A qualitative research synthesis examining the effectiveness of interventions used by occupational therapists in mental health

Key findings

A particular set of attributes are important to any intervention type, and such attributes reflect the capabilities of the therapist, the way in which an intervention is delivered, and the context in which it is delivered.

The findings of this qualitative research synthesis (QRS) are represented by four key themes that are essential for effective intervention:

Professional artistry: the ability of the therapist to interact well with clients, underpinned by sound professional reasoning, emerged as a key factor in effective interventions.

Two forms of professional artistry were evident; interaction and legitimacy, and pragmatism and reflection.

Occupational engagement: the level of occupational engagement provided by an intervention was central to its perceived effectiveness.

Occupations used within therapy had potential to foster a sense of connectedness, and a sense of purpose and meaning that affirmed the worth of the person and their capacity to experience agency.

New horizons: the ability of the clients and occupational therapists to identify future targets/goals and work towards them, and how this was timed, linked to its effectiveness.

Effectiveness was evidenced in the therapists’ ability to gauge the use and pace of occupation at the most effective time in the person's recovery, in order to instil a sense of control and self-worth.

Inclusion: the effectiveness of the therapy intervention was viewed in relation to its ability to promote client identity, participation and sense of belonging in relation to a range of socio-cultural contexts.

Project aims

The aims of the study were to:

- Synthesize international, qualitative research evidence examining the effectiveness of occupation-focused interventions used by occupational therapists working within mental health, from clients’ and carers’ perspectives.
- Contribute to a global understanding of the importance of activity and occupation to mental health.

Specific objectives identified were to:

- Identify the types of interventions currently in use that are viewed as effective by consumers of services.
- Establish how outcomes of intervention are realised.
- Identify the advantages and disadvantages of approaches being used in different countries.
- Make recommendations about practice development to support the commissioning of occupational therapy services.

Background

Occupational therapy in mental health should reflect user needs, preferences and aspirations in addition to ensuring high quality reported outcomes. Further, occupational therapy needs to ensure that its services are understood and made visible, including what works for whom, when and why.

The therapeutic effectiveness of an intervention is clearly central to the success of occupational therapy but can be difficult to measure due to the complexity of factors involved. Qualitative research has the ability to elicit deep, insightful findings into complex situations and a range of qualitative studies have been undertaken around the subject of intervention effectiveness, but to date no attempts have been made to synthesise such studies.

This qualitative research synthesis (QRS) is the first international study of its kind to give profile to the range of qualitative research evidence being amassed, authored by occupational therapists, working within mental health.

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Methodology

The process involved reviewing over 2000 research papers, which were each judged for relevance using inclusion and exclusion criteria, and then appraised using quality criteria adapted from Savin-Baden and Major (2007, p838). In total, twenty two papers were finally selected, since only studies of good standing are included in a QRS. Papers were included on the basis of addressing the research question, their theoretical grounding, description of the methodology and methods, and the presence of thick description. The selection process is essential to ensure a high quality of output.

The synthesis of the included studies was conducted by a practice-academic partnership involving researchers at Coventry University and a lead occupational therapist at Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health Foundation Trust. The partnership also involved establishing three Steering Groups that included clients and occupational therapy practitioners from three West Midlands Mental Health Trusts, namely Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust, Solihull and Birmingham Mental Health Foundation Trust and Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Partnership Trust.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted that occupational therapists need to demonstrate their therapeutic effectiveness and impact upon clients and carers occupational lives, in order that the profession may be known and understood for its contribution, embracing the range of services in which occupational therapists work within mental health, without limiting the complexity of interventions.

The findings of the study have revealed that occupational therapists, working in different countries, experience similar concerns working within the mental health arena. Therapists were seen to deliver comparable interventions in relation to their therapeutic use of ADL, group work, leisure and creative activities, community re-integration and vocational support. The interventions seen to be most effective were those which enabled clients' space for healing, self-rediscovey, identity formation and participation and acceptance in the wider community, rather than short, psychological-based interventions, focused on case management and the assessment of mental stability. Moreover, effectiveness related to the ways in which interventions were delivered by skilled, artful, practitioners, who demonstrated genuine care and attention, and who were mindful of working within culturally relevant, inclusive environments.

Publications


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