

**Exploring Burnout and Well-Being Strategies for Occupational Therapy Students:
A Qualitative Study**

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Abstract

Literature Review: Burnout rates continue to grow in occupational therapy students and practitioners. Despite using coping strategies, occupational therapy students continue to experience burnout. Because of this, occupational therapy students are more likely to have worse academic outcomes and experience burnout after graduation.

Purpose: The purpose of this capstone experience was to further explore occupational therapy student experiences of burnout, as well as to gain feedback on current mental health promotion strategies adapted for all occupational therapy students for continued revisions.

Methods: This research study used a qualitative interpretive phenomenological approach in combination with Critical Incident Interviewing Technique to explore the experiences of burnout of occupational therapy students at the University of Missouri. A rapid interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyze data collected from the interviews.

Results: Three themes emerged from the data that describe student burnout experiences: contributing factors, burnout responses, and mindset. The acceptability of EMC strategies was also explored. Our findings revealed that OT students experience burnout in a cycle consisting of themes of contributing factors, burnout responses and mindset. When asked for feedback about mental health promotion strategies adapted for occupational therapy students, most strategies were well received by participants with minimal feedback and recommendations. Findings were supported by Mindset Theory and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping.

Conclusion: This study highlights how contributing factors, responses, mindsets, and strategies characterize the burnout cycle and how using mental health strategies adapted for all occupational therapy students can begin to interrupt the burnout cycle.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	5
Chapter 2: Needs Assessment.....	6
Chapter 3: Literature Review.....	7
Chapter 4: Capstone Methods.....	9
Chapter 5: Project Evaluation & Results.....	12
Chapter 6: Discussion.....	29
Conclusion.....	34
References.....	35
Appendices.....	41

Chapter I: Introduction

Due to the rigorous nature of gaining an occupational therapy degree, students are at an increased risk of mental health issues and burnout (Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021). Approximately 98% of students reported using at least one self-care strategy to cope with school related stress, but students continue to experience burnout (Popova et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated burnout experiences amongst students and brought this topic to the forefront, further highlighting the need for a better understanding of burnout and strategies that can improve the overall well-being of occupational therapy students. The aim of this research study was to explore occupational therapy student experiences of burnout at the University of Missouri, and to assess the acceptability of adapted mental health promotion strategies. Therefore, this capstone experience aimed to answer the following research question: How do occupational therapy students at the University of Missouri experience and cope with burnout? What is the acceptability of mental health promotion strategies adapted for all occupational therapy students to current students?

The University of Missouri (MU) has multiple occupational therapy programs including a bachelor's degree in occupational therapy assistant, entry-level occupational therapy doctorate degree, and an occupational therapy post professional doctorate. Students enrolled at MU come from a variety of backgrounds and from different states across the country. Ages of students vary from ages of 18-30+ years old, and a majority of students are women. During these occupational therapy programs, students complete course work related to human movement, neuroscience, community health, documentation, evidence-based practice, theory in OT, leadership, and off-site fieldwork experiences (University of Missouri, 2024). Students in the occupational therapy doctorate program also complete a capstone experience to gain in-depth experience in a specific area of focus.

This capstone experience with MU's occupational therapy department provided a great opportunity to participate in the focus areas of research and program development by

contributing to scholarly research related to occupational therapy student burnout. These focus areas allowed for engagement in research design, research ethics, data collection, and data analysis to begin to gain further knowledge about burnout experiences and feedback for refinement of mental health promotion strategies for all occupational therapy students. Ultimately, this line of work will help us to promote positive mental health for all occupational therapy students and identify mental health challenges and burnout among occupational therapy students in the MU department of occupational therapy.

Chapter II: Needs Assessment

We conducted a needs assessment to further explore the problem of burnout and mental health issues within the occupational therapy programs at the University of Missouri. Both a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis and occupational profile were completed for the site in September and October of 2023. I completed the needs assessment with Dr. Melanie Tkach, an assistant professor and occupational therapist at the University of Missouri. Information was obtained to better understand strengths and weaknesses of the site, barriers to conducting a research project at the site, and to identify needs of the students to be addressed by a capstone experience. A strength of the site included a supportive staff who is aware of the growing concern of mental health issues and burnout in occupational therapy students. Another strength is that there are several cohorts of students in different stages of the MU occupational therapy programs who would be able to provide unique perspectives during a qualitative study. A weakness of the site is that there are several types of occupational therapy programs at MU, which may make program wide strategies hard to implement across all programs or it may be difficult to get faculty buy in from all professors. A threat of this site is that MU is a doctoral OT program, which may result in greater workloads and potentially more burnout compared to a master's program. There is a great opportunity at this site to adapt a mental health promotion program designed for primary and secondary education to occupational therapy students for improved well-being among students at the MU.

Chapter III: Literature Review

Approximately 65% of students in healthcare related programs report burnout, and prevalence is higher for these students than the general student population (Hamed et al., 2023; Tlili et al., 2021). Burnout is defined as emotional and physical exhaustion resulting from exposures to environmental and internal stressors and inadequate coping and adaptive skills (Madigan et al., 2023). Burnout is associated with diagnosed health problems, a mental health diagnosis, emotional exhaustion, and difficulty sleeping in healthcare students (Tlili et al., 2021). Moreover, Robins et al. (2018) find that rates of burnout in students correlate to experiences of burnout once becoming a practicing occupational therapist, which is particularly concerning given that 27% of practitioners have thought about leaving the OT field (AOTA, 2024). Understanding student burnout and interventions that promote positive student mental health may increase well-being and prevent future clinical burnout.

Occupational therapy students encounter many unique stressors throughout their occupational therapy education that can result in burnout. These stressors include changes in roles and routines, poor work-life balance, increased academic workload, emotional burden, financial burden, and feelings of decreased social connectedness or belonging (Malek-Ismail & Krajnik, 2018). At the start of an occupational therapy program, a student may experience a transition period that includes new roles and routines such as spending more time each day at school, not being able to have a job, or having to move to an entirely new school or state to complete the occupational therapy program. Students also have less time to complete meaningful activities or spend time engaging socially with their peers due to the increased academic workload of occupational therapy school compared to undergraduate coursework (Malek-Ismail & Krajnik, 2018). Financially, occupational therapy school can lead to more debt accrued when compared to other graduate level programs (Shin et. al., 2022). This increased debt then places more stress on students to find a job with a competitive wage after graduation. Students may also encounter emotionally difficult situations when interacting with patients on

fieldwork (Gribble et al., 2017). If not addressed early, burnout can negatively impact academic performance and future clinical practice

Student burnout negatively impacts academic performance. Specifically, burnout leads to a decreased sense of well-being, which is associated with poor academic outcomes such as decreased grade point average, absenteeism, failed courses, or withdrawal from academic programs (Madigan & Curran, 2020). Students experiencing burnout or mental health challenges are more likely to experience negative impacts to their academic performance including poor academic productivity, cognitive changes due to mental health issues, and thoughts of dropping out (Nagy et al., 2019; Madigan & Curran, 2020). Therefore, it is important that we ensure that occupational therapy students have the appropriate coping strategies to address student burnout during academic programs and in practice.

