

The Impact of Mental Health Occupational Therapy on Physical Fitness of People with Chronic Mental Illness: A Retrospective Outcome Study

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What Matters? People with chronic mental illness (CMI) commonly sustain the simultaneous presence of comorbid physical health problems, such as obesity and cardiovascular, respiratory, and metabolic diseases (Nielsen et al., 2021). Accordingly, compared with the general population, these people have a 2–3 times higher average mortality alongside a life expectancy that is 10–25 years shorter (Fiorillo & Sartorius, 2021).

Objectives: This study aimed to investigate physical fitness outcomes after routine occupational therapy activities for clients with CMI.

Methods: This was a retrospective outcome study recruiting clients with CMI (n = 410) from a regional psychiatric center of Taiwan. Data analyses included (a) the clients' daily occupational therapy activities that were converted to energy expenditure (in kilocalorie) and (b) the results of the clients' annual physical tests using a battery of norm-referenced physical fitness measures.

References:

- Fiorillo, A., & Sartorius, N. (2021). Mortality gap and physical comorbidity of people with severe mental disorders: the public health scandal. *Annals of General Psychiatry, 20*(1), 52.
- Nielsen, R. E., Banner, J., & Jensen, S. E. (2021). Cardiovascular disease in patients with severe mental illness. *Nature Reviews Cardiology, 18*(2), 136-145.

Results: Overall, 68.0% of participants improved their upper extremity (UE) strength and endurance and 60.2% remained at the same high level for cardiorespiratory fitness. There were significantly more participants who improved than those who declined in UE strength and endurance, lower extremity (LE) strength and endurance, cardiorespiratory fitness, and dynamic balance (McNemar test, $p < .05$). Multiple regression with potential confounding variables offset revealed that dose-response relationships existed between occupational therapy activities and physical fitness outcomes, indicating the higher the amount of intervention activity, the greater the physical benefits.

Conclusion: Occupational therapist practitioners working with clients with CMI should prioritize occupations and activities coinciding with each client's needs, interests and capabilities to help clients achieve the optimal energy expenditure for better physical health.