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Health workers asked, why don't we care for ourselves?

Delegates to Occupational Therapy Australia's (OTA) 2020 Virtual OT Exchange have been told that systematic factors may explain our tendency to endure stressful work conditions stoically and with inadequate self-care.

"Burnout and compassion fatigue are enduring problems for health workers, especially in the context of COVID-19," psychotherapist and presenter Ms Toni Knight said.

Ms Knight has over 20 years of experience, beginning with her own compassion fatigue when she was a psychologist in a juvenile detention centre.

"Professional care givers are continuously extending empathy to clients with intense and complex needs.

"The chronic depletion of energy and the negative beliefs that come with burnout and compassion fatigue diminish resilience, strain relationships and reduce life and work satisfaction," Ms Knight said.

Research on the management of these conditions has generated a wealth of self-care strategies. Yet the high incidence of burnout and compassion fatigue indicates a widespread repudiation of these strategies.

According to Ms Knight, inadequate self-care is a tacit condition of participation in a powerful professional caregiving system.

"Workplace norms, the professional's reference group, and psychological factors such as personality, beliefs, cognitive biases and thinking styles can all act as barriers to undertaking adequate self-care.

"As professional caregivers we need to allocate our personal resources carefully to effectively manage our energy reserves."

To prioritise self-care, Ms Knight advocates regular reflective practice that:

- Clarifies personal and professional values, priorities and professional identity;
- Enables the practicing of adaptive mental strategies to connect to personal power; and
- Encourages self- and systems advocacy.

Approximately 500 occupational therapists have converged – virtually – on the 2020 OT Exchange, the first of OTA's national conferences to be delivered entirely online.

The conference features 93 scientific presentations and three workshops focussed on four key areas of occupational therapy practice: Driving, Rehabilitation, Paediatrics and Environmental Modifications. It runs from 14 to 15 September.

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About Occupational Therapy Australia

Occupational Therapy Australia is the national professional association representing occupational therapy in Australia. We offer opportunities for our members to enhance best practice through professional development, support, and access to profession-specific information.