A variety of programs exist that can help promote positive mental health in an educational setting such as Challenge Success, Second Steps, and Every Moment Counts (EMC) (Stanford University, 2024; Low et al., 2019, Bazyk, 2023). These programs are used with students in grades K-12 to promote belonging and connection, a sense of community, a supportive and welcoming environment, and overall well-being. Research has shown that these programs have a positive impact on academic outcomes and engagement (Bazyk 2018; Low et al., 2019), but mental health promotion programs like these are underutilized at the graduate level (Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021).

Every Moment Counts, a mental health promotion initiative used in elementary schools, can inform population-level mental health promotion strategies for occupational therapy students. The focus of the program is to guide students to become mentally healthy at school and home in order to succeed. The main goal of Every Moment Counts is to provide a program with embedded strategies that promote positive mental health throughout the school (Bazyk et al., 2018). Institutional support has been widely identified as a protective factor for preventing burnout among students (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). While EMC does not account for the unique

contexts and stressors that occupational therapy students face in higher education, it can be used as a starting point to reduce burnout and promote positive mental health in all students.

Overall, there is a lack of research directed towards occupational therapy students and burnout, but there are different strategies that may promote better academic and professional outcomes when applied at the program level. Further research is needed to gain perspectives on student mental health needs, program experiences, and to evaluate the acceptability of mental health promotion strategies adapted for all occupational therapy students based on the EMC initiative. To further address rates of burnout in occupational therapy students, this doctoral capstone experience explored student experiences of burnout from the perspectives of both student and faculty members. We also explored the acceptability of mental health promotion strategies adapted for all occupational therapy students based on the EMC initiative.

Chapter IV: Capstone Methods

Study Design

This research study used a qualitative interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experience of stress and burnout in occupational therapy students from the perspective of students and educators at MU. Additionally, we used Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to interview research participants. CIT takes place in a natural setting and helps elicit more specific experiences and richer responses from participants (Cunningham et al., 2020). CIT focuses on the researcher being the key instrument of data collection through interviewing, participant observation, and open-ended questions (Cunningham et al., 2020). Both a phenomenological approach and Critical Incident Technique were selected because these methods allow for participants to provide first-hand accounts of their burnout experiences including what was experienced and how it was experienced (Neubauer et al., 2019). This methodology created the opportunity to learn valuable knowledge from student and faculty

experiences so that we can better support the mental health needs of occupational therapy students.

Participants and Recruitment

We recruited participants to the point of saturation from 1st, 2nd, and 3rd year occupational therapy doctorate students (OTD) at MU. 1st and 2nd year students at MU's Occupational Therapy Assistant (OTA) program were also recruited. In addition, we recruited full-time faculty members. The lead investigator recruited participants through an in-person presentation about the research study. Recruitment also included an email-based recruitment ad to potential participants included in MUOT's email listserv which reached participants currently and not currently on campus. Inclusion criteria included being an MU OTD student, OTA student, or full-time OT faculty member. Exclusion criteria included students enrolled in the Post Professional Doctorate (PPOTD) program because they are practicing clinicians and distance learners whose experiences may be different than entry-level MU OT students. Adjunct or part-time faculty were excluded because of their limited interaction with students. Potential participants completed an eligibility screener via [REDCap®](#) to confirm eligibility for the study.

Data Collection and Procedures Interviews were conducted between May and July of 2024. Participants provided electronic informed consent prior to participation. After consent was obtained, participants completed a short demographic questionnaire. Then, participants answered open-ended questions about their experiences of burnout (students) or their observations of student burnout (faculty). Then, using a CIT approach, participants identified a specific experience of burnout or observations of student burnout to discuss with the interviewer. Participants answered questions about their feelings and perceptions of the situation, actions taken during the situation, and changes in behaviors following the identified situation. Finally, participants provided feedback about mental health promotion strategies for occupational therapy students that MU OT previously adapted from EMC to further refine the strategies. Interviews lasted about 30-60 minutes and were video and audio recorded on Zoom

for data transcription and analysis. See *Appendix M. & N. for Every Moment Counts adapted strategies and interview questions.*

Data Analysis

A rapid interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was used to analyze data collected from the interview process due to the time constraints of the 14-week capstone experience (Charlick et al., 2016). First, audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were then read and reread until researchers were familiar with the data. A sample of 3 interviews from each participating cohort and faculty group were selected to be coded. Transcripts were independently analyzed and coded by 3 members of the research team. Significant quotes were identified and given a corresponding code. These codes were then put into NVIVO, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, and a codebook was generated (Lumivero, 2023). The research team met to further refine initial codes and to analyze for emerging themes across the data. Coding and theme discrepancies amongst the research team were discussed until a consensus was reached. Patterns and themes were then interpreted for significance and meaning was given to narratives provided by participants.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of our research, the research team reflected on personal biases and backgrounds that could potentially influence research findings (Krefting, 1991). To reduce personal biases and confirmation bias, we used triangulation of investigators to code data to ensure that determined codes and emergent themes were agreed upon across the research team. To further enhance the transferability of findings, a diverse sample of participants reflected students throughout the academic program participated in interviews (Krefting, 1991). After each interview, participants could request a follow-up Zoom interview or email to further confirm and discuss the accuracy of our interpretations of their responses. Research manuscripts developed from our data include direct quotes from participants to

enhance trustworthiness and to give an accurate representation of the lived experiences of research participants.

Chapter V: Project Evaluation

Capstone Results

In order to ensure that capstone learning objectives were being met, we completed a survey throughout the 14-week capstone experience during check in meetings between the site mentor and doctoral capstone student. These check-ins ensured that research skills such as enhancing communication skills, implementing the research project, and becoming proficient with data analysis were being met through my capstone experience. Research skills and the quality of the project were frequently reviewed during formal and informal meetings throughout the experience, and feedback was incorporated into the project as needed. *See Appendix O for evaluation checklist and surveys.*

Research Results

A convenience sample of 20 OTD students and 3 OT faculty completed an eligibility screener prior to participating in this study (n=23) and 19 OTD students and 3 OT faculty then completed a semi-structured interview (n=22). One student dropped out of the study after completing the eligibility screener due to no longer being interested. Participants included 14 students from the OTD class of 2024 (63.6%), 3 students from the class of 2025 (13.6%), 2 students from the class of 2026 (9.0%), and 3 faculty members (13.6%).

Participant Backgrounds

Student participants were sampled from students in different stages of their occupational therapy education including students who had not yet experienced fieldwork, students who were currently or had just finished fieldwork, and students currently working on their Capstone experiences. 57.9% of student participants reported experiencing burnout prior to OT school

and 100% of student participants reported that they had experienced burnout during the program. See Table 1 for detailed student and faculty demographic information.

