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## Group Action Planning to Promote Well-Being of Non-Traditional Students in a Hybrid Program

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## Abstract

Non-traditional occupational therapy students experience stress and occupational imbalance during their educational experience due to academic and non-academic factors, which decreases their well-being. Throughout the occupational therapy literature, participation in a variety of occupations is known to positively impact well-being. However, there are limited interventions available to foster occupational therapy students' overall well-being through occupational engagement. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of interventions specifically designed to meet the unique needs of non-traditional occupational therapy students. Action planning is a structured goal setting format by which a person develops specific strategies to achieve desirable outcomes. This qualitative descriptive study described the benefits of participating in a group action planning intervention on the health, wellness, and well-being of non-traditional occupational therapy master's hybrid students. Data were collected through written reflections and coded line-by-line, resulting in open and focused codes. From the data, four themes emerged: developing the new skill of action planning, recognizing the importance of well-being, understanding health and wellness must be prioritized, and achieving a sense of balance. While follow-up studies are recommended, results from this study suggest that the group action planning intervention was beneficial and may help promote health, wellness, and well-being in non-traditional occupational therapy hybrid students.

## Keywords

Action planning, well-being, non-traditional student, occupational therapy, group intervention

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## Group Action Planning to Promote Well-Being of Non-Traditional Students in a Hybrid Program

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### ABSTRACT

Non-traditional occupational therapy students experience stress and occupational imbalance during their educational experience due to academic and non-academic factors, which decreases their well-being. Throughout the occupational therapy literature, participation in a variety of occupations is known to positively impact well-being. However, there are limited interventions available to foster occupational therapy students' overall well-being through occupational engagement. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of interventions specifically designed to meet the unique needs of non-traditional occupational therapy students. Action planning is a structured goal setting format by which a person develops specific strategies to achieve desirable outcomes. This qualitative descriptive study described the benefits of participating in a group action planning intervention on the health, wellness, and well-being of non-traditional occupational therapy master's hybrid students. Data were collected through written reflections and coded line-by-line, resulting in open and focused codes. From the data, four themes emerged: developing the new skill of action planning, recognizing the importance of well-being, understanding health and wellness must be prioritized, and achieving a sense of balance. While follow-up studies are recommended, results from this study suggest that the group action planning intervention was beneficial and may help promote health, wellness, and well-being in non-traditional occupational therapy hybrid students.

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One of occupational therapy's core beliefs is that engagement in meaningful activities positively impacts health and wellness (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2013; Hildenbrand & Lamb, 2013; Meyer, 1922/1977; Saraswati et al., 2019; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). However, despite learning about the importance of participation in meaningful activities in their course curriculum, it is well documented in the literature that occupational therapy students experience stress and occupational

imbalance during their academic experience, which decreases their overall well-being (Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education [ACOTE], 2018; Grab et al., 2021; Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021). In addition to all the typical stressors experienced by students, non-traditional occupational therapy students experience additional stressors due to other roles and responsibilities outside of their academic work (Chung et al., 2014; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Unfortunately, there are limited interventions available to foster occupational therapy students' overall well-being through promoting participation in meaningful occupations (Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021). Furthermore, there is a scarcity of interventions specifically designed to meet the unique needs of non-traditional occupational therapy students. Action planning is a structured goal setting format in which a person develops specific strategies to achieve desirable outcomes (Hagger & Luszczynska, 2014; Patton et al., 2020; Reinwand et al., 2016). This skill encourages an individual to take personal action towards creating change within their own life, habits, and routines for improved health (Fleig et al., 2016; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). The purpose of this pilot study was to assess the effectiveness of an action planning intervention with group accountability on the health, wellness and well-being of non-traditional occupational therapy students enrolled in a hybrid master's program.

