

Emotional intelligence: A critical competency for therapy students undertaking clinical placements

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Background

This research paper will challenge university educators to devote more time in occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech pathology curricula to enhancing the emotional intelligence (EI) of students prior to the commencement of their full-time clinical placements. Increasingly, EI is a desired quality in workers around the globe including therapists. Currently, university therapy courses spend minimal course-time enhancing the EI capabilities of students.

Methods

This longitudinal study sought to delve into the influence that clinical placements have on the EI capabilities of therapy students. This study tracked changes in EI over the final 18 month period of the undergraduate course of occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech pathology students (n=191). Students were from four Australian universities. EI was measured using the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i^{2.0}). The therapy students' EI was compared to Australian General Population Norms for the EQ-i^{2.0}. Interviews were then conducted (n=24) with therapy students to determine how clinical placements influenced the changes in EI capabilities.

Results

Before students commence full-time, extended clinical placements, EQ-i^{2.0} scores were significantly lower than the Australian Norms in the EI domains of self-expression, independence, problem-solving and stress tolerance. Concerningly, there was a prevalence of therapy students with scores below 90 on the EQ-i^{2.0}, which is considered 'low' or 'below average', for independence (49% of students), problem solving (47%) and stress tolerance (41%). During placements, EI tended to fluctuate. Interviews showed that supervision style, student's success in interacting with patients and the personal/professional maturity positively and negatively impacted the EI competencies of therapy students.

Discussion

This longitudinal research recommends that EI modules be included in university therapy programs. Students may benefit from undertaking EI testing prior to clinical placements, thus gaining insights into their strengths and weaknesses. Students could make clinical supervisors aware of their strengths and deficiencies commencing placement with a range of strategies to help improve their EI competencies.