

4-14-2022

Exploring the Experiences and Adaptation Strategies of People Who Develop Work-Related Musculoskeletal Symptoms After Working from Home During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Caitlin Gregory

Jim King

Lisa Griggs-Stapleton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://soar.usa.edu/otdcapstones-spring2022>



Part of the [Occupational Therapy Commons](#)

Exploring the Experiences and Adaptation Strategies of People Who Develop Work-Related Musculoskeletal Symptoms After Working from Home During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Caitlin L. Gregory, OTS, Jim King, PhD, OTR, CHT Lisa Griggs-Stapleton, PhD, OTR

Research Question: What are peoples' experiences while WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic and how do they adapt?

Background

- In 2020, a coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic brought fear, confusion, sickness, and change to people across the globe. In the United States, the closure of offices and workplaces forced millions to transition to work remote (Parker et al., 2021).
- Risk factors in the traditional work setting include prolonged sitting, awkward postures, repetitive movements, excessive force, and high mental workloads (Besharati et al., 2018; Costa & Vieira, 2009).
- Musculoskeletal (MSK) disorders are multifactorial, meaning a combination of physical, ergonomic, individual, and psychosocial factors contribute to the development and progression (AlOmar et al., 2021; King et al., 2021).
- Occupational therapists (OT) are healthcare professionals who encourage individuals across the lifespan to live life to the fullest by promoting preventative and adaptive methods when faced with an injury, illness, or disability (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], n.d.).
- Human development involves continuously adapting to various occupational challenges (Grajo & Boisselle, 2018; Schkade & Schultz, 1992).
- Individuals adapt activities by “modifying the craft, game, sport, or other occupation to enable performance, prevent MSK symptoms, or accomplish a goal” (Radomski & Trombly, 2013, p. 378).

Problem

- As working from home (WFH) has become more common, a greater number of people experience environmental challenges leading to increasing incidence and prevalence of MSK conditions (Gerding et al., 2021).
- The development of MSK symptoms can negatively impact an individual's overall health, wellbeing, and quality of life (Habib et al., 2015).
- Currently, the literature and experiences of OTs provide limited insight into the challenges and adaptive process of individuals who WFH and develop MSK symptoms.

Purpose

- Explore the experiences and adaptation strategies of employees WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Provide insight into the adaptation process of individuals WFH who developed MSK symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Develop valuable qualitative research that OTs can utilize to better assist this population in becoming more adaptive.
- Address the gap in literature to describe the phenomenon of people WFH during COVID-19, their adaptation process, and their development of MSK symptoms.

Methods

Qualitative Case Study Methodology

Recruitment

- Convenience sample of individuals known to the researcher; AOTA forums
- Three participants
- Inclusion Criteria: between the ages of 25-60, worked in an office setting prior to COVID-19, were a full-time worker, worked at home with an office setup, experienced MSK symptoms since WFH, attempted to adapt to the occupational challenges and symptoms.
- Exclusion Criteria: experienced MSK symptoms prior to COVID-19.

Data Collection

- One-on-one semi-structured interviews via audio phone call
- Interview guide: 13 open-ended questions
- Audio recorded: two devices

Data Analysis

- Braun and Clark (2006) Thematic Analysis Guide
- Transcription via Microsoft Word and NVivo
- Identify similar and unique responses
- Theoretical Approach

Theory of Occupational Adaptation

Schkade and Schultz's (1992) theory of Occupational Adaptation (OA) describes adaptation as an internal human process between the human and the environment.

- Three main components: “person, occupational environment, and the interaction of the two as they combine to engage in a task” (Schkade & Schultz, 1992, p. 831).
- Internal and external factors: desire for mastery and demand for mastery
- Outcome: dysfunction or function
- More adaptive = more functional

Findings

Case Studies

“Katherine”

- 44-year-old female senior manager of risk services and ergonomics at an insurance company. She experienced MSK symptoms in lower back, neck, upper shoulders, first and second digit, and right UE. Katherine demonstrated a high desire for mastery, which was evident by her ongoing adaptive process. This participant used household items, purchased new equipment, went to a chiropractor and doctor, took medication, and implemented various new aspects into her routine, such as stretches, walks, and timers.

“Callie”

- 27-year-old female consultant at a health care consulting firm. She experienced MSK symptoms in her wrist. This participant tried to adapt to the occupational challenges faced while WFH and her MSK symptoms in several ways. Callie purchased new equipment, took medication, implemented advice from a friend, and tried soft tissue massage.

“Blake”

- 25-year-old male consultant at a global software provider company. He experienced MSK symptoms in his lower back, shoulders, and wrist. This participant moved homes three times while WFH during COVID-19 and shared his experience in each location. In each location, he demonstrated a greater need for adaptation but also a greater level of mastery within his adaptation process. This participant used household items, purchased new equipment, and modified his environment to adapt to his symptoms and WFH challenges.

Categories and Themes

Contextual Factors and Dysfunction

- Finding Boundaries and Work-Life Balance
- Challenges in Communication
- Defining Occupational Roles
- Declining Socialization and Collaboration
- Working with Others

Contextual Factors and Function

- Having Employer Support
- Experiencing Flexibility
- Altering the Environment

The Adaptation Process

- Encountering Occupational Challenges
- Adapting the Workstation Setup
- Utilizing Household Items
- Purchasing Ergonomic Equipment
- Completing Additional Adaptations
- Reflecting on Adaptive Capacity

Future Directions

Publication and distribution of research article to discuss key qualitative findings to support the WFH community and OTs when working with this population.