Table 1.

Student & Faculty Demographics

Student Demographics	n	%
Age		
18-20	0	0
21-23	3	15.7
24-26	15	78.9
27-29	1	5.2
>30	0	0
OT program		
OTD	19	100
OTA	0	0
Graduation year		
2024	14	73.7
2025	3	15.8
2026	2	10.5
Employment status		
PRN	1	5.2
Part-Time	10	52.6
Full-Time	7	36.8
Not Employed	1	5.2
Marital status		
Single	16	84.2
Married	2	10.5
Divorced	1	5.2
Widowed	0	0
Children		
Yes	0	0
No	19	100
Burnout prior to OT school		
Yes	11	57.9
No	8	42.1
Burnout in OT school		
Yes	19	100
No	0	0
Faculty Demographics	n	%

Years as full-time faculty		
3-5 years	0	0
6-10 years	0	0
11-15 years	1	33.3
>15 years	2	66.6
Highest education level		
Clinical Bachelors	0	0
Clinical Master's	0	0
Clinical Doctorate	1	33.3
Doctor of Philosophy	1	33.3
Doctor of Education	1	33.3
Primary teaching area		
Mental health	0	0
Community-Based	0	0
Acute Care/Acute Inpatient	1	33.3
Rehabilitation	0	0
Pediatrics	1	33.3
Other	1	33.3
OT cohorts taught		
OTD 2024	3	100
OTD 2025	3	100
OTD 2026	2	66.6
OTA 24	1	33.3
OTA 25	1	33.3
How do you incorporate strategies?		
Explicitly	2	66.6
Implicitly	1	33.3
Not at all	0	0
Additional mental health training		
Yes	2	66.6
No	1	33.3

Qualitative Analysis

Our thematic analysis revealed three themes related to student burnout: contributing factors, burnout responses, and mindset. Data analysis also revealed the overall acceptability of

proposed mental health promotion strategies. These themes reveal the multiple layers of burnout and provide insights into which strategies may be best to use with occupational therapy students. Together, these themes highlight the complexity of burnout and the importance of high quality and targeted mental health promotion strategies.

Contributing factors

Contributing factors were internal and external factors that triggered episodes of burnout or protected students from burnout. Examples included internal/external expectations, personal stressors, limited breaks, academic workload, and person factors.

When asked about what stressors or triggers led up to their episode of burnout, one student identified both academic and non-academic contributing factors to her burnout. She shared how both external expectations from the program and internal expectations to succeed contributed to her burnout experience:

“I think just as a 1st year student there was a lot of pressure that you were expected to always be on your A game and always be in class and always like submit things on time and submit things to your best abilities. And so I was like giving that extra pressure to myself, which I thought was coming from the department above me. And so I think that made it the most difficult because I wasn't only like battling what the external world was telling me and like what the professors and our peers were expected to do, but also like challenged myself where I was like, well, I don't wanna like disappoint anyone or let anyone down and it's like this is my 1st year I can't like get kicked out of the program now and so I had this like additional pressure that I put on myself. And so that like definitely accelerated the process of burnout.”

Similarly, another student shared a similar experience:

“Academically, I would say like the pressure of it. Like, you know, the fear of like the academic probation, because that word was thrown out a lot by particular people. And then so we had that and then you know all the exams and the pressure of wanting to do okay on them and like wanting to pass them and all of that.”

The same student then went on to share how personal stressors in her life also impacted her.

“And then like non-academic, you know, I was taking care of 2 kids and it was a lot of work. And then I had a lot of financial stress. Especially towards the end, like, you know, having to pay bills and not having the money to do that was really hard.”

Another student shared a similar experience:

Yeah, I had a lot of family stuff going on in the fall. A lot of health issues. Things that I missed out on being home or being away. And I think that took a big toll on it.

One faculty member discussed how personal struggles can contribute to the burnout experience:

“There's other like student events where they've had personal struggles and those to me are a little bit of the harder ones. Um. You know, we've had students that have had to deal with some pretty significant family events.”

Participants also identified protective factors that keep students from experiencing burnout or factors that improve their ability to cope with the stress of an occupational therapy program such as person factors including resiliency, age, and coping skills. One faculty member shared:

“A younger student may not have as good of coping skills as a slightly older student. But you know coping skills are also at the individual level. Um. Obviously, within a cohort, we see some students who seem more resilient than others. And um, I think that just gets back to interpersonal skills and maybe prior experiences, age makes a difference.”

A student mentioned that she was able to use good coping skills during a time of burnout:

“My skills from therapy have been helpful. Being able to like talk to people and explain what's going on. I also call my friend from who's in the program with me and like talk to her because she's also on fieldwork so that's kind of helpful and same with when we were like studying for finals I would talk to her about things. And then I also journal which has, which helps too, just writing it out.

A student mentioned that limited breaks made their episode of burnout additionally challenging, stating:

“But it was definitely like I don't think there were really ever any breaks and like my only time to like not think about school was like 30 min before bed (...) So I think I just wore myself out a lot.

A faculty member also noted that burnout seems to increase when students haven't had a break in awhile:

“I think we tend to see because of the way academic calendars are structured, I think we see periods of time where students are better and then periods of time when students seem to be struggling more. Of course before midterm, end of semester tend to the periods where I think students have the most difficulty. I feel like the fall and spring semesters are longer, and so we tend to see like leading up to right before break.”

Students and faculty both expressed that there is increased student burnout when there is a heavy workload. One student said:

“I think during the final exam period I was really burned out just from the amount of work we had to do.”

Another student shared similar feelings, stating:

“I was definitely feeling really stressed because I felt like all I did was be in class all day and then go home and do like 3 to 4 hours of homework. And do it again. I think when I really started feeling burnt out, it was probably early on, was like in the fall when it just was like test after test quiz after quiz. And it felt like I really didn't have time for anything besides school.”

Many participants identified that burnout is a result of compounded factors, rather than just one contributing factor. One participant even compared student burnout to layers of an onion stating:

“Yeah, so it was it was just really tricky because it was multiple levels like it was like a layer of an onion like there's a student in the middle and each layer you're peeling off personal stressors.

Another faculty member shared similar thoughts, stating:

“I don't think it's just one assignment or one class. I think it's a collective.”

Burnout Responses

Burnout responses were positive or negative ways that students responded during their identified episode of burnout. Examples included coping and defense mechanisms, decreased academic performance, mental health changes, mood changes, social withdrawal, and feelings of physical and emotional fatigue. One student reflected on how they respond while experiencing burnout:

“For me burnout, like I feel kind of like I'm--Let me see how to explain it. Like very overwhelmed and like not like brain fog, but like my like I'm just not I'm just like going through the motions and I'm not like fully present for what I'm learning or what I have to do and I'm kind of just like getting through it. I'm just doing what I need to do so that I can get to the next task instead of like being able to actually feel like I'm learning the information, able to apply it. I kinda just do as much as I can to get the task done.”