## **Literature Review**

### **Health, Wellness, and Well-being: Definitions**

Despite being distinct constructs, health, wellness, and well-being have been used interchangeably throughout the literature. According to the World Health Organization (2006), health can be defined as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (p. 1). Wellness is defined as the active process that a person participates in to increase awareness and make choices to promote a successful life and optimal state of health (Hettler, 1984; Smith et al., 2006). Finally, well-being considers the physical, mental, and social components that constitute a good life that emerge from feelings of contentment, belonging, security, and self-determination, resulting in a meaningful life through roles and by helping others (Hammell, 2009; World Health Organization, 2006). Because people are equipped with various levels of resources to meet and overcome challenges, well-being can also be defined as the “balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced” (Dodge et al., 2012, p. 230). Living a life that promotes everyday living through positive physical, social, and mental states, rather than just an absence of illness, allows a person to grow, develop, and experience daily rhythms leading to vitality and peace (Hörberg et al., 2020).

### **Importance of Participation in Occupation for Health, Wellness, and Well-Being**

It is well developed in the occupational therapy literature that participation in a variety of occupations positively impacts well-being (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2013; Hildenbrand & Lamb, 2013, Meyer, 1922/1977; Saraswati et al., 2019; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Participating in meaningful occupations can meet an individual's needs for competence, affirmation, autonomy/agency, identity, companionship, contentment, pleasure, and renewal (Doble & Caron Santha, 2008; Saraswati et al., 2019). Specifically, a person experiences autonomy/agency when they

feel a sense of control and can set priorities that dictate participation in meaningful activities (e.g. what to do, how, when, where, how often and with whom they will participate in occupations), even if the amount of control and choice is limited (Doble & Caron Santha, 2008; Saraswati et al., 2019). Pleasure and renewal can be achieved when people give themselves permission to participate in enjoyable occupations which help redirect their attention from stressors and pressures that result from daily life (Doble & Caron Santha, 2008). While all people experience similar occupational needs, prioritization of each need differs for everyone (Doble & Caron Santha, 2008). By engaging in purposeful, meaningful, and fulfilling occupations, individuals can maintain a state of homeostasis and health, which allows the mind and body to function efficiently and helps promote social relationships (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). However, environmental constraints can make it difficult for a person to participate in meaningful occupations (Matuska & Barrett, 2019).

An important concept related to participation in meaningful occupations is occupational balance. Occupational balance is the subjective experience of being engaged in the right amount and types of occupations leading to health and a high quality of life (Matuska & Barrett, 2019; Stamm et al., 2009; Wagman et al., 2012). Because occupational patterns differ between persons and contexts, these occupational configurations need to be meaningful, sustainable, satisfying, and personalized to positively impact a person's health and well-being (Aas et al., 2020; Bejerholm, 2010; Forhan & Backman, 2010; Håkansson et al., 2019; Matuska, 2010; Matuska & Christiansen, 2008). Alternatively, occupational imbalance is an incompatibility or incongruence between occupational requirements and time, resources, or opportunity (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Imbalance can occur when a person experiences stress, is unable to meet identified needs, or is dissatisfied with the amount of time spent participating in meaningful occupations (Matuska, 2012; Matuska & Barrett, 2019). Therefore, a person experiences either occupational balance or imbalance depending on if they have enough time to engage in a variety of occupations within their typical routines.

### **Occupational Therapy Student Stressors and Occupational Imbalance**

Graduate students experience decreased physical and mental health during their educational experience as noted by reports of increased stress, anxiety and depression requiring mental health service utilization, psychological distress, sleep difficulties, and decreased physical activity (American College Health Association, 2020; Council of Graduate Schools & The Jed Foundation, 2021; Okahana, 2018). Unfortunately, current literature reports that this is common among graduate students and the prevalence trend is rising compared to the previous five years (Council of Graduate Schools & The Jed Foundation, 2021; Okahana, 2018). While campus-wide initiatives have been increasingly implemented, universities have not made a significant impact in developing programming that effectively addresses graduate student mental health and well-being (Council of Graduate Schools & The Jed Foundation, 2021).

