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Use of Formal and Informal Strategies to Manage Stress During Level II Occupational Therapy Fieldwork

Abstract

Stress may play a role in the performance of occupational therapy students during Level II fieldwork, but little research exists regarding the causes of stress or the stress management strategies students use. The objective of this study was to determine factors that contribute to fieldwork-related stress and strategies students use to manage that stress on Level II fieldwork.

Students or recent graduates of occupational therapy or occupational therapy assistant programs who completed at least one Level II fieldwork experience in the previous 36 months were eligible to participate. An online survey was distributed to participants through snowball sampling. The participants were asked to indicate whether they experienced fieldwork-related stress, the causes of that stress, and the stress management strategies used during Level II fieldwork. The strategies were coded as either formal or informal to allow comparison.

Four hundred and thirty-two individuals completed the survey, 426 of whom met the inclusion criteria. Six individuals were excluded because they had not completed at least one Level II OT fieldwork experience. Of the 426 students who met inclusion criteria, 407 indicated that they experienced fieldwork-related stress. Fifteen percent of the responses indicated use of formal strategies to manage stress during fieldwork.

Comments

The author declares that they have no competing financial, professional, or personal interest that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

Keywords

fieldwork, education, mental health, stress

Cover Page Footnote

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The degree to which occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant students are successful in Level II fieldwork placements is dependent on various personal, interpersonal, and contextual factors (Grenier, 2015). Stress is one such factor that may impact performance in Level II fieldwork performance (Andonian, 2013; Greenstein, 1983; Mitchell & Kampfe, 1990, 1993; Pfeifer et al., 2008; Yuen, 1990).

Compared to the general population, graduate students, such as those studying to become occupational therapists, have been found to be more likely to experience challenges, such as depression or anxiety (Evans et al., 2018; Hoying et al., 2020). Participation in graduate and professional programs has also been linked to worsened sleep, less satisfaction with dieting and exercise routines, reports of worsened mental health, and increased levels of stress (Smith & Brooks, 2015).

The Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) places significant emphasis on fieldwork as a critical part of occupational therapy education ("2018 Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education Standards and Interpretive Guide," 2018). Fieldwork is required for all entry-level programs for both occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant students. Past studies on stress in higher education have indicated that factors such as academic performance, pressure to succeed, and career plans following graduation can significantly contribute toward stress in higher education (Beiter et al., 2014). Given that fieldwork has a significant connection to the preceding factors, students may experience increased stress levels during one or both of their Level II fieldwork experiences.

Occupational therapy education, including fieldwork, has been associated with increased stress (Pfeifer et al., 2008). The transition from the classroom to the fieldwork environment can represent a significant change for many students who must adjust to a traditional full-time schedule, the close supervision of their fieldwork educator, new situations and environments, and the pressure of needing to "pass" the experience to complete their occupational therapy education successfully. Because of the competitive nature of admission to occupational therapy programs (Bathje et al., 2014), many students in occupational therapy programs have consistently achieved high levels of academic performance both leading up to and during the didactic portions of occupational therapy programs. The transition to the less familiar fieldwork environment, which requires different skills to succeed than those in the classroom (Karp, 2020), may cause increased stress for students.

Students in other health professions, such as nursing and medicine, also experienced increased stress levels during clinical rotations (Compton et al., 2008; Gurková & Zeleníková, 2018; Yildiz Findik et al., 2015). Given the impact stress can have on both health care training (Barton et al., 2013; Beiter et al., 2015; Hoying et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2018; Smith & Brooks, 2015) and the delivery of professional health care services (Boyle, 2015; Çelmeçe & Menekay, 2020; Jones et al., 2018; Sabo, 2011), stress may be a significant contributing factor to student performance in Level II fieldwork.

While contributing factors and coping strategies related to stress during fieldwork have been studied before, the existing research is significantly outdated (Mitchell & Kampfe, 1990, 1993). More recent studies have explored contributing factors and coping strategies used to manage stress in higher education broadly (Chao, 2012; Kumar & Bhukar, 2013), but there has not been a significant focus on either clinical education or occupational therapy students, specifically. In addition, a recent study has found that there are opportunities for increased collaboration between academic programs and fieldwork sites to support student success (Karp, 2020). Leaders in the occupational therapy profession have highlighted the need for increased attention to stress in occupational therapy education and practice (Zeman & Harvison, 2017), and this study aims to be a part of the answer to that call.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to build on the existing body of research to provide academic fieldwork coordinators, fieldwork educators, students, and other interested parties with information about fieldwork-related stress during Level II placements so that more effective support can be provided to students to manage these challenges. In this study, fieldwork-related stress is defined as stress resulting from student participation in Level II occupational therapy fieldwork placements. The study explored both contributing factors of this stress and stress management strategies used by students. This information can play a role in how academic programs and academic fieldwork coordinators address student readiness and collaboration with fieldwork sites, both of which have been cited by fieldwork educators as significant components of successful fieldwork experiences (Evenson et al., 2015).