Several students shared experiences of social withdrawal during their identified episodes of burnout. One student shared her experience of isolating herself:

“I put myself deeper into the hole and spent more time studying, more time in the library, less time with my friends. I wanna say at one point I like stopped studying with my friends. Um, and I just kind of like isolated myself a little bit just because I was like, I was getting frustrated with other people who were doing better than me and I was like, why am I not understanding it? And so then that's when I kind of isolated myself. And, um, then like basically drowned myself in work and didn't do anything else.”

Similarly, another student shared how during their episode of burnout they stopped hanging out with their friends. They stated:

“When I would go home on weekends, I have a lot of friends back home. I'm still really close with my high school friends. But I wouldn't hang out with them, I would just hang out with my parents. So I'd get home on a Thursday night, go to bed, wake up, both my parents had to work on Fridays. Um. And then I would just like go to dinner with my parents off Friday. I really turned into a home body. Which I probably shouldn't know because that was probably the time that I needed to see people and needed to get out. Um. But just like I felt so drained from the 40 hours of week—40 hours of work, and um, just like the whole demand and just feeling the need to isolate. So I think it definitely impacted my like with my peers. I don't really think I was texting many people during that time. So like, I wasn't checking in on friends like to see if they were experiencing what I was with fieldwork or just like even asking the questions like how's it going and all of that.”

Many participants discussed the feelings of fatigue and lack of motivation they experienced during their episodes of burnout:

“And so I just felt really fatigued. Like I said, not as motivated to complete my assignments and study when I needed to.”

Another student shared:

“ I just like I went through a long period of just not caring. Like I was so burnt out and so exhausted that I just didn't even care and you know thought about dropping out.”

A faculty member shared her observations of students and how they respond while feeling burnout. They shared:

“But I feel like wellbeing wise, you know, I see students that are tired and crying and like not happy and disengaged in class.”

Both faculty and students are aware of mental health and mood changes that students experience during a burnout episode. One student shared that the episode of burnout brought back feelings of depression:

“So, being in the middle of it, it was just tough. I felt myself getting really depressed again. I was like just not having a good time.”

Another student shared a similar experience of anxiety and depression, resulting in going on medication. She shared:

“I mean, I'd say that was probably my like lowest low. Mental well-being. That's when I finally was like, um, went and talked to a doctor about my mental health and got like diagnosed with depression and anxiety. And like got medicated for it.”

Similarly, a faculty member shared her observations of student mood changes that occur while students are having burnout.

“Their affect overall is more serious or negative or they're just a maybe the level of the type of questioning has a more negative feel to it. Or people seem to be getting rattled

by things that maybe they previously wouldn't have been that rattled by. But, kind of that cumulative effect of oh, I'm really tired, I really need a break. And now everything's bugging me. Um. And I think, you know, whenever you're worn out entire that happens to everybody, whether you're in school or not, you get grouchier (...) So things, people get grouchier about things that maybe they wouldn't."

Students shared about defense mechanisms and coping mechanisms they use during episodes of burnout. One student shared her defense mechanisms, stating:

"I think they're mostly bad coping mechanisms. Um. Energy drinks. Um. So just on healthy food, cause you know, it would at least give me like a little bit of energy, like sugary stuff and carbs and stuff (...) And obviously not giving myself breaks. (..)Not noticing things like that I needed (..)I didn't really do a lot of self care things like it was kind of just the bare minimum that became self care. You know, it's like, oh, like I'm eating, this is self care, that's the bare minimum. Like, oh, I'm taking a shower, this is taking care of myself."

This student also shared some of the coping mechanisms she uses:

"My partner definitely helped me a lot. It was just really nice because he really helped me actually take breaks and like actually take care of myself. Like when he was over we'd go on walks. And he just helped me really get my mind off of school and we'd still have work time together because he's also in grad school. So that was really helpful because it made like work time more like relaxed."

During episodes of burnout, students shared that their academic performance decreases, and they feel like the quality and quantity of their work also decreases. One student shared how she felt like her work wasn't as good as she knows it could have been.

“I would say it was below my average. I was not performing as well as I thought I should have been. I mean, I wasn't supposed to know at all, but at the same time a lot of this was repeat information and I should have been able to apply that knowledge from undergrad. But with all the other stuff going on, things weren't sticking in my brain. But yeah, it was definitely below average for myself.”

Another student shared the impacts her burnout had on the quality of her academic work.

“So it didn't affect my grades, but it did affect like the amount of effort I put into producing good quality or what I consider good quality work.”

A faculty member shared their experiences of decreased academic performance from students who are experiencing burnout. She said:

“I had a lot of students (...) struggle with meeting deadlines of what I considered to be easy assignments. Like most students typically get an A in that leadership management and policy course as long as they turn things in on time. Again, it's not hard content, it's just a lot of content. But more and more students struggling with deadlines. More and more students missing class.”

Another faculty member shared similar observations of decreased academic performance:

“This year I probably saw more students electing to not do assignments because they knew they could pass the class with or without some of the assignments. So, that's probably a sign that they're burned out or managing, like this is the lesser of my evils, so I'm gonna let that one go and I'm gonna prioritize.”

Mindset

Mindset were beliefs and feelings that participants had about their burnout experience. Examples included feeling like they couldn't take a break, feeling like they were just going

through the motions, feeling “stuck”, only having thoughts of school, and feeling like there was no end in sight. One student shared a personal experience where she even continued to think about school while her sister was dealing with a major health issue and she felt like she still couldn't take a break:

“One time I had to take my sister to the ER like really early in the morning and instead of like caring about her I was really--that was like during the semester that was really hard on us like course work. I was sort of instead of worrying about her I was worried about missing class which so like that priority was like all out of whack because I shouldn't be, I shouldn't be worried about missing class whenever my sister is in the hospital like in the ER but that's just what I was because It was just like a really hard class and I was worried about that.”

Another student provided further insight into her mindset while actively experiencing an episode of burnout and feeling like there was no end in sight:

“There's really no end right now. I feel like I'm just waiting for my clinical to be done and then it'll be better.”

Students expressed that they felt like they were just going through the motions while they were experiencing burnout. One student shared:

“Before I was like oh, I'm excited to learn this stuff, you know. I want to know how to be a good occupational therapist. Then like come fall it was just like I'm just ready to be done like I'm I was just like something that I was checking off my list.”

Another student shared:

“I'm just going through the motions, just trying to finish out my clinical.”

One student shared that during her burnout experience, she just felt like she was stuck when she should have been moving forward. She stated:

“I felt like, I was supposed to be moving on into the next chapter. I don't know how else to describe that, but it was just like, like I'm pretty, like I'm not religious, but I am very spiritual. And it felt like I should have been going through this change and going to the next chapter. And like that would have happened if we would have graduated, but it didn't happen. I just felt very stuck.”

