

Reclaiming Wellness: A COTA's Perspective on Mental Health Advocacy, Burnout, and Leadership in Occupational Therapy

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Abstract

This professional reflection explores the impact of burnout and mental health challenges among occupational therapy practitioners, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on lived experience as a Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant (COTA), I examined the intersection of personal wellness, workplace stress, and cultural identity. This paper highlights evidence-based strategies for self-care, the importance of mental health advocacy within the profession, and the role of leadership in promoting institutional wellness initiatives. Limitations include the narrative, non-generalizable nature of personal reflection. The discussion underscores the need to prioritize practitioner well-being as a foundational component of effective occupational therapy practice.

Keywords: Occupational therapy; burnout; mental health; self-care; leadership

Introduction

My name is Juanita Lambe, and I bring extensive years of experience as a Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant (COTA). I have experience across diverse clinical settings and higher education, including serving as Academic Coordinator of Field-Based Experiences in a School of Education. Driven by a passion for mentorship and developing future practitioners, I pursued a Master of Science in Organizational Behavior & Leadership.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, my commitment to occupational therapy—and to mental health in particular—became deeply personal. Like many frontline workers, I was immersed in emotionally demanding environments while managing my own experiences of stress, grief, and uncertainty. I recall days working in full personal protective equipment (PPE), supporting clients through isolation and loss, and later needing quiet moments in my car to decompress and process the cumulative weight of these experiences. This period highlighted a critical reality within healthcare: practitioners are often expected to care for others while simultaneously navigating their own wellness challenges.

The challenges I experienced during this period ultimately served as a catalyst for professional growth, leading me to reevaluate my career trajectory and pursue a Master of Science in Organizational Behavior & Leadership. My graduate studies, with a focus on burnout and its impact on women in the workplace, further deepened my understanding of systemic stressors in professional environments and reinforced my commitment to mental health advocacy within occupational therapy and beyond.

The occupational therapy profession emphasizes holistic care; however, practitioner well-being is frequently overlooked in practice. Research indicates that occupational therapy professionals experienced increased levels of burnout, compassion fatigue, and psychological strain during the pandemic (Restauri & Sheridan, 2020; American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2021). Additionally, systemic and cultural factors—such as underrepresentation and workplace inequities—can further intensify these stressors for practitioners from marginalized groups.

The purpose of this reflection is to examine the relationship between occupational therapy practice and practitioner mental health, while highlighting strategies for self-care, advocacy, and leadership that support sustainable professional well-being.

Centering the Therapist's Mental Health

The occupational therapy profession is rooted in holistic care—addressing mind, body, and environment. Yet, as practitioners, we often overlook our own needs in service of others. Research highlights the urgency of addressing provider mental health: a 2021 AOTA survey revealed that over 60% of OT practitioners reported moderate to high levels of burnout, with work-life imbalance and emotional exhaustion cited as leading causes (AOTA, 2021).

Mental health advocacy within our profession must begin with ourselves. I have implemented mindfulness routines, pursued therapy, and engaged in professional communities for support. These strategies align with evidence-based self-care practices recommended for healthcare professionals (Pereira et al., 2019). Just as we tailor

interventions for clients, we must apply individualized and intentional approaches to our own well-being, prioritizing rest, emotional regulation, and meaningful connection.

The Intersection of Race, Wellness, and Representation

As a Black woman in occupational therapy, I also carry the weight of underrepresentation. Black practitioners comprise just over 4% of the profession (AOTA, 2020), and the cultural tax of existing in predominantly white spaces can contribute additional psychological strain. Navigating microaggressions, the pressure to overperform, and limited access to culturally responsive support systems can exacerbate stress levels for Black professionals (Sue et al., 2007).

This is why I am particularly proud to be part of the Black OTA community. Representation and affinity spaces matter because they provide environments where lived experiences are validated and collective resilience is fostered. As Black OTAs, we are uniquely positioned to advocate for inclusive mental health practices grounded in cultural humility, equity, and community support.

Institutional Action: From Lived Experience to Leadership

In a previous role in higher education, I strived to translate these experiences into meaningful institutional initiatives. One of my proudest contributions was the redesign of *Wellness Wednesdays*, a monthly wellness initiative designed to support students, faculty, and staff in managing stress, promoting proactive mental health practices, and fostering community engagement.

Each session addressed a different aspect of well-being, including mindfulness, sleep hygiene, work-life balance, and emotional resilience. The interdisciplinary structure of the program encouraged collaboration across departments while normalizing conversations around mental health. Participant feedback indicated increased awareness of wellness resources and reduced stigma in seeking support, aligning with best practices in campus mental health promotion (American College Health Association, 2022).

By embedding wellness into institutional culture, we demonstrated that mental health is not peripheral but integral to professional success and sustainability. In my roles mentoring and advising fieldwork students, as well as supporting practicum development, I incorporated reflective journaling, wellness check-ins, and education on burnout prevention. These practices help prepare future clinicians to prioritize their own well-being alongside client care.

A Call to Sustain Mental Health as a Core Practice

My hope is that as a community, we continue to elevate mental wellness as a professional priority rather than an afterthought. Occupational therapy, by its nature, is a profession grounded in compassion, adaptability, and human connection. To sustain these values, we must also commit to supporting the well-being of practitioners themselves.

By integrating self-care, advocacy, and leadership into our professional identity, we can reimagine a field where the health of the healer is valued as much as the health of those we serve.

I am honored to contribute to this ongoing conversation and to grow alongside a community committed to meaningful change.

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