firefighter who is taught that he cannot help others if he himself is injured or compromised, OTs must themselves be well in order to effectively and ethically contribute to their patients' well-being and thus the organization.

“Opportunities” for Self-advocacy

Focus groups held in Calgary and Edmonton in 2014, with over 80 occupational therapists, reported the perceived fatigue-related factors as follows:

- difficulty prioritizing demand
- feeling less control over quality of work
- inability to search for most current evidence to support best practice
- feeling overwhelmed by seemingly unending demand
- seldom achieving job satisfaction
- feeling students are a burden as opposed to an opportunity
- feelings of guilt and anxiety over providing only basic, sub-optimal intervention.

By causing debilitating fatigue, these 'opportunities' can decrease your value to your patients and, as a result, to your organization. The self-advocate “decides” how successful she will be in her work and takes charge in making it happen by ‘inquiring’ into these factors and thinking, doing, being, and acting accordingly.

How to be a Successful Advocate

1. Assume an ‘other-awareness perspective’ – seek and appreciate the contributions of others while being constantly aware of the impact of your own work (OT) on patients and the organization.

The advocate ASSUMES ambiguity and clarifies, clarifies, clarifies! Part of advocacy involves communicating our needs, knowledge and curiosity.

Asking questions and giving explanations about your work and your contributions to patient care provides opportunities to promote ideas and consider the opinions of others.

These discussions help us refine our own assumptions and make decisions regarding situations or problems.

The organizational advocate is open to learning from others and contributing to the learning of others.

2. The assumption that others see and understand your work and successes can be fatal! (Remember that people see what they are reminded to see!)

Appreciate and promote your work and contribution to those in your workplace who have some control over the issues listed above – by seizing opportunities to shine a light on your successes and actively creating strong, positive images of your (and OT's) contribution to patient care and organizational outcomes.

Don't let others forget that you are the best person for the job that that you do. Speak up about what is working. Recognize and celebrate.

3. Grasp opportunities to make your own decisions and choices about your work and your practice. Don't assume they are made by others or even that it is appropriate for them to be made by others. As a regulated health professional YOU are accountable for your practice. Remember that non-action is a choice.

Explore the assumptions that inform your actions. Question commonly accepted definitions, and go beyond previous conceptions of what your role and responsibilities are. Anchor your thinking and activities to the organization's purpose and goals.

4. Communicate messages of 'personal belief' – Assuming you believe in your own work, and in OT – promoting your work is a priority and a responsibility.

Inform and influence others through the choices you make each day all day. What you pay attention to, ignore, legitimize and delegitimize (as evidenced by what you say and do – or don't say and do) identifies where energy will be focused.

Notice and take action when you sense that "something isn't right". Be aware of the power behind your personal performance and actions.

5. Share your knowledge – OTs have knowledge and expertise that no other health professional has – be generous with it.

Everyone is a consultant about their own work and how it is best accomplished

References

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