Acceptability of Proposed Mental Health Strategies

Adapted Every Moment Counts Strategies

Participants provided feedback about embedded strategies that have been adapted from Every Moment Counts. Most students thought that the 10 EMC suggested strategies would be beneficial to them or beneficial to other students. Specifically, a majority of students and faculty thought that flexible attendance, balanced courses and assignments, and talking about mental health would be beneficial to student mental health.

“I do think the balancing the courses is important just because some of the courses are so heavy like all the time and then some are like, some are a little bit more even, so. Yeah, those are the ones that stuck out to me.”

One student expressed that they liked the idea of in-class strategies:

“And breaks and like calm moments definitely would be awesome because I think in the class I do get really tense and like I'm just trying to keep up with notes and I'm, you know, I'm trying to listen, but I'm also kind of, typing the entire time.”

Another student expressed how talking about mental health would be beneficial:

“Well, I'm a big like, talker about things and so like the talk about mental health, about like just asking students how they're doing, discussing challenges and needs. Is a big one for me.”

Students and faculty proposed minimal or no changes to the strategies. When asked what changes they would make to the strategies, one student said:

“I honestly don't think that changes necessarily need to be made because I know that some of the things that aren't important to me are important to others. And so just because I don't need that doesn't mean that somebody else doesn't need that.”

A majority of concerns or proposed changes were about the flexible attendance strategy, one student stating that they

“ Like the idea of flexible attendance like missing class for physical or mental health concerns but I'd also like know that it would be difficult to kind of manage whether people are abusing that policy or not. So I think that's like a good idea, but also needs to be like implemented with some restrictions, I guess.”

One faculty member believed that flexible attendance was dependent on the course and the instructor:

“I think flexible attendance still continues to have to be up to the actual faculty person teaching the class just based on what type of format they're using.”

Chapter VI: Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to examine how occupational therapy students at the University of Missouri experience and cope with burnout, and how embedded strategies that have been adapted from Every Moment Counts can be further refined to better support the mental health and well-being of occupational therapy students. Findings of this study revealed

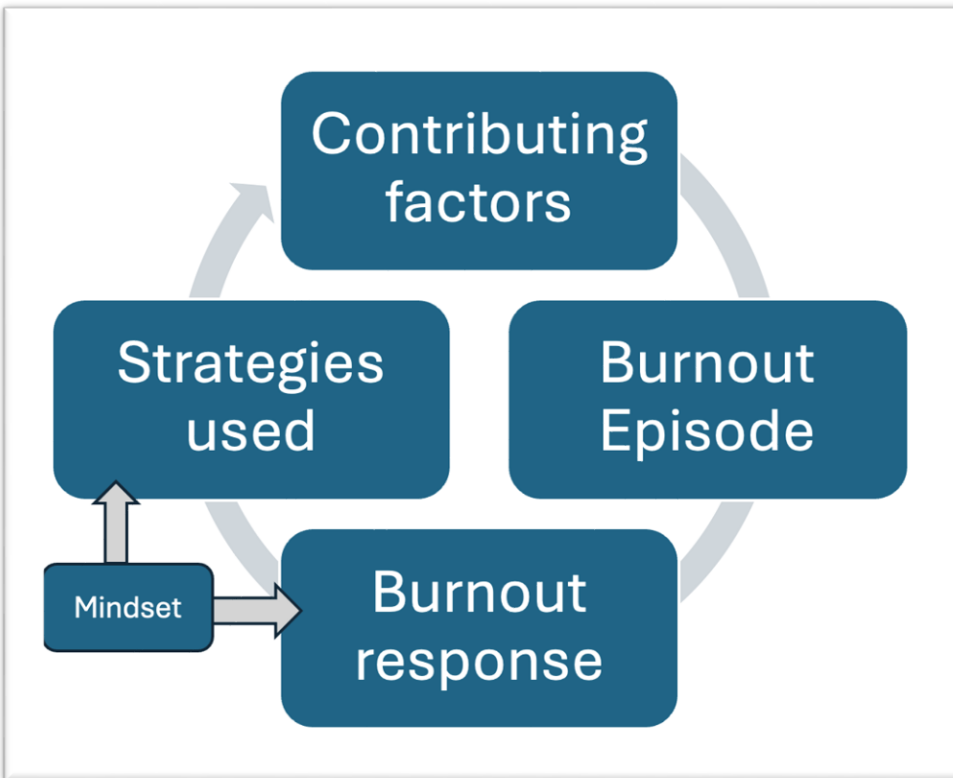
that students may experience burnout in a cycle. 4 interconnected themes, which include contributing factors, burnout responses, mindset, and strategies make up that cycle.

The Burnout Cycle

A cyclical relationship can be found between the themes that emerged from our analysis. See *Figure 1. for burnout cycle graphic*. Contributing factors such as academic workload, internal and external expectations, and limited breaks can lead to an episode of burnout. In response to the episode of burnout, a student may use coping or defense mechanisms, experience mood changes, or there may be changes to their academic performance. A burnout response may be positive or negative, based upon the mindset of the student. A student may have a growth mindset or a fixed mindset. Mindset may also influence a student's willingness to utilize mental health promotion strategies during an episode of burnout. Both mindset and the use of strategies or lack of strategies has the potential to exacerbate an episode of burnout or break the cycle of burnout.

The cyclical connection between these themes can be explained through Mindset Theory. Growth mindset embraces learning and effort, viewing challenging things as an opportunity for growth. A fixed mindset believes that circumstances are unchangeable, and challenges are avoided (Kapasi & Pei, 2022). In the burnout cycle, mindset can have both a positive and a negative relationship with all aspects of the model including burnout response, strategies used, and an indirect impact on the contributing factors. Mindset is the determinant for how an episode of burnout is approached, and what strategies are used.

Figure 1.



Acceptability of strategies

Based on feedback from faculty and students, the use of embedded strategies were well received. Embedded strategies help prevent burnout or stop burnout by addressing contributing factors and burnout responses before episodes of burnout can escalate further. The use of embedded strategies is a proactive approach to burnout that potentially neutralizes contributing factors, promotes positive burnout responses, and encourages a positive mindset. By embedding these strategies into the curriculum and program, mental health promotion is taken from an individual level to a population level. By using a population-based approach, the responsibility of finding and using strategies is no longer solely reliant on each individual student. Instead, strategies are integrated into daily academic life, ensuring that all students are benefiting from well-being strategies and decreasing the need for students to seek out individual level supports.

The use of embedded strategies is supported by the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMSC). This model deals with how someone perceives their stressors and resources

and then how they select a coping strategy based on that information (Kaveh et al., 2023). Selected coping skills determine how a stressor is handled, and whether or not the burnout cycle will continue or be neutralized. Ensuring that occupational therapy students have easily accessible resources that are embedded into the structure of an academic program can potentially break the cycle of burnout and provide students with the necessary tools to handle a future episode of burnout.