Like all students, occupational therapy students experience stressors which impact their overall well-being. Specifically, occupational therapy student stressors commonly center around the areas of academics, health, finances, and relationships (Govender et al., 2015; Grab et al., 2021; Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021; McCombie et al., 2016). Occupational therapy students have identified helpful coping strategies to mitigate stress such as supportive relationships from friends and family, religion, and participation in exercise and hobbies (Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021; McCombie et al., 2016). However, despite learning about the importance of leisure and balance in their coursework and recognizing that participation in these activities may help them cope with stress, occupational therapy students experience occupational imbalance and tend to prioritize academic work over participation in meaningful non-academic activities (ACOTE, 2018; Grab et al., 2021; Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021).

### **Non-Traditional Students: Characteristics and Challenges**

The term non-traditional student typically describes students who differ in socio-demographic characteristics compared to the traditional higher education student (Chung et al., 2014). These characteristics include age greater than 25 years old, having life roles beyond student (e.g. worker, spouse/partner, parent/caregiver of dependents), having a previous degree, and enrollment in a non-traditional program such as an evening or weekend program (Chung et al., 2014; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Jesnek, 2012). In addition to the typical concerns and stressors faced by all students, because of these differences, non-traditional students face unique educational and mental health challenges compared to the traditional student (Chung et al., 2014). Non-traditional students experience challenges such as competing demands stemming from family and work responsibilities, learning to balance and maintain sufficient engagement in both academic and external commitments, looking for ways to apply new learning into their real-life contexts, and adjusting to changes in their workplace while requiring additional coping skills (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Non-traditional students, who are not on campus daily, also need to find ways to develop authentic involvement with peers and instructors as a positive and protective factor considering they experience lower levels of time and energy to invest in educational activities (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

### **Action Planning**

Action planning is a structured goal setting format by which a person develops specific strategies to achieve desirable outcomes (Hagger & Luszczynska, 2014; Patton et al., 2020; Reinwand et al., 2016). This self-management skill encourages a person to take personal action towards creating change within their own life, habits, and routines (Fleig et al., 2016). Developing action plans has the potential to enable individuals “to appreciate what they can do for themselves” by providing them with opportunities to increase control through choice and action leading to improved health (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015, p. 453). Adding a group component has been shown to increase effectiveness in people attaining their established goals (O’Donnell et al., 2018). While action planning is well documented in use with clients with chronic conditions to take a more active role in their health management, action planning has not been used as commonly with students to help them achieve their personal health and wellness goals

despite academic pressures (Carraro & Gaudreau, 2015; Gutnick et al., 2014; Patton et al., 2020; Ory et al., 2013). Developing action plans has the potential to aid occupational therapy students in participating more regularly in meaningful occupations, which may help to promote their health, wellness, and well-being.

### **Statement of the Problem and Study Purpose**

An occupational lifestyle that is comprised of regular, adequate, and timely activities that provide opportunities for rest, creativity, and relationships can positively contribute to overall health (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Despite learning about the importance of promoting health and well-being, participating in leisure activities, and maintaining occupational balance within their educational program, unfortunately, occupational therapy students do not always personally experience well-being and occupational balance as they progress in their educational programs due to the significant stressors and pressures they face as students (Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education, 2018; Grab et al., 2021; Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021; McCombie et al., 2016). This is particularly true for non-traditional students, who are balancing other roles and responsibilities beyond their academics (Chung et al., 2014; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). In their scoping review about occupational therapy student stress, well-being, and coping, Lewis-Kipkulei et al. (2021) stated, “Students should not have to choose between academic success and well-being” (p. 10). While students verbalize the importance of participating in a variety of meaningful activities which can be beneficial for coping with high levels of stress and help to maintain their well-being, there appears to be a disconnect between identifying strategies and implementing practices into daily routines.

According to AOTA’s *Occupational Therapy Practice Framework, 4th edition* (2020), “achieving health, well-being, and participation in life through engagement in occupation is the overarching statement that describes the domain and process of occupational therapy in its fullest sense” (p. 5). While there is a wealth of literature describing the problem of decreased well-being in the student population, including graduate students, there are very few interventions and strategies available for graduate students to manage their stress, promote personal well-being, and engage in meaningful occupations (Council of Graduate Schools & The Jed Foundation, 2021; Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021). Furthermore, there is a scarcity of interventions for occupational therapy students and more specifically non-traditional students, who are not typically involved in or have access to regular campus programming (Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021). The purpose of this pilot study was to assess the effectiveness of an action planning intervention with group accountability on the health, wellness and well-being of non-traditional occupational therapy students enrolled in a hybrid master’s program. Specifically, the research question was: What is the benefit of a group action planning intervention on student health, wellness, and well-being?

