

Summary of key findings



Occupational therapy interventions for informal carers and implications for carer support: a systematic review

Key findings

- 21 interventions were identified, described in 38 papers
- Most interventions were dyadic and for carers of people with dementia
- Occupational therapy interventions can successfully improve outcomes for informal carers
- However, outcome measures must be carefully considered to ensure intervention effects are successfully captured
- In dyadic interventions, care must be taken to ensure burden on carers is not increased
- Barriers to carer engagement: high carer stress/worry, strained carer-patient relationships, low belief in potential intervention efficacy, carers feeling unable to talk about the patient in front of them, gatekeeping by professionals
- Facilitators to carer engagement: flexible intervention delivery tailored to the carer's situation, advice being specialist but accessible, continuity, good communication from the occupational therapist and validation regarding their caring role
- Occupational therapists appeared to enjoy participating and using "core OT skills"
- Managerial support, good MDT communication and confidence in the intervention help occupational therapists engage with carer-focused interventions; time pressures, difficulty accessing onward resources, poor MDT relationships and overly-complex procedures do the opposite.

Project aims

This review aimed to synthesize the last decade of published international literature relating to the role of occupational therapists in interventions to support adult informal carers.

It sought to identify: the nature and breadth of relevant interventions, the reported outcomes of carer-focused interventions, the quality of eligible studies, barriers and facilitators to carer engagement in eligible interventions and the experiences of occupational therapists in delivering carer-focused interventions.

Background

Many people in the UK are "informal carers", who support friends and family in an unpaid role. They assist patients with a range of day-to-day tasks and provide emotional support. Health and social care services rely on informal carers to reduce strains on services: facilitating hospital discharges, preventing acute admissions and reducing the need for costly formal care packages.

However, providing this care can be detrimental to the health and wellbeing of carers. Carers experience significant fatigue, stress, financial difficulties, loneliness, low mood and often have issues balancing caring and employment. 6.5 million people (10% of the UK population) were carers before the pandemic (Carers UK, 2019); 4.5 million more people provided informal care during 2020 (Carers Week, 2020), many of whom reported deteriorating mental and physical health (Carers UK, 2020).

Government policy increasingly emphasises the importance of carer identification and support, which occupational therapists are well-placed to respond to. A comprehensive synthesis of published literature regarding the role of occupational therapists in interventions to support informal carers was thus completed.

Methodology

- English language studies published January 2010-January 2021 were identified using predetermined inclusion criteria via searches of CINAHL, MEDLINE, EMBASE, PsychINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, OTSeeker and the Cochrane Library.
- Supplemental search strategies: hand-searching (The British Journal of Occupational Therapy, January 2020-January 2021), database alerts, searching of eligible papers' citations and reference lists and contacting key authors.

Recommendations

1. Occupational therapy-led interventions can successfully improve outcomes for informal carers and should be given consideration when developing carer support services or improving the support provided by existing services.
2. When designing dyadic interventions (targeting both carer and patient) care must be taken to ensure burden on carers is not increased.
3. Flexibility may be required to facilitate carer participation in interventions to improve carer support.
4. A variety of barriers and facilitators affect carer engagement and intervention delivery by occupational therapists which should be considered when designing interventions.
5. Outcome measures must be considered carefully to ensure intervention effects are successfully captured; including qualitative data capture may be helpful.
6. Positive outcomes diminish over time as patient function and carer needs change; although achievement of positive outcomes, even short-term, is inherently helpful for carers, intervention designers should consider how to maintain positive effects long-term to maximise intervention efficacy.
7. Interventions should be carefully trialled when introduced to new contexts; transferability cannot be assumed.
8. Interventionists must have a clear understanding of how to operationalise carer support in order for it to be delivered effectively.

Publications

Micklewright K. & Farquhar M. Occupational therapy interventions for adult informal carers and implications for intervention design, delivery and evaluation: A systematic review. British Journal of Occupational Therapy. Submitted 29/07/21

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