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A systematic review of the effectiveness of Occupational Therapy interventions for improving functioning and mental health for individuals with anxiety and stress-related disorders

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Background
- Anxiety disorders are highly persistent over the lifetime (Kessler et al., 2009) and are associated with poor functioning in many activities of daily life (Iancu et al., 2014).

- Occupational therapists have a long history of practice with individuals with anxiety disorders (Creek & Lougher, 2012), but their interventions are individualised and vary widely across clinical settings.

- Very few manualised or standardised occupational therapy interventions exist for individuals with anxiety disorders, leading to a weak evidence base and a lack of rigorous research.

- The effectiveness of occupational-therapy led interventions for improving functioning and mental health is under-researched and systematic reviews are urgently required.

Objective
To determine the effectiveness of interventions designed/led by occupational therapists to improve functioning and mental health outcomes for individuals with anxiety and stress-related disorders.

Results

Records identified through database searching
(n = 4231)

Records after duplicates removed
(n = 2584)

Records published after 1994 (n = 2065)

Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 226)

Records included in narrative synthesis (n = 24)

Titles and abstracts excluded with reasons (n = 1839)

Qualitative studies 124
Cross-sectional studies and reviews 234
Population under-18 155
Surgical/pharmacological treatment 155
Diagnostic accounts 94
Healthcare services 337
Academia 87
Records with no OT intervention or anxiety diagnosis 278
Assessment tool development 54
Theory papers 183

Randomised Controlled Trials (5)
- Lambert et al. (2007) showed significant improvements in panic symptoms in an individually delivered lifestyle intervention.
- Garvey et al. (2015) showed significant improvements in daily functioning from a 6 week group self-management intervention.
- Kitchener et al. (2009) showed no difference between an OT group, a stress management intervention and CAU.
- Heterogeneous theoretical approaches mean results cannot be combined.

Controlled Trials (3)
- Eklund & Erlandsson (2011) showed improved return-to-work rates for the Redesigning Daily Occupations programme compared to usual work rehabilitation.
- Prior (1998) showed a statistically significant improvement in anxiety symptoms following a 6 week group using mixed approaches.
- Lack of randomisation increases risk of bias, but is common in clinical-based research.

Uncontrolled trials (6)
- A surfing intervention (Rogers et al) and a life skills intervention showed potential for improving PTSD trauma symptoms.
- Driving rehabilitation demonstrated improvement in driving skills (Classen).
- Lack of a control group increases risk of bias.

Single-case designs (5)
- n = 1 designs using widely differing interventions.
- The best quality study showed some emerging potential for a driving rehabilitation programme for veterans with PTSD.

Implications
- Occupational therapy interventions that focus on changing how individuals perform daily activities have the potential to improve individual functioning and mental health symptoms.
- Emerging evidence for replicable programmes such as OPTIMAL, ReDO and LAMP, as well as life skills and driving rehabilitation for specific populations.
- Occupational therapy interventions for anxiety are heterogeneous and high quality RCTs are urgently required.