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This was a qualitative descriptive study which explored the benefits of a group action planning intervention on non-traditional hybrid master's level occupational therapy students' well-being. The study was approved by Belmont University's Institutional Review Board and informed consent was obtained from each participant.

### **Recruitment**

First year students enrolled in Belmont University's Master's in Occupational Therapy (MSOT) program were recruited to participate in the study. The MSOT program director assisted with the recruitment process to minimize coercion concerns as the researcher was also the interventionalist and instructor for the course. The program director described the study purpose and invited students to sign the informed consent forms indicating their willingness for their reflections to be included in the data collection. Students were encouraged to contact the researcher with any questions prior to signing the informed consent forms. Recruitment was completed early in the semester, well before the students completed the written reflection assignment, which was due at the end of the semester. Students were told that they could withdraw their consent at any time and that their decision to participate in the study would not impact their grades or relationship with the researcher/instructor, program or university.

### **Intervention Description**

Students were educated on the purpose of action planning and provided with a format to develop personal action plans. The action plans focused on a specific task/activity that they wanted to do to promote their own well-being, when they would do it, and how much they would do it. To gauge how achievable the action plan was, participants were asked to rate their confidence level and action plans were modified as needed to promote success. Each time students came together for their on-site classes, students provided updates on their previous action plans and developed new plans within a small group setting of five to six students. Students provided each other accountability and encouragement when face to face in the classroom and virtually during the weeks when they were away from campus. The course instructor served as an example by developing her own personal action plans, providing updates on goal success and failures, and by encouraging students in their pursuit of fostering their health, wellness, and well-being. Modeling is consistent with recommendations for faculty in supporting graduate student mental health and well-being (Council of Graduate Schools & The Jed Foundation, 2021; Grab et al., 2021).

### **Data Collection**

Students reflected on their health, wellness, and well-being in a written assignment, which was completed at the end of the semester. These reflections became the data collected and analyzed. Reflection was chosen as the medium for data collection as it allowed the students to make meaningful connections between current and new knowledge and attitudes, which is essential to transformational learning (Pale, 2017). Prompts (e.g. knowledge and skills gained, attitude towards well-being, comparison of

well-being between first and second semesters, future areas of focus/change, opportunities for knowledge translation) were provided for students to consider when writing their reflections; however, students were encouraged to share what they thought was most pertinent to share regarding the topic. All students in the cohort completed the written reflection assignment, regardless, if they were participating in the research study or not. Students submitted their reflections through the university's learning management system and the assignments were graded for completion. The primary researcher did not download the study participants' reflections or prepare the data for analysis, including de-identifying reflections, until after the students' final grades were submitted. These measures were taken to avoid any additional concerns for coercion.

### **Data Analysis**

The participants' reflections comprised the raw qualitative data and the data analysis process was guided by Corbin and Strauss (2015) and Charmaz (2014). The primary investigator coded the qualitative data line by line and incident to incident resulting in open codes (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The open codes were a conceptualization of the data based on the interpreted meaning of what the participants said in their reflections (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). There was a total of 225 open codes. The open codes were then sifted into focused codes (Charmaz, 2014). The process of focused coding was used to analyze the large amounts of data resulting in the most significant and/or frequent codes (Charmaz, 2014). To visually depict codes and increase overall comprehension for those that might not be familiar with qualitative data analysis, a word cloud was developed with the size of the words and phrases corresponding to the code prevalence (Bletzer, 2015). Thus, the word cloud brings the reader "closer to the truth of what participants wished to communicate versus the reality of frequency counts" (Bletzer, 2015, p. 6) by visually revealing the overall participant intent (Bletzer, 2015). Refer to Figure 1 for the word cloud. In cases where the participants' words perfectly captured a thought or idea, data was recorded verbatim as "in vivo" codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Themes emerged from the data as the researcher filtered the data into the significant and manageable codes.