Lewis-Kipkulei et al. (2021) also described the cyclical pattern that burnout can follow, emphasizing that the mindset of a student can impact how they handle a challenge. Our study expanded further on the cycle of burnout being connected to the triggers that lead to a burnout episode, mindset impacting how someone responds to an episode of burnout, how mindset can influence whether or not someone uses strategies, and the selected strategies can either break the cycle or keep it going. Although previous research has shown that individual level supports are valuable for promoting mental health (Nair & Otaki, 2021), our results show that MU OT students also believe that embedded strategies that support the mental health of an entire group would be beneficial.

EMC Strategies and Impact on the Burnout Cycle

Our suggested mental health promotion strategies can potentially impact all aspects of the burnout cycle we identified in this study. The suggested strategies address contributing factors by adding more flexibility and balance into courses, and by encouraging environmental changes. Morale boosters, department events, and cohort events can impact mindset by making students feel appreciated and supported. Talking about mental health and using in-class strategies can influence both the burnout response and strategies used during an episode of burnout. By using embedded mental health promotion strategies, student responses to burnout can be more positive and may break the burnout cycle, therefore improving overall well-being of students.

Implications for OT Education

The findings of this study have significant implications for how burnout and student well-being is approached moving forward. When addressing occupational therapy student burnout, key areas of focus should include addressing contributing factors to burnout, fostering a growth mindset in students, and incorporating embedded strategies to promote student well-being.

Both faculty and students should play a role in integrating mental health promotion strategies into occupational therapy education. A collaborative and comprehensive approach is needed in order to effectively reduce burnout in occupational therapy students. By working together, faculty and students can create a supportive academic environment by ensuring that embedded strategies being used are student centered, feasible, and effective.

Action Plan Development

Considering the results from this qualitative study and their implications on occupational therapy education, we created an action plan that will be presented to the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of Missouri. The action plan includes a compiled list of ideas for how the adapted Every Moment Counts strategies and student and faculty generated mental health promotion strategies can be embedded into the daily academic life of MU OT students to promote student well-being and reduce burnout. This action plan also included a comprehensive list of mental health and well-being supports available through MU, Columbia specific resources, and national mental health resources. For faculty, a section for training and professional development opportunities related to student mental health was included. We created the final version of the plan based upon feedback received from the MU OT Department Chair and Associate Department Chair. A video explaining the action plan was recorded and shared with faculty. This video will help facilitate discussion and generation of ideas for suggested strategies at an upcoming department meeting. *See Appendix Q. for complete action plan.*

Burnout Graphic Development

Following the conclusion of this research study, we developed a burnout graphic to provide a visual representation of the burnout experience. The purpose of this graphic was for MU OT students to be able to view the graphic as a poster around Lewis and Clark halls to gauge whether or not they were currently experiencing burnout. The graphic includes contributing factors that may lead to burnout, responses someone experiencing burnout may have, the mindset of someone who is experiencing burnout, strategies to try if having burnout, and a QR code with attached mental health resources. *See appendix R for burnout graphic.*

Limitations and Future Directions

Our study included several limitations that should be further discussed. Participants were conveniently sampled from a group of the student investigator's peers, potentially impacting willingness to participate and the willingness of participants to share certain information about their burnout experiences. Another limitation was that OTA students were recruited, but there were none that were interested in completing the eligibility screener. This limited our data pool to faculty and OTD students only. Another limitation is that 63.7% of participants originated from one cohort, potentially skewing our findings to be less generalizable to other cohorts. Finally, response bias may have occurred due to participants wanting to provide socially acceptable answers.

Future research should focus on the implementation of these population based embedded strategies with occupational therapy students. More research is needed on the effectiveness of these strategies when used with occupational therapy students. Future research should also look at the connection between student burnout and faculty burnout and its impact on academic outcomes.

Conclusion

This research study and capstone experience explored occupational therapy student experiences of burnout, how students cope with burnout, and feedback on how adapted Every Moment Counts strategies can be further refined to better support OT students. Three major

themes emerged during data analysis including contributing factors, burnout responses, mindset. We also collected feedback on mental health promotion strategies. A cycle of burnout was then found between themes. The cycle of burnout is supported by Mindset Theory and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. This cycle is influenced by how stressors are perceived, how coping strategies are selected, and how either a growth or a fixed mindset impacts the approach taken during a burnout episode. Using the results from our data analysis, we created an action plan and a burnout graphic that will be shared with the MU OT department. Although student burnout is a widespread and complex issue, this research outlines actionable steps that can be used to create a supportive academic environment for students to promote well-being and begin to reduce occupational therapy student burnout.

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Appendices

Appendix A

IRB Approval Form



Institutional Review Board
University of Missouri-Columbia
 FWA Number: 00002876
 IRB Registration Numbers: 00000731, 00009014

310 Jesse Hall
 Columbia, MO 65211
 573-882-3181
 irb@missouri.edu

April 12, 2024

Principal Investigator: Madison Fowler (MU-Student)
 Department: Occupational Therapy-OTD

Your IRB Application to project entitled Exploring Burnout and Well Being Strategies for Occupational Therapy Students was reviewed and approved by the MU Institutional Review Board according to the terms and conditions described below:

IRB Project Number	2101286
IRB Review Number	405521
Initial Application Approval Date	April 11, 2024
IRB Expiration Date	April 11, 2025
Level of Review	Expedited
Application Status	Approved
Project Status	Active - Open to Enrollment
Expedited Categories	45 CFR 46.110.a(f)(6) 45 CFR 46.110.a(f)(7)
Risk Level	Minimal Risk
Type of Consent	Written Consent
HIPAA Category	No HIPAA
Approved Documents	Informed Consent & Assent - Written Consent Form: #691885 - Electronic signature approved Informed Consent & Assent - Written Consent Form: #691887 - Electronic signature approved Other Study Documents - Eligibility Questionnaire: #691892 Other Study Documents - Instruments (i.e. surveys): #691600 Other Study Documents - Instruments (i.e. surveys): #691604 Other Study Documents - Interview Questions: #691603 Other Study Documents - Interview Questions: #691753 Other Study Documents - Pre-Screener: #691886 Protocol & Investigator's Brochure - Protocol: #695468 Recruitment Materials - Recruitment E-Mail: #691602 Recruitment Materials - Recruitment E-Mail: #691605 Recruitment Materials - Recruitment Flyer: #691888 Recruitment Materials - Recruitment Script: #691889

Appendix B

Faculty Recruitment Email

Subject line: Research opportunity for all full-time OT faculty

Dear OT faculty,

Researchers in the MU Dept. of Occupational Therapy are seeking full-time occupational therapy faculty members for a research study. Participants will complete a one-time, in person or Zoom interview that will last approximately 60 minutes. Participants will be asked to answer a demographic questionnaire and to complete a semi-structured interview about your perspectives on student burnout. Participants will also be asked for feedback about mental health promotion strategies that our research team has adapted for occupational therapy students to inform continued refinement. Participants will not be compensated. The study flier is attached to this email.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at mfk3f@umsystem.edu or complete the eligibility screener at [link to RedCap survey] and a member of the study team will contact you shortly. You may also contact my faculty research adviser, Dr. Melanie Tkach, at melanie.tkach@health.missouri.edu or 573.882.0992.

