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Professional journeys in mental health: developing professional resilience.

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Introduction

In Australian mental health practice there is a trend towards interprofessional team work. When working in teams occupational therapists often find themselves in the minority with their occupational perspective of health in conflict with the dominant medical model adopted by other professions. To cope with these pressures experienced occupational therapists develop a professional resilience, which although linked to professional identity also encompasses the personal capacity to work in difficult situations.

Objectives

To explore how experienced therapists develop their professional resilience.

Method

The study explored the knowledge experienced practitioners value and use in their practice. Data were collected from a sample of ten experienced mental health practitioners working in teams in a range of Australian mental health practice contexts. The study used the qualitative methodologies of narrative and semi-structured interviews.

Results

The informants described how episodes in their professional journeys led to the development of professional resilience. They had eventually found services and teams which allowed them to use the professional knowledge they valued and where they felt their practice was validated by their peers and managers. However, each had negative experiences which had led them to move to a new position. Their stories demonstrated the professional resilience needed to provide occupation-focused practice while coping with the ongoing conflicts which can occur when the service and other professionals use the medical model.

Conclusion

Development of professional resilience is vital for OTs working in mental health practice. Resilience is sustained through professional socialisation during formal and informal networking with peers, and the provision of supervision with an OT. It is strengthened by the practitioner valuing an occupational perspective of health, developing an ability to translate this perspective to others, and maintaining a focus on consumer's occupational issues.

Contribution to practice/evidence base of occupational therapy

Understanding how professional resilience is developed by experienced occupational therapists can be used to improve the retention of occupational therapists working in mental health.