## Figure 1

### Word Cloud Depicting Code Prevalence



In the research study design process, the primary investigator decided to be the sole coder. Therefore, to preserve rigor in the data analysis process, the primary investigator completed a bracketing interview prior to the data being gathered with an expert in qualitative research (S. Busby, personal communication, May 6, 2020). This expert also has a specific expertise in the process described by Corbin and Strauss (2015) and Charmaz (2014), including his dissertation work being an example in Corbin and Strauss' text (2015). The bracketing interview was used to identify and make the primary investigator more aware of her biases, preferences, and preconceptions, especially considering the established plan for her to complete the data analysis process on her own (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Questions asked during the bracketing interview were related to the researcher's thoughts on why some students decided not to participate in the study, what the researcher hoped to find and not find in the study, what factors influence hybrid student well-being, how the group intervention might impact participant responses, and how these ideas might influence the coding process (S. Busby, personal communication, May 6, 2020). The primary investigator reviewed the bracketing interview transcript multiple times throughout the data analysis process. The primary investigator recognized that she is a non-traditional, doctoral student enrolled in a hybrid program, and like the participants, is trying to maintain her well-being. She also acknowledged that she was the participants' instructor. Therefore, the data was analyzed with these biases.

By being reflexive, the primary investigator acknowledged her own role in the research process and the pre-conceived assumptions that she brought to the research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018), while maintaining a careful balance of using these experiences to benefit the researcher's sensitivity when completing data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The researcher did not force her ideas on the data to interpret meaning; however, the researcher used her professional knowledge and experience to enhance sensitivity (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The qualitative researcher is considered to be an instrument, especially when research is done in an area of expertise and nuanced meaning is important (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The primary investigator's insight stemming from being a student and faculty member helped her identify and understand significance more quickly (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Also, an audit trail and memos about decisions made were maintained by the primary investigator throughout the entire process. The primary investigator had extensive conversations with a qualitative researcher with a specific expertise in Corbin and Strauss' (2015) and Charmaz's (2014) processes during the research design process and used the bracketing interview, audit trail, and memos as strategies to meet the criterion of trustworthiness, specifically dependability, credibility, and reflexivity (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

## Results

### Participants

Out of the 38 students enrolled in the course, 32 students participated in the study by agreeing to have their written reflections included in the data collection. These hybrid master's level students were non-traditional students. The participants were either certified occupational therapy assistants or physical therapy assistants who had returned to school to become occupational therapists. Many of the participants were older than 25 years old, working full-time, and balancing families and other responsibilities in addition to school. As hybrid students, the participants traveled to campus every three weeks for a total of six times per semester. Teaching during the in-between weeks was asynchronous virtual.

### Qualitative Results

Overall, data indicated that the participants found the group action planning intervention beneficial in promoting personal health, wellness, and well-being. Four themes emerged from the data describing the benefits of participating in the intervention: developing the new skill of action planning, recognizing the importance of well-being, understanding health and wellness must be prioritized, and achieving a sense of balance.

### *Developing the New Skill of Action Planning*

The participants found that by developing the new skill of action planning, it helped them to focus on their health promotion and motivated them to actively participate in self-care activities. A participant stated, "...just having this as a goal prompted me to complete this task much more often than if I had not made it a goal. If this action plan did not exist, I would have most likely slacked..." The structured format and group accountability also helped participants meet their goals by providing an evidence-based

resource, additional support, and encouragement. For those that did not achieve their action plans, they still viewed the skill as an opportunity to grow in the future. Regardless, if they were successful or unsuccessful in meeting their goals, participants said that they would like to continue using the action planning format themselves and plan on sharing it with others, including their family members, clients, and coworkers. One participant said, "I have found them to be so helpful that I have been encouraging others to implement action plans to help promote proactivity and personal well-being."

### ***Recognizing the Importance of Well-Being***

The participants also found that this intervention helped them recognize the importance of well-being. At the end of the semester long experience, they recognized changes in their attitudes and mindset. One student said, "This class has transformed my thinking on health and wellness..." Another person reported, "...I have noticed a drastic difference in my health/wellness and well-being. Physically I have lost about 7 pounds from the start of the semester, but what I notice more is how I feel." Additionally, as non-traditional students who juggle many roles and responsibilities, participants realized that they must be well themselves so that they can take care of others, whether that be family or their clients. A participant concluded, "Overall, I learned that I can't forget about myself. I want to be super mom, super student and super therapist, but I can't be any of those things if I don't take care of myself first." After acknowledging the value of well-being personally, the participants desired to share this newly experienced knowledge with others in their realm. A participant summarized the sentiment well when she said, "...I will definitely be spreading this knowledge like wildfire in my personal and work life."

### ***Understanding Health and Wellness Must Be Prioritized***

Many of the participants previously thought that health was comprised of just exercise; however, through the intervention process, they learned that health also included their emotional, mental, and emotional states. They acknowledged that they experienced a significant amount of stress and pressure as a non-traditional student; however, when they prioritized their well-being, participants found that they were more resilient and capable than they originally thought. Participants also reported when they took time to recharge their minds, bodies, and souls, they experienced decreased stress and anxiety and were in better moods, which positively impacted their personal relationships and academic performance. One participant said, "I have learned that it is important to maintain at least a little of the leisure activities that are important to me during this time, while accepting that I cannot do everything I have previously done." As the students prioritized their well-being and demonstrated self-compassion, they also found the freedom to give themselves permission for self-care, even if that meant less time for school activities. A participant described this changed mentality as, "...I will continue to apply this philosophy of being both kind and realistic with myself..."

### ***Achieving a Sense of Balance***

Participants reported experiencing a sense of balance as a benefit of participating in the action planning intervention. They achieved an increased overall sense of balance when they participated in a variety of activities that nourished their minds, bodies, and souls helping them to better fulfill their various life roles. The benefit of feeling more balance was enough incentive that the participants planned to continue incorporating these activities that fostered their well-being into their regular routines. One participant spoke about how having more balance helped manage her feelings of burnout, “Being a part of this program brings me joy, but there are many other areas of my life like my roles as a wife and mother, my spirituality, and my hobbies that need to be pursued so that I am balanced instead of burnt out.”

Even though they had participated in the action planning intervention that emphasized well-being promotion, some students still struggled to find balance and prioritize their health. Some reported, despite having the desire, it was difficult to change their habits and routines.

### **Discussion**

The benefits reported by participants aligned well with the literature that supports participating in a variety of meaningful occupations positively impact well-being, transitioning knowledge into action, finding ways to apply new knowledge within real-life contexts, group accountability for increased effectiveness, and struggling yet achieving balance.

Consistent with the occupational therapy literature, participating in a variety of meaningful occupations positively impacted the participants’ overall physical, mental, and social health (Hildenbrand & Lamb, 2013; Meyer, 1922/1977; Saraswati et al., 2019; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). They reported weight loss, the ability to perform their roles better, decreased anxiety and stress, improved moods, and enhanced social interactions with others. Considering the participants had already completed their therapy assistant education and were practicing clinicians, knowing the importance of participating in a variety of meaningful activities to foster health and wellness was not a new concept for them. However, only after participating in the action planning intervention, which was focused on promoting personal well-being, did the participants recognize the importance and benefit of prioritizing personal well-being and implementing this strategy in their own lives, resulting in a changed attitude.

Once they experienced improved health and wellness, the participants were eager to share this knowledge with others. Applying schoolwork knowledge gained in real-life contexts had been identified in the literature as a challenge for non-traditional students (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). However, this did not appear to be an issue for the participants as they repeatedly reported sharing information learned through the intervention with their family, friends, co-workers, and clients through knowledge translation. Also, the participants’ appreciation of the group dynamic for encouragement and accountability aligned well with the literature suggesting non-traditional students are looking for ways to have authentic involvement with other students, because they are

not on campus often (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). The intervention was well suited for hybrid students as they communicated with each other between live weekends, even if they had little time and energy to invest in educational activities because of their full lives.