Sincerely,

Madison Fowler, OTD/S

Appendix C

Student Recruitment Email

Subject line: Research opportunity for all OTA and OTD students

Dear OTD and OTA students,

Researchers in the MU Dept. of Occupational Therapy are seeking occupational therapy students in all OTD and OTA cohorts for a research study. Participants will complete a one-time, in person or Zoom interview that will last approximately 60 minutes. Participants will be asked to answer a demographic questionnaire and to complete a semi-structured interview about their experiences with burnout as a student. Participants will also be asked for feedback about mental health promotion strategies that our research team has adapted for occupational therapy students so that we can continue to refine them for future use. Participants will not be compensated. The study flier is attached to this email.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at mfk3f@missouri.edu or complete the eligibility screener at [link to RedCap survey] and a member of the study team will contact you shortly. You can also contact my faculty research adviser, Dr. Melanie Tkach at melanie.tkach@health.missouri.edu or 573.882.0992.

Sincerely,

Madison Fowler, OTD/S

Appendix D

Faculty Recruitment Script

My name is Madison Fowler, and I am a student researcher at the University of Missouri. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study titled “Exploring Burnout and Well Being Strategies for Occupational Therapy Students”. An employee's decision about research participation will not affect (favorably or unfavorably) performance evaluations, career advancement, or other employment-related decisions made by peers or supervisors. This study will help us understand student burnout from the faculty perspective as well as faculty perspectives on mental health strategies that have been adapted for occupational therapy students. All full-time OT faculty are eligible to participate in this study. Part-time or adjunct OT faculty will not be eligible to participate in this study. If you are willing to participate, you will complete a demographic questionnaire that includes questions about your experience as a professor, the courses you teach, and how much contact you have with students. Then, during a semi-structured interview in person or over Zoom, you will answer questions related to a specific time you noticed OT student burnout, and your perspectives on student mental health promotion strategies that have been adapted for occupational therapy students. You are not required to participate in this interview, and if you decide to participate but want to stop during the interview, you can withdraw your consent without negative consequences. The interviews will be audio and video recorded so that we can generate transcripts. We will assign videos a unique identification number and remove facial identifiers to protect confidentiality. We will store videos on a secure server and only the research team will have access to the recordings. The demographics questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes to complete, and the interview will last approximately 60 minutes. You may ask for a break at any given time. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Madison Fowler at 660-342-0068 or by email: mfk3f@umsystem.edu. This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Missouri. Does this study sound like something you're interested in doing? If yes, then follow the QR code on the provided flier to determine your eligibility.

Appendix E

Student Recruitment Script

My name is Madison Fowler, and I am a student researcher at the University of Missouri. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study titled “Exploring Burnout and Well

Being Strategies for Occupational Therapy Students”. This study will help us understand student burnout from the student perspective as well as student perspectives on mental health strategies that have been adapted for occupational therapy students. All students in the OTA or OTD cohorts will be eligible to participate in this study. Students in the post professional OTD cohort will not be eligible to participate in this study. If you are willing to participate, you will first complete an eligibility questionnaire. If eligible, you will then complete a demographic questionnaire that includes questions about your occupational therapy program enrollment, marital status, employment status, and whether you have experienced burnout before or after beginning OT school. Then, during a semi-structured interview in person or over Zoom, we will ask you questions related to a specific time as an OT student you have experienced burnout, and your perspective on student mental health promotions strategies that have been adapted for occupational therapy students. You are not required to participate in this interview, and if you decide you want to participate but want to stop during the interview, you can withdraw your consent without negative consequences. The interviews will be audio and video recorded so that we can generate transcripts and analyze data. We will assign videos a unique identification number and remove facial identifiers to protect confidentiality. We will store recordings on a secure server and only the research team will have access to the recordings. The demographics questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes to complete, and the interview will last approximately 60 minutes. You may ask for a break at any given time. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 660.342.0068 or by email: mfk3f@missouri.edu. Does this study sound like something you’re interested in doing? If yes, then let me ask you some screening questions to determine your eligibility or follow the QR code on the provided flier to determine your eligibility.

Appendix F

Recruitment Flyer

EXPLORING BURNOUT AND WELL BEING STRATEGIES FOR OT STUDENTS

RESEARCH PURPOSE:

- To better understand occupational therapy student burnout and perspectives on mental health strategies that have been adapted for professional students.

SEEKING PARTICIPANTS FOR A RESEARCH STUDY:

- Occupational therapy or occupational therapy assistant students
- Full-time faculty members

WHAT YOU WILL DO:

- Complete an eligibility screening
- Complete a demographics form (15 minutes)
- Complete one semi-structured in person or Zoom interview (60 minutes)



CONTACT US:
Madison Fowler, OTD/S
mfk3f@missouri.edu.
422 Clark Hall, Columbia, MO 65211

Appendix G

Faculty and Student Eligibility Screener

1. Are you currently a full-time faculty member in the University of Missouri (MU) Occupational Therapy Department?
 - Yes
 - No

2. [If yes] Have you ever noticed burnout among OT students?
 - Yes
 - No

3. [If no] Are you currently enrolled in either the OTA or OTD (does not include PPOTD) program at MU?
 - Yes
 - No

4. [If yes] Have you experienced burnout while in OT school?
 - Yes
 - No

Please provide your name and contact information below so our team can contact you about scheduling a future interview.

Name:

Email:

Phone number:

Appendix H
Eligibility Screening Script

Thanks for your interest in our research study and your willingness to participate. Next, we will ask you to complete a brief eligibility questionnaire to confirm that you are a good fit for our study. Would you like to answer the eligibility questions with me now or on your own time? [If participant prefers to complete screen on phone, ask eligibility questions and document responses.]

[If participate prefers to complete screen online] The best way to access the eligibility screening questionnaire is through the QR code on the social media or email flier. To use the QR code, open your phone camera and hold the phone over the QR icon until a link to the questionnaire opens. You may also go to this web address [Insert link] to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire will take 5 minutes or less to complete.