In addition, the study aims to provide information about the extent to which formal strategies are used to manage fieldwork-related stress compared to informal strategies. In this study, formal strategies are defined as those originating from engagement with professional services, either those offered as a part of entry-level occupational therapy programs or services outside of academic programs. Examples of formal strategies include consultation with the academic fieldwork coordinator or other faculty in an occupational therapy program, collaboration with a fieldwork educator, or consultation with outside professionals, such as medical providers or psychotherapists. Informal strategies are defined in this study as those not originating from the use of professional services and include approaches such as speaking with peers, improving sleep quality, or engaging in hobbies.

Method

Research Design

This study is a descriptive, non-experimental design that was granted exemption from institutional review board review by the university with which the author is affiliated. The study was granted exempt status because it presented little or no risk to the participants.

Participants

Students and recent graduates of occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant programs who had completed at least one Level II fieldwork experience in the previous 36 months were eligible to participate in this study, regardless of whether the student had passed or failed that Level II fieldwork experience. Incomplete surveys or surveys indicating the respondent had not completed at least one Level II fieldwork experience were excluded from data analysis.

Measures

The author developed the survey using existing literature on stress in clinical rotations (Andonian, 2013; Greenstein, 1983; Mitchell & Kampfe, 1990, 1993; Moscaritolo, 2009; Pfeifer et al., 2008; Yildiz Findik et al., 2015; Yuen, 1990) to guide question content and language. The Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (Law et al., 2014) was also used to formulate the language of certain items (e.g., active recreation, socialization, quiet recreation). Items were additionally validated in collaboration with three recent graduates of an occupational therapy program who did not participate in the study. These students assisted the author in validating how survey items were phrased and the inclusion of specific contributing factors toward fieldwork-related stress and strategies used to manage that stress. The author also collaborated with an academic fieldwork coordinator with over 10 years of experience to further refine survey items. Most items on the survey were provided to the participants as multiple-choice questions. An open response field was also provided to allow the respondents to indicate the use of contributing factors to stress or strategies used to manage it, which were not listed in the survey.

Questions 1 and 2 of the survey were used to determine eligibility by asking the respondents to indicate whether they were 18 years of age or older and whether they had completed at least one Level II fieldwork experience in the last 36 months. Question 3 asked the respondents whether they were current students or recent graduates of their occupational therapy or occupational therapy assistant program. The respondents were also given the opportunity to indicate that they had not graduated and were no longer enrolled.

Question 4 asked the students whether they were enrolled in an occupational therapy program or an occupational therapy assistant program. Questions 5 through 9 collected basic demographic information, such as race, gender, and age. The remainder of the survey asked the respondents to indicate whether they experienced fieldwork-related stress, contributing factors to that stress, and strategies used to manage that stress. Contributing factors and strategies used to manage stress were provided as multiple-choice items in which the participants were allowed to provide multiple answers. Figures 1 and 2 in this text contain the choices that were provided as possible answers for these items. An open response field was also provided to allow the respondents to explain contributing factors to stress or stress management strategies they used, which were not listed in the survey. Skip logic was used to prevent the respondents who indicated that they had not experienced fieldwork-related stress from completing further questions in the survey.

The author coded strategies used to manage fieldwork-related stress as either formal or informal, but this coding was not available to the respondents. Formal strategies were defined as those originating from engagement with professional services. Informal strategies were defined as those not originating from the use of professional services and included approaches such as speaking with peers, increased sleep, or engagement in hobbies. Strategies indicated through open response were not coded as either formal or informal to avoid the possibility of ambiguous or unclear responses being coded incorrectly by the author.