Finally, consistent with challenges faced by non-traditional students, the participants reported struggling to find balance while juggling their academic and external responsibilities within the constraints of their environments (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Matuska & Barrett, 2019). This continued stress and pressure negatively impacted their overall well-being; however, once they gave themselves permission to participate in activities that provided pleasure and renewal, they were able to better fulfill their duties and care for themselves and others (Doble & Caron Santha, 2008). Also, the action planning intervention helped them experience a sense of autonomy and agency leading to increased agency and a sense of control and choice in how to spend their time and energy, despite the many roles they held (Doble & Caron Santha, 2008; Saraswati et al., 2019). Taking personal responsibility for their overall health, wellness, and well-being enabled participants to see that they did not have to sacrifice well-being to achieve academic success (Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While the results are promising, there are a few limitations to the study. This was a small sample size involving one cohort of students from one university. Also, unfortunately, COVID-19 emerged right in the middle of the semester and intervention. While the students reported that the action planning intervention was beneficial and perhaps even provided a buffer to more significant effects, the pandemic most likely impacted the students' overall well-being. Additionally, while the participants were encouraged to honestly reflect on their health, wellness, and well-being, it is possible that the students may have wanted to appear more well-adjusted or inflate the positive effects of the action planning intervention to impress the course instructor who was also the researcher. Finally, the primary investigator completed the data analysis process on her own. Therefore, despite multiple strategies (e.g., extensive conversations with an expert in the research design process, bracketing interview, audit trails, memos) being used to maintain the rigor and trustworthiness of the data analysis process, the results may have differed if the data analysis was completed by multiple people.

This study lays the foundation for future research including studies with other cohorts of students or with other populations such as occupational therapy practitioners, traditional occupational therapy students or other health professions students. Also, a quantitative component using standardized assessments that measure the constructs of health, wellness, and/or well-being could be added to the data collection methods to determine if students experience a statistically significant difference in their health, wellness, and well-being after participating in the action planning intervention. Quantitative data could be collected using a quasi-experimental research design, with either a one group pre-test – posttest collection (experimental group only) or a non-equivalent control pre-test – posttest collection (experimental group and a control group; Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019).

### **Implications for Occupational Therapy Education**

Occupational therapy students experience stress, decreased well-being, and occupational imbalance during their educational experience. While the problem of occupational therapy student stress has been well documented in the literature, there has been minimal effort to mitigate the issue. Therefore, academic programs need to address this rising trend in students. A core tenant of occupational therapy is that participation in meaningful activities can positively impact well-being. Occupational therapy academic programs are well-positioned to develop programming to promote student health and wellness from this unique perspective. While occupational therapy students may learn about the importance of occupational balance and participation in meaningful activities within their academic curriculum related to clients, they need opportunities to implement these concepts into their personal lives. If occupational therapy students experience positive outcomes when prioritizing their overall well-being during the didactic portion of their educational experience, this could result in continued implementation of healthy habits and routines as they transition into fieldwork and eventual practice. Occupational therapy faculty members also have the opportunity to encourage students to prioritize personal well-being by modeling good practices themselves. Finally, the way occupational therapy educational opportunities are offered has expanded to fit the diverse needs of students (e.g. online programs, hybrid programs, post-professional programs for working clinicians). As the number of non-traditional occupational therapy students increases, academic programs should consider how they can help to promote well-being in this specific population.

### **Conclusion**

Like many students, non-traditional occupational therapy students experience stress while in school that limits their participation in a variety of occupations. This lack of occupational balance can negatively impact their overall health, wellness, and well-being. Through the action planning intervention, students participated in meaningful activities, allowing them to take personal action and responsibility towards creating change within their own lives, habits, and routines. The participants reported benefits from this pilot study intervention including developing the new skill of action planning, recognizing the importance of well-being, understanding health and wellness must be prioritized, and achieving a sense of balance. While follow-up studies are recommended, results from this study suggest that a group action planning intervention may help promote well-being in non-traditional occupational therapy students.

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