Appendix I

Faculty Consent Form

Project Title: Exploring Burnout and Well-being Strategies for Occupational Therapy Students

Principal Investigator Name: Madison Fowler, OTDS

Advisor Name: Melanie M. Tkach, PhD, MSOT, OTR/L

IRB Assigned Project Number: #2101286

Key Information About the Study

You are being asked to participate in a one-time, semi-structured interview as part of a research study. An employee's decision about research participation will not affect (favorably or unfavorably) performance evaluations, career advancement, or other employment-related decisions made by peers or supervisors. The purpose of the research study is to better understand occupational therapy student burnout. The study will also help us gain student and faculty perspectives on mental health strategies that have been adapted for professional students so that we can continue to refine them for future use. The study will include 20 participants that are occupational therapy (OT) students or faculty at the University of Missouri (MU). You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a full-time occupational therapy faculty member in the MU OT department and have direct contact with occupational therapy students. This interview will be completed via Zoom or face to face depending on your scheduling needs. Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes. Interviews will be audio and video recorded for data transcription and analysis purposes. Audio and video recordings will be labeled with a unique identification number, and we will remove faces to protect your confidentiality. Recordings will be stored on Microsoft OneDrive under your unique identification number. Please read this form carefully and take your time. Let us know if you have any questions before deciding to participate. The research team can explain words or information that you do not understand. Research is voluntary, and you can choose not to participate. If you do not want to participate, or if you choose to start the interview and then stop later there will be no penalty.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this interview is to explore your experiences with student burnout as a professor of MU OT students. Interviews will also help researchers gain feedback about mental health strategies that have been adapted for professional students so that we can continue to refine strategies.

What will happen during the study?

You are being asked to participate in the following research activities:

- Demographic questionnaire (15 minutes)
- One semi-structured interview (60 minutes)

Participation is expected to last approximately 75 minutes.

What are the expected benefits of this study?

There are no direct benefits to you as a result of participating in this study. Results may help us understand student burnout and strategies to better support student mental health in our department.

What are the possible risks of participating in this study?

Potential risks associated with this study include breach of confidentiality, emotional distress, and boredom.

Breach of confidentiality: With any research study involving human subjects, there is a possible risk of a breach of confidentiality where identifiable information related to the subjects is inadvertently made available to individuals beyond the research team.

Emotional distress: In rare circumstances, subjects may experience emotional distress while discussing experiences of burnout.

Boredom: There is a low risk that some of the questions during interviews may make the participant feel bored or fatigued.

To help lower these risks we will do the following:

Risk of a breach of confidentiality: To minimize the risk of a breach of confidentiality during the research process: all data collected will be used for research purposes only and will be kept in strict confidence. No information will be given to anyone without permission from the participant. We will ensure confidentiality through the use of unique identification numbers. We will de-identify all data, including audio and video recordings, with a random identification number that is unique to the subject. We will store video and audio recordings on Microsoft OneDrive. We will secure all other electronic data in a REDCap data base. The database will be secured with double password protection. The consent form includes the confidentiality statement required by the University of Missouri IRB and informs potential participants of the risks to confidentiality as well as the steps we will take to protect participant confidentiality. No paper-based documentation forms will be used.

Risk of emotional distress: investigators will inform participants of the potential for distress when answering interview questions and that they can stop answering questions or withdraw consent at any time without negative repercussions.

Risk of boredom: Participants will be allowed to take breaks at any point during the interview. Interview questions will be written concisely to minimize the overall time required for the interview.

What other choices do I have if I don't want to participate in this study?

You are not required to take part in this study. All participation is voluntary, and you can simply choose not to participate. You can look for other research projects you may be interested in instead of this study.

Will I receive compensation for taking part in this study?

You will not receive compensation for your participation in this study.

Are there any costs for participating in this study?

You should not expect any additional costs by agreeing to participate in this study. You should discuss any questions about costs with the researchers before agreeing to participate.

Will information I share be kept private?

The research team is committed to respecting your privacy and keeping personal information confidential. We will make every effort to protect your information to the extent allowed by law. Your records will be given a unique identification number and will not contain your name or other information that could identify you. The unique identification number that connects your name to your information will be kept in a separate, secure location. When the results of this research are shared, we will remove all identifying information including faces from all videos so it will not be known who provided the information. Your information will be kept as secure as

possible to prevent your identity from being disclosed. We may share what we collected from you as part of this research, after removing identifiers including faces from all videos, for future research without additional informed consent from you.

Who do I contact if I have questions or concerns?

If you have questions about this study, you can contact the University of Missouri student researcher at mfk3f@missouri.edu. You can contact the student researcher's University of Missouri advisor at (573) 882 – 0992 or melanie.tkach@health.missouri.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or muresearchirb@missouri.edu. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

Do I get a copy of this consent?

You will receive a copy of this consent for your records. We appreciate your consideration for your participation in this study.

Consent to Participate - Signatures

Participant Signature	Date

Appendix J

Student Consent Form

Project Title: Exploring Burnout and Well-being Strategies for Occupational Therapy Students

Principal Investigator Name: Madison Fowler, OTD/S

Advisor Name: Melanie M. Tkach, PhD, MSOT, OTR/L

IRB Assigned Project Number: #2101286

Key Information About the Study

You are being asked to participate in a one-time semi-structured interview as part of a research study. The purpose of the research study is to better understand occupational therapy student burnout. The study will also help us learn more about student and faculty perspectives on mental health strategies that have been adapted for professional students so that we can continue to refine them for future use. The study will include 20 participants that are occupational therapy (OT) students or faculty at the University of Missouri (MU). You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a student enrolled in an MU OT program. This interview will be completed via Zoom or face to face depending on your scheduling needs. Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes. Interviews will be audio and video recorded for data transcription and analysis purposes. Audio and video recordings will be labeled with a unique identification number, and we will remove faces to protect your confidentiality. Recordings will be stored on Microsoft OneDrive under your unique identification number. Please read this form carefully and take your time. Let us know if you have any questions before deciding to participate. The research team can explain words or information that you do not understand. Research is voluntary, and you can choose not to participate. If you do not want to participate, or if you choose to start the interview and then stop later there will be no penalty.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this interview is to explore your experiences of burnout as an occupational therapy student at MU. Interviews will also help researchers gain feedback about mental health strategies that have been adapted for professional students so that we can continue to refine strategies.

What will happen during the study?

You are being asked to participate in the following research activities:

- Demographic questionnaire (15 minutes)
- One semi-structured interview (60 minutes)

Participation is expected to last approximately 75 minutes.

What are the expected benefits of this study?

There are no direct benefits to you as a result of participating in this study. Results may help us understand student burnout and strategies to better support mental health.

What are the possible risks of participating in this study?

Potential risks associated with this study include breach of confidentiality, emotional distress, and boredom.

Breach of confidentiality: With any research study involving human subjects, there is a possible risk of a breach of confidentiality where identifiable information related to the subjects is inadvertently made available to individuals beyond the research team.

Emotional distress: In rare circumstances, subjects may experience psychological distress while discussing experiences of burnout.

Boredom: There is a low risk that some of the questions during interviews may make the participant feel bored or fatigued.

To help lower these risks we will do the following:

Risk of a breach of confