

The Health and Wellbeing of Mental Health Occupational Therapists



Principal Researcher: Professor Genevieve Pepin

Student Researcher: Evana Miesen (Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (Honours))

Associate Researcher: Ms Rachel Knight

Background:

This study was undertaken in response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (RCVMHS) published in 2021 and stated that the system was 'failing' to adequately meet the needs of patients, families, and the workforce. To address this, 65 recommendations were detailed with one focusing on *Workforce safety and wellbeing*. From the recommendations in the RCVMHS, Victoria's Mental Health and Wellbeing Workforce Strategy was developed by the Victorian government. Four priority areas are included in this strategy with priority area three being "supporting the safety, wellbeing and retention of the mental health workforce" (Department of Health, 2023, p. 38). Mental health occupational therapists are key members of the mental health workforce.

Past research has found that occupational therapists working in the mental health setting are at increased risk of burnout, and are more likely to experience reduced job satisfaction, and increased job turnover intention. To the researcher's knowledge research regarding how mental health occupational therapists are looking after their own health and wellbeing and wellbeing strategies used is scarce. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify strategies currently used by mental health occupational therapists working in the public health system in Victoria to support their health and wellbeing at work.

Research questions:

The research question of this study was: What are the strategies currently used by mental health occupational therapists working in the Victorian public health system to support their health and wellbeing at work?

More specifically, we sought to answer the following sub-questions:

- What strategies are in place within workplaces to support the health and wellbeing of mental health occupational therapists?
- What strategies are being used by mental health occupational therapists in their routine to support their health and wellbeing at work?

- How useful and effective are the current strategies used by mental health occupational therapists' and implemented in their workplace in supporting their health and wellbeing?
- What future recommendations do mental health occupational therapists have to support their health and wellbeing at work?

Method:

A mixed-methods cross sectional survey design was used in this study. A bespoke survey was developed specifically for this project which included closed ended questions in the form of multiple choice questions and Likert scales. Qualitative data were collected through open ended questions. A total of fifty-six mental health occupational therapists completed the online anonymous survey between July and August 2023. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were analysed in two processes. First the data were analysed using inductive content analysis. Following inductive content analysis, data were further analysed using a deductive mapping approach against an occupational therapy model, the Model of Human Occupation (Taylor et al., 2023). It was important to use an occupational therapy model to ensure this study remained grounded within the discipline. Both forms of data were compared to identify areas of discrepancies and commonalities.

This project was reviewed and approved as Low Risk by the Human Ethics Advisory Group Deakin (HEAG-H 76_2023).

Results and Findings:

Participant characteristics:

A total of 56 surveys were completed by mental health occupational therapists. Most participants were female (87.50%) aged between 30 and 39 years old (33.93%). Participants had completed either an undergraduate (48.21%) or master's degree (51.79%), and majority of participants had been working as an occupational therapist for 10-20 years (30.36%) and in a mental health setting also for 10-20 years (26.79%).

Research Question One: What strategies are being used by mental health occupational therapists in their routine to support their health and wellbeing at work?

Nearly all participants reported that they utilise social support (98.21%) within their routine to support their health and wellbeing at work. Reflective practice and supervision were both used to promote health and wellbeing at work by 91.07% of participants. The majority of

participants used self-care strategies (85.71%) to support workplace wellbeing. Mindfulness (72.00%), positive self-talk (41.38%), and reflective practice (45.10%) were used weekly while supervision was a strategy typically used on a monthly basis (78.43%). Self-care strategies were used daily and weekly at the same level of frequency (47.92%).

In open ended questions participants listed other wellbeing strategies used. The most commonly reported strategy movement-based strategies (26.79%) including walking, yoga and stretching throughout the workday. Sensory approaches were also commonly reported by participants (16.07%). Some strategies reported reflected tasks within their occupational environment, such as structured meal breaks (17.85%) and debriefing (12.50%). Changes to the physical environment were also noted by participants in supporting wellbeing such as being in nature (16.07%), taking breaks from workspace (8.93%).

Research Question Two: What strategies are in place within workplaces to support the health and wellbeing of mental health occupational therapists?

Three quarters (75%) of participants reported that their workplace had implemented wellbeing initiatives. Overall, the initiatives listed diverse, however the most commonly reported initiatives were team building exercises, employment assistance programs and funding for wellbeing resources.

Research Question Three: How useful and effective are the current strategies used by mental health occupational therapists' and implemented in their workplace in supporting their health and wellbeing?

All strategies (social support, reflective practice, mindfulness, positive-self-talk, self-care strategies and supervision) were identified majority very useful or useful on the Likert Scale. Social support and supervision were identified as the most useful strategies across both arms of data. Movement based tasks such as walking and stretching were also commonly reported as useful by participants.

Participants identified several useful workplace wellbeing initiatives. Social networking (9.53%) was most frequently reported as the most useful workplace initiatives including social events and team building activities. Initiatives within the occupational environment were also reported most useful including supervision (9.53%) and debriefing (4.76%). Changes to the physical environment including implementing outdoor seating spaces were also reported as most useful by participants (4.76%), a sensory room (2.38%) and bringing dogs to work (2.38%). Human system initiatives including opportunities for mindfulness (4.76%) and yoga (4.76%) were also identified as most useful workplace initiatives. The

most frequent response by participants (16.67%) who answered the question, was that the workplace initiatives are not useful in promoting their health and wellbeing.

Research Question Four: What future recommendations do mental health occupational therapists have to support their health and wellbeing at work?

Several recommendations were made by participants which included changes for the occupational environment and immediate context of their workplace including access to supervision (14.29%) and reflective practice (10.71%). Caseload monitoring and reduction was recommended by five participants (8.93%). Nine participants (16.07%) recommended the acknowledgement of challenging work environment by organisations and workplaces, including the need for collaboration between leadership and staff to support employee wellbeing.

Conclusion:

The overall findings of this study highlighted that participants are engaging in a wide range of strategies to support their own health and wellbeing at work. Majority of the individual strategies reported were identified as useful by participants, particularly social support and supervision. The importance of the environment (physical, social and occupational) in promoting health and wellbeing was suggested by participants. Summarising results and findings through the lens of the Model of Human Occupation (Taylor et al., 2023) highlights the importance of both individual and environmental efforts to sustain health and wellbeing. The Model of Human Occupation details that one's ability to adapt to change and stressors that arise, results from the interaction between the human system and environment (Taylor et al., 2023). In this study, it appears that a preferable approach to enable occupational adaptation where one can adapt to changes that may arise at work and maintain health and wellbeing involves environmental supports such as support from participants workplaces and opportunities to engage in useful strategies, access to greenery and social support, in collaboration with participants own individual useful strategies. Therefore, environmental support such as opportunities to implement effective strategies and collaboration with staff have been identified as important to sustain the health and wellbeing of mental health occupational therapists working in the public health system in Victoria.

