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Employee wellness: Position paper of the Occupational Therapy Association of South Africa (OTASA)

INTRODUCTION

Employee wellness is central to meaningful engagement in work occupations and contributes positively to conflict resolution, stress management and productivity in the workplace¹. An employee who experiences wellness in the workplace will thus act accordingly with confidence; demonstrate emotional regulation skills, creativity, and resilience. This sentiment is supported by the South African Framework

Table I Demographic information

Employment Sector	Private Sector			Public Sector						Higher Education	Non-Governmental Organisation	Other
	Private Practice 58.72 %	Private Hospital Group 4.09 %	Insurance Company 1.60 %	DoH 20.28 %	DoE 9.79 %	RAF 5.16 %	DoL 0.53 %	SASSA 0.18 %	6.41 %			
Province	64.41 %			35.94 %						6.41 %	3.02 %	4.8 %
	Gauteng	Western Cape	KwaZulu Natal	Eastern Cape	Free State	Mpumalanga	Limpopo	North West	Northern Cape	-	-	
	51.15 %	18.12 %	10.48 %	5.86 %	5.58 %	4.26 %	3.37 %	2.31 %	0.89 %	-	-	
Years of Experience	Student	0-10 years	6-10 yrs	11-20 yrs	21-30yrs	>30 yrs	-	-	-	-	-	
	0.71 %	38.37%	15.10 %	29.13 %	20.60 %	11.37 %	-	-	-	-	-	
Personal Life	Relationships			Dependents						Gender		
	Married	Single	Stable relationship	Divorced	No dependents	1 dependent	2 dependents	3 dependents	Female	Male	Gender: Prefer not to say	
	61.46 %	24.40 %	8.53 %	2.66 %	43.69 %	14.56 %	27.18 %	12.61 %	97.69 %	2.14 %	0.53 %	

for the Employee Health and Wellness in Public Service¹, which strives to support healthy and productive employees. Employee wellness manifests through physical, intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual, moral, ethical and occupational well-being^{1,291}.

Factors influencing wellness have been identified as a person's cultural-, personal and temporal context and environment, meaningful occupational engagement^{2,3}, positive emotions, engagement, relationships, accomplishments⁴, work demands, and organizational influences¹ to name a few. These factors are all subjective to the person and depend on the internal and external resources of the person¹.

As occupational therapists we focus on the health and wellness of our clients, but do we afford ourselves the same focus? How mindful are occupational therapist of the factors influencing their wellness and their responses to those factors? In response to growing concerns regarding wellness of occupational therapists, OTASA conducted an online survey during 2020 to obtain an understanding of the perceptions of occupational therapy staff regarding their wellness.

SURVEY RESULTS

A total of 562 responses to the survey were received. The results of the survey are presented below.

Demographic information

The demographic information regarding the respondents is presented in Table I (adjacent).

Employment sector

In terms of employment sector, most of the respondents reported working in the private sector (64.41%), of which most worked in private practice (58.72%) and for private hospital groups (4.09%). Many respondents reported working in the public sector (35.94%) of which most worked in the Department of Health (20.28%), Department of Education (9.79%), and the Road Accident Fund (5.16%). The respondents who reported working in Higher education accounted for 6.41%.

Geographical location

Approximately 80% of the respondents were employed in three provinces, namely Gauteng (51.15%), Western Cape (18.12%) and KwaZulu-Natal (10.48%).

Years of experience

The majority of respondents had up to ten years of experience (38.37%), of which most had between one and five years of experience (23.27%) and the remainder had worked as occupational therapists for between six and ten years (15.10%). The percentage of respondents generally decreased with increasing number of years of experience, with 29.13% reporting having worked for between eleven and twenty years, 20.60% reporting having worked for between twenty-one and thirty years, and 11.37% reporting having worked for more than thirty years respectively.

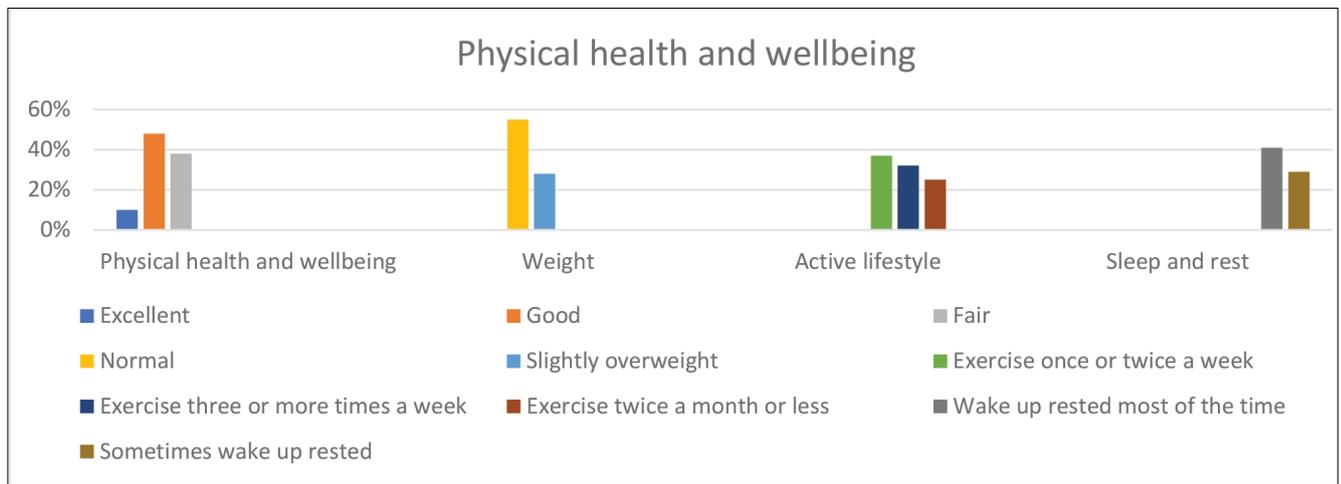


Figure 1: Physical health and wellbeing.

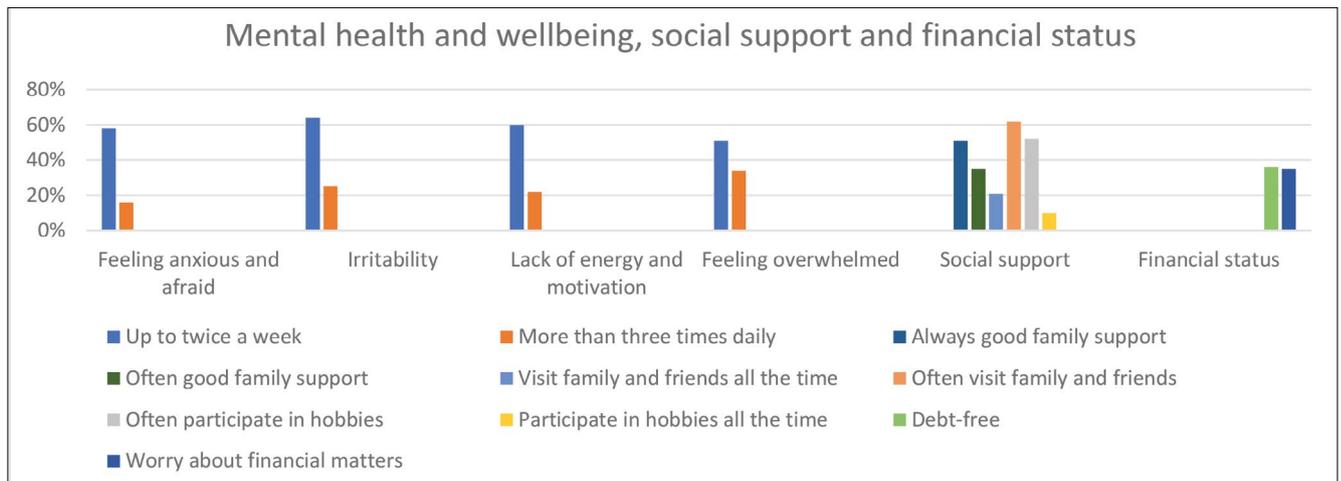


Figure 2: Mental health and wellbeing, social support and financial status.

Personal life

The majority of the respondents were married (61.46%), female (97.69%) and had no dependents (43.69%) or two dependents (27.18%)

Health and wellbeing

Physical health and wellbeing

As shown in Figure 1 (page 96) most respondents rated their general health and wellbeing as good, while many rated it as fair. Only a limited number of respondents rated their general health and wellbeing as excellent.

Most respondents rated their weight as normal, while some indicated they were slightly overweight. Similarly, many respondents indicated that they followed a healthy and balanced diet most of the time, while most reported that their diets could be improved. Drinking water on a regular basis “most of the time” was reported by the majority of the respondents, while many reported doing so for “more than eighty percent of the time”.

With regards to having an active lifestyle and exercising regularly, most respondents indicated they exercised approximately once or twice weekly, while many stated that they exercised three or more times per week. Of concern was the significant number of respondents who indicated

they exercised twice a month or less.

In terms of sleep and rest, many respondents reported sleeping well and waking up rested most of the time, while a number indicated only sometimes sleeping well and waking up rested.

Mental health and wellbeing

A visual presentation of mental health and wellbeing, social support, and financial status is presented in Figure 2 (above).

It was of concern that feeling anxious and afraid up to twice weekly was reported by most respondents, and that many respondents experienced these feelings up to three times daily. On the other hand, many respondents reported not having feelings of fear or anxiety at all (24.09%).

Irritability was being experienced up to twice weekly by most of the respondents, while many others reported experiencing irritability more than three times daily. A lack of energy and motivation was experienced up to twice weekly by most respondents, while these feelings were experienced more than three times daily by numerous others. Stress and feelings of being overwhelmed or overloaded were experienced up to twice weekly by half of the respondents, while a third of the respondents experienced these feelings more than three times per day.



Figure 3: Work environment.

Social support

Half of the respondents indicated that they always had good family support systems, while many others reported that they often had good family support systems. In addition, more than half of the respondents reported that they often visit family and friends, while a small percentage did so all of the time.

Most respondents often participated in hobbies or activities that they enjoyed, while relatively few reported that they did so all the time. It was of concern, particularly given the philosophical basis of the profession, that many respondents rarely participated in hobbies or activities that they enjoyed (35.47%).

Financial status

An equal percentage of respondents reported that they were either debt-free and did not require any financial assistance or that they did sometimes worry about financial matters.

Work environment

The work environment consists of utilisation of leave benefits, physical work environment, organisational climate, and access to workplace wellness programme (see Figure 3 above).

Utilisation of leave benefits

The results showed that most respondents took up to ten days of voluntary vacation leave during the year prior to the survey (43.33%), while just over a third of them took between 11 and twenty days of vacation leave during the same period (27.85%).

Sick leave benefits did not appear to be over-utilised, with most respondents taking up to ten days of sick leave due to illness (48.75%), while a similar number reported having taken no sick leave during the same period (42.6%).

Physical work environment

Several of the physical work environment factors were

identified as contributing a great deal to stress, namely access to transport, access to telephone and email facilities and adequate access to the internet. Adequate access to therapeutic equipment and having a manageable workload were reported to contribute a fair amount to stress.

Organisational climate

Most respondents indicated that they enjoyed their work and felt that they were making a positive contribution. Working relationships with managers (41.81%) and with colleagues (66.67%) were reported to be good most of the time. In addition, an equal number of respondents indicated that the opportunity to discuss issues and solve problems as a team was rated as somewhat good and good most of the time.

Access to workplace wellness programme

It was notable that most respondents indicated not having access to a workplace wellness programme, while numerous respondents reported having some access to such services.

Summary of results

Occupational therapists in South Africa work in all sectors at present but are predominantly employed in private practice and the Department of Health. Physical health and wellbeing, access to social support, as well as organisational culture appear to be strengths, which may contribute to wellness of occupational therapists. On the other hand, mental health, physical work environment (particularly access to transport and telecommunications) and limited utilisation of vacation leave appear to contribute negatively to their wellness. In addition, while fulfilling an essential role and providing service delivery often under challenging circumstances, occupational therapists appear to have limited access to employee wellness services.

STATEMENT OF POSITION

OTASA believes that all occupational therapists should

have access to basic employee wellness services. It is recommended that occupational therapists:

- Advocate for implementation of a minimum standard of facility, telecommunications, transport and therapy equipment across all occupational therapy services;
- Offer CPD events related to wellness strategies and development of resilience;
- Offer access to contracted wellness services for members working in the private sector;
- Advocate for provision of wellness services for occupational therapists working in the public sector,
- Support research into the causative factors of work-related stress for occupational therapists, which is warranted to inform sustainable, customised and contextually relevant wellness programmes.

CONCLUSION

OTASA is concerned that the results of the employee wellness survey point to significant wellness challenges within the South African occupational therapy fraternity. Employee wellness is essential to ensure that occupational therapists continue to provide quality services across all sectors.

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