Procedure

This study was conducted using an online survey built through the Qualtrics platform. Distribution occurred using snowball sampling procedures. Email distribution lists targeted at academic fieldwork coordinators, posts on occupational therapy social media pages, use of department listservs, and professional contacts were used for initial survey distribution beginning in the spring of 2021. Recruitment emails and social media posts included the purpose of the study along with the benefits and risks associated with participation. The only anticipated risk was minor psychological discomfort from recalling a stressful situation.

Data were collected over 18 months with three separate data collection pushes conducted by the author at 6-month intervals. The survey was kept open for a relatively long period, both to increase the sample size and to mitigate the potential impact on generalizability that could be caused by specific temporal factors, such as temporary surges in the spread of COVID-19. The survey was closed in the summer of 2022.

Results

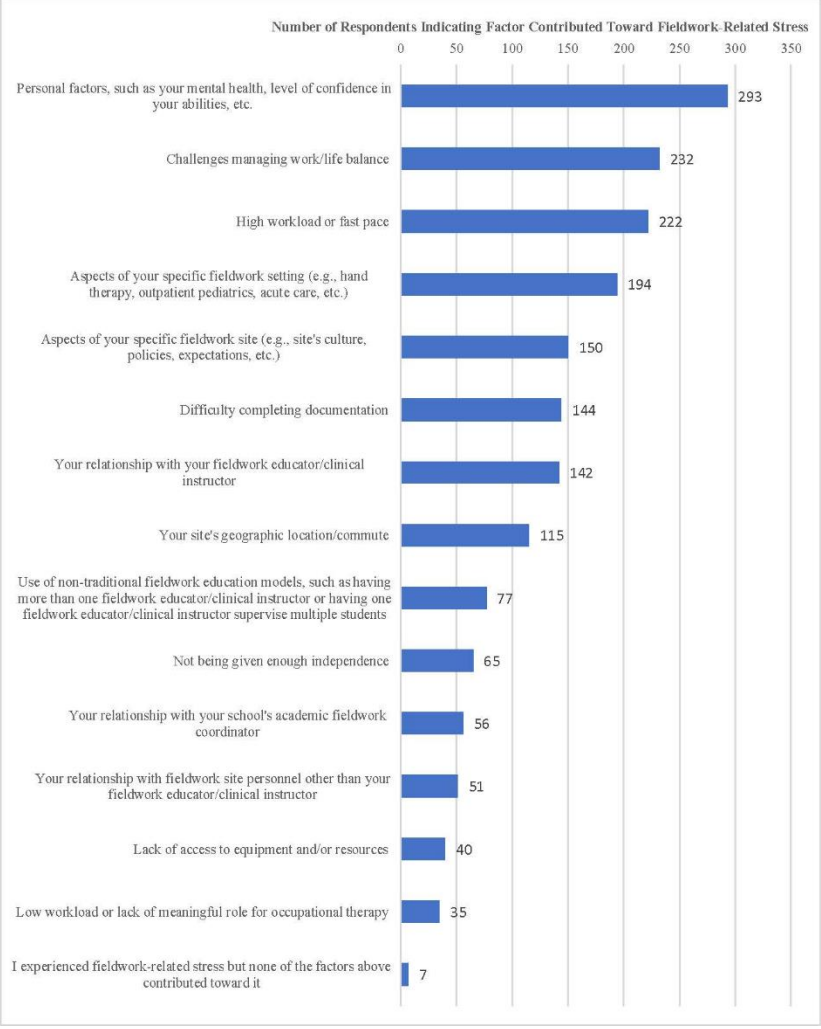
Four hundred and thirty-two respondents completed the survey. An additional 28 respondents started but did not complete all parts of the survey; these respondents were excluded from any data analysis. Of those respondents who completed the survey, 426 met the inclusion criteria of having completed at least one Level II fieldwork placement, regardless of whether they passed or failed that placement.

Of the respondents who met the inclusion criteria, 55% (n = 234) indicated that they were current students of an occupational therapy or occupational therapy assistant program, 42% (n = 181) indicated they were recent graduates of an occupational therapy or occupational therapy assistant program, and 3% (n = 11) indicated they had not completed their program and were no longer enrolled. Seventy-one percent (n = 302) of the respondents indicated that they were enrolled in an occupational therapy program, and 29% (n = 124) indicated that they were enrolled in an occupational therapy assistant program.

Ninety-six percent of the respondents (n = 407) indicated that they experienced fieldwork-related stress during at least one Level II fieldwork experience. As shown in Figure 1, the respondents indicated that a variety of factors significantly contributed to that stress. Among the most commonly indicated contributing factors were personal factors, such as mental health and level of confidence in one's abilities (n = 293), challenges managing work/life balance (n = 232), a high workload or fast pace (n = 222), aspects of the specific fieldwork setting (e.g., hand therapy, acute care, etc.; n = 194), and aspects of the specific fieldwork site (e.g., site culture, policies, expectations, etc; n = 150). Among the least commonly indicated responses were a low workload or lack of a meaningful role for occupational therapy (n = 35), lack of access to needed equipment or resources (n = 40), not being given enough independence (n = 65), and the relationship with site personnel other than the fieldwork educator (n = 51).

Figure 1

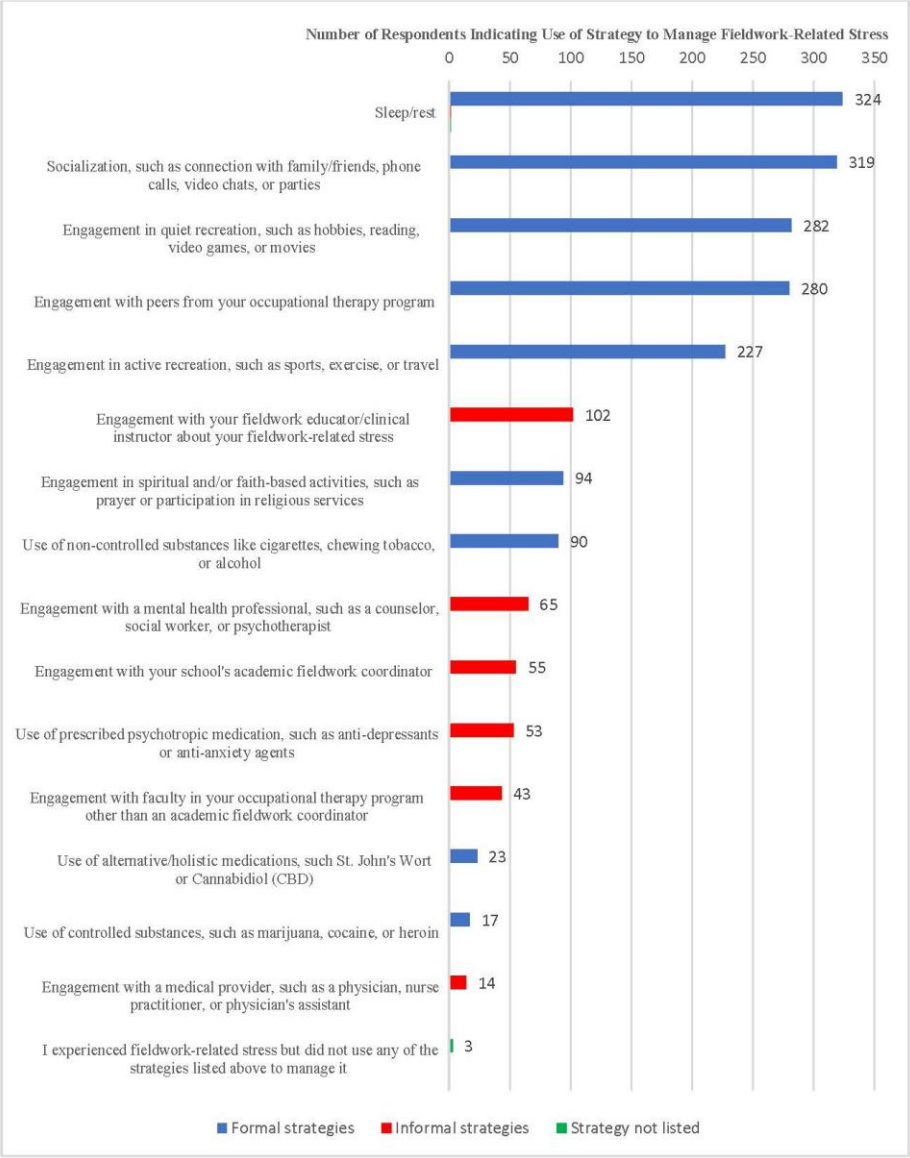
Factors that Significantly Contributed Toward Fieldwork-Related Stress



