

Developing occupational therapy student knowledge of sensory modulation for well-being and clinical application

Background

During their degree programme occupational therapy students at the University of Liverpool complete a number of professional practice modules aimed at developing clinical knowledge and skills for practice. An increasingly important part of this is identifying ways to support their own well-being while in clinical practice, as well as that of their service users.

Within their first professional practice module in their second year of study students were introduced to sensory modulation as an approach with the potential to support increased engagement with their service users as well as providing additional ways to facilitate self-regulation and well-being (O'Sullivan & Fitzgibbon, 2018). Students developed their understanding through first considering the benefits of sensory strategies for their own arousal levels before applying this knowledge to fictional case studies.

Aims

- To develop student knowledge of sensory modulation & well-being
- To expand the range of approaches available to students for use on placement
- To support students in considering the benefits of sensory approaches for their own well-being.

Method

Students reviewed online preparatory materials & completed a sensory preferences checklist

Face to face workshop trialling different sensory items and reflecting on the benefits for themselves & different case studies

Application of knowledge in a practical exam where students selected a sensory item, explained potential use, benefits and risks to an actor in the role of their case study



Outcomes

This poster reflects on the first trial of incorporating sensory modulation approaches into this module and as yet has not been formally evaluated. Anecdotal feedback from students during the session reflected identification of strategies they could utilise to support them in maintaining concentration, regulation of anxiety, and stress reduction. Informal feedback from this first year of the project is being used to inform further developments as part of an action research project for this academic year to both expand on the benefits of the project and more formally evaluate and review these.

Conclusion

Providing students with additional ways to consider and reflect upon the different influences on their own well-being has an important place within developing readiness for practice and understanding of service user needs. There is an increasing need for focus on student well-being in higher education settings (Dodd et al, 2021) and in identifying further ways to support them in maintaining this while dealing with the demands of clinical practice. Increased levels of sensory sensitivity in higher education students have been connected with decreased resilience, depressive symptoms, difficulties in both social relationships and adjusting to university (Hwang et al, 2021; May & Pitman, 2021; Yano et al 2019) suggesting this is an important area to consider further.

Next steps

Plans are in development to expand the project further this academic year to incorporate the following:

- Availability of additional sensory inputs to support provision of additional sensory inputs
- Students being able to opt-in to an additional education session to learn about their own sensory preferences
- Loaning of sensory items to students to trial use during different situations and environments such as lectures, group work, while completing assignments and preparing for exams.
- Gathering of formalised feedback focused on the impact on their well-being and knowledge for practice through an anonymous survey incorporating Likert scale ratings and free text responses.

Limitations

As this project was one component of a professional practice module with a broader remit, it was limited to a focus on a sensory modulation approach to support well-being for anyone rather than a more detailed consideration of individual sensory processing patterns; therefore limiting the extent of their understanding and application.

While students were advised that sensory modulation is just one area of consideration within sensory integration there was not the scope within the project to introduce other areas that also impact on well-being such as discrimination and praxis.

References

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