



Supporting Occupational Therapists Working in High-stress Environments

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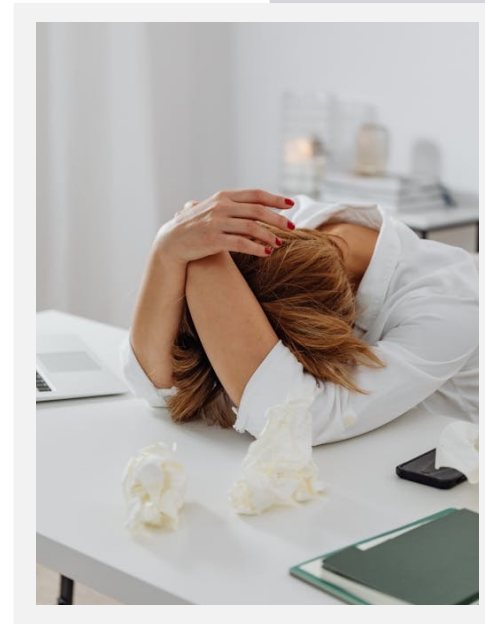
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Background

- Healthcare professionals including OT practitioners face increasing job demands and work-related stress (Park, 2021; Sipos et al., 2024).
- These pressures are strongly linked to burnout and reduced well-being (Tawfik et al., 2019).
- Burnout negatively affects both providers and quality of patient care (Quan et al., 2024).
- Research has largely overlooked OT practitioners (Kunjumen et al., 2022), especially in high-stress settings.



Context

- Southern Israel is a chronically high-stress region due to ongoing security threats.
- Since October 7, 2023, mental health and rehabilitation demands have increased alongside routine care (Davidovitch & Lev, 2024).
- Despite universal coverage, timely OT care is limited in the southern periphery (Levi & Davidovitch, 2022).
- A persistent shortage of healthcare professionals, including OTs, exists in the region (Ministry of Health, 2025).



Knowledge Gaps

- Limited research focuses on OTs working in high-stress or trauma-affected contexts.
- Qualitative insights into OTs' lived work-experiences remain largely missing.

Aim: To explore OTs' work experiences in Southern Israel.



Methods: Design & Participants



A qualitative descriptive study



Semi-structured Interviews



Snowball convenience sampling



Ethical approval: Ben-Gurion University



Eighteen licensed OT practitioners, had worked at least 5 years in the public sector in Southern Israel

Methods: Analytical Framework

- Qualitative thematic analysis facilitated by Taguette software.
- Analysis guided by the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) an approach to human motivation and personality (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
- SDT suggests three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
- Work meaning, job satisfaction, mental well-being, and compassion fatigue influence work engagement (Grinberg et al., 2025).





Results: OTs Experiences

Participant 3:

“Returning to the south was very, very hard.... Because it was returning to both a state of war and to the huge mess that exists”.

Participant 5 :

“I have a very big problem where I have patients that I need to attend to, and no one else is attending them”.

Participant 9:

“That they appreciate and see the hard work.”

Participant 3:

“Someone who meets you in an organized manner and listens to you. Also on an emotional level, some kind of ventilation”.

Participant 14:

“it’s one of the reasons I don’t see myself leaving .. The relationships between us (the OT team) are really important to me”.

Results: Key Themes

Core Challenges

Extreme workloads

Decreased service availability

Compromised Client outcomes

Ethical dilemmas

OTs Outcomes

Decreased control

Decreased competence

Exhaustion and fatigue

Personal costs

Required Support

Opportunities for development

Recognition of professionalism

Personal and professional support

Sense of belonging

Discussion

- Extreme workloads and limited service availability, undermine client outcomes and create ethical dilemmas for practitioners.
- High-stress contexts intensify the challenges, reducing OTs' sense of control and competence.
- Sustained overload and stress causes exhaustion, limiting capacity beyond work hours.



Discussion

- Support needs in this context extend beyond professional to personal, familial, and emotional support.
- Strong team relationships enhance resilience, belonging, and commitment.
- Qualitative research provides context-sensitive insights relevant for OTs in high-stress, high-workload environments globally.



Implications



- High-stress contexts threaten OTs' well-being and service quality.
- Support programs are needed at workplace and policy levels.
- Workplace: professional development, managerial support, team cohesion.
- Policy: funding for support and ventilation opportunities.

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