The study also explored strategies used by the students to manage stress. As shown in Figure 2, sleep/rest (n = 324) was the most indicated strategy for managing fieldwork-related stress during Level II placements. The respondents also indicated using socialization with family or friends (n = 319); engagement in quiet recreation, such as hobbies, reading, or video games (n = 282); engagement with peers from one's academic program (n = 280); and engagement in active recreation, such as sports, exercise, or travel (n = 227), as commonly used strategies. Each of these strategies was classified as an informal strategy for managing fieldwork-related stress. Among formal strategies to manage fieldwork-related stress, the most selected were engagement with one's fieldwork educator (n = 102), engagement with a mental health professional (n = 65), and engagement with the school's academic fieldwork coordinator (n = 55). The least commonly indicated strategies included the use of alternative/holistic medications, such as St. John's Wort or Cannabidiol (CBD) (n = 23); use of controlled substances, such as marijuana, cocaine, or heroin (n = 17); and engagement with a medical provider, such as a physician, nurse practitioner, or physician's assistant (n = 14).

Figure 2

Strategies used to Manage Fieldwork-Related Stress



Discussion

The results indicate that a significant majority of the respondents experienced fieldwork-related stress during at least one of their Level II fieldwork experiences. Given that stress has been shown to have a significant impact on performance and the potential for burnout in both work and academic settings (Ardiç et al., 2022; Barton et al., 2013; Beiter et al., 2015; Boyle, 2015; Çelmeçe & Menekay, 2020; Hoying et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2018; Pascoe et al., 2020; Sabo, 2011; Smith & Brooks, 2015; Sun et al., 2022), this is an area of importance for the profession of occupational therapy and the development of future occupational therapistsand occupational therapy assistants.

Among the most cited factors contributing to fieldwork-related stress were personal factors, such as mental health and confidence in one's own abilities. This information can be used to inform content to prepare students for fieldwork and may lead to an increased focus on student mental health in fieldwork and the provision of both prevention and remediation strategies.

While academic fieldwork coordinators, fieldwork educators, and academic programs cannot and should not act as mental health providers, they can play a role in supporting students in preparation for and during Level II fieldwork. Preparing students for the possibility of elevated stress during Level II fieldwork and providing linkage to specific, accessible resources, such as university counseling centers, crisis lines, and other outlets, are steps that academic programs can take that may positively impact students' ability to manage stress dur Level II fieldwork.

In addition, educators may find value in teaching students about tools to manage their expectations regarding their knowledge, skills, and abilities during fieldwork. Concepts such as growth mindset (Yeager & Dweck, 2020) or psychological resilience (Vella & Pai, 2019) may assist students in reframing how they approach the fieldwork process, how they interpret their own performance, and how they receive feedback from their fieldwork educator. Both concepts may help students reframe the challenges of Level II fieldwork described earlier in this article, such as regular exposure to new situations and close supervision from their fieldwork educator, as learning experiences that present opportunities for development rather than as overwhelming hardships.

Other commonly cited factors contributing to fieldwork-related stress, such as work/life balance, the particulars of a given setting, workplace culture, and difficulty completing documentation, may speak to broader challenges in the field. Longstanding challenges in the profession, such as excessive productivity requirements, have been shown to impact patient care and practitioner burnout (Cote et al., 2022), so it stands to reason that it may also significantly impact on fieldwork-related stress for occupational therapy students. All occupational therapists can play a role in advocating for better working conditions and more reasonable expectations around productivity. Such advocacy can reduce burnout, support the education of future occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants, and increase the quality of client care (Lamb, 2018).

Furthermore, the results show that formal resources, perhaps most notably consultation with the academic fieldwork coordinator, are significantly underused compared to informal resources. Only 13% (n = 55) of the respondents indicated that they engaged with their school's academic fieldwork coordinator as a means of attempting to manage fieldwork-related stress, which may indicate a need to place greater emphasis on the role of the academic fieldwork coordinator and their potential to act as a source of support for students regarding fieldwork-related stress. Fieldwork educators have cited strong collaborative relationships with academic fieldwork coordinators as a significant factor contributing to student success in fieldwork (Evenson et al., 2015), so this underuse is noteworthy.

Similarly, consultation with the fieldwork educator regarding fieldwork-related stress is underused compared to informal resources, with only 25% (n = 102) of the respondents indicating that they did so. Whether this is because of a lack of comfort around discussing these issues with fieldwork educators generally, factors associated with specific fieldwork educators, or other factors is unknown and worth further study.

More broadly, the relatively low use of formal strategies may indicate that stigma around seeking support for challenges related to mental health impacts occupational therapy students and their willingness to seek services. Previous research has shown that this stigma has such an effect on students and workers in other fields (Hankir et al., 2014; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Schomerus et al., 2019). Occupational therapy programs may be able to play a role in addressing the stigma around help-seeking for mental health challenges prior to and during Level II fieldwork. While some students may ultimately prefer to use informal resources, efforts should be made to ensure that students are aware that academic fieldwork coordinators and fieldwork educators, the individuals most immediately connected to their fieldwork experience, provide safe places to discuss stress and can serve as potential sources of support. In addition, students may benefit from increased attention to the potential value of professional resources, such as mental health clinicians, to help manage fieldwork-related stress.

The significant number of respondents who indicated that informal strategies, such as sleep/rest, socialization, and engagement with peers, were their most used strategies in managing fieldwork-related stress is also notable. It may benefit academic programs to further emphasize the importance of basic self-care during fieldwork in addition to noting the availability of formal resources, such as the academic fieldwork coordinator.

This objective can be supported, in part, by providing students with evidence from other health care professions that support the value of engaging in regular, intentional self-care as a strategy to reduce stress and burnout (Posluns & Gall, 2020). Students may also benefit from the use of tools in the profession of occupational therapy, such as the Occupational Questionnaire (Smith et al., 1986), to help intentionally structure the time they spend on fieldwork-related activities and the time they spend on activities needed to manage stress and support their own mental health.

Limitations

This study used snowball sampling, which may not have resulted in a representative sample. The respondents may have been more inclined to participate because the subject matter of the study interested them and related to their own experiences. In addition, because snowball sampling relies on others to further distribute the survey (Etikan et al., 2016), individuals who chose to share it may have explicitly targeted potential participants who they knew would be interested in the topic of the study. This has the potential to contribute to an overrepresentation of respondents who experienced fieldwork-related stress. In addition, the survey did not ask the respondents to specify the setting or sequence (e.g., first or second Level II placement, whether the placement was attempted following a previous failure of fieldwork, etc.) of their fieldwork, and it is possible these factors may have impacted responses and perceptions of stress.

Survey validation was also somewhat informal and involved only a small number of former students and one academic fieldwork coordinator besides the author. The study may have benefited from collaboration with additional students and academic fieldwork coordinators, as well as consultation with fieldwork educators.

It must also be noted that the study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Surges in COVID-19 transmission (e.g., a surge of Omicron variant in the winter of 2021–2022 in many parts of the United

States) may have impacted the participants' levels of stress and perception of the survey questions. COVID-19 was not provided to the participants as a potential response for factors contributing to fieldwork-related stress; nevertheless, it may have played a role in student experiences of fieldwork stress that resulted from those experiences.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that a significant majority of the occupational therapy student respondents experienced fieldwork-related stress during their Level II fieldwork experiences. The causes of that stress are varied and involve individual and contextual factors, including factors that also impact practitioners, such as work culture, expectations of a specific setting, and documentation.

In addition, this study demonstrates that formal resources are significantly underused compared to informal resources in managing fieldwork-related stress. The causes for this underuse are unknown and should be studied further; however, it may indicate that academic programs are not sufficiently informing students of the formal supports available to them, either in their academic program or outside of it, during Level II fieldwork. While students may ultimately choose to prioritize the use of informal resources, even with knowledge of these formal supports, academic programs must ensure that students are aware of the formal resources that exist and the role they can play in supporting student success on Level II fieldwork. Increasing awareness of these resources and their potential use in managing fieldwork-related stress may play a role in supporting students by reducing the stigma sometimes associated with reaching out for help (Wu et al., 2017).

These results indicate there may be an opportunity for academic fieldwork coordinators and others to reimagine how they prepare students to succeed in Level II fieldwork and how they make themselves available as supports to students, fieldwork educators, and other interested parties during Level II fieldwork rotations. While the roles of academic fieldwork coordinators, fieldwork educators, and other academic supports are distinct from the roles of professionals, such as mental health counselors, each can play a role in supporting student mental health on Level II fieldwork. Through innovation in fieldwork preparation and effective collaboration with all stakeholders can and should play a role in supporting occupational therapy students' mental health during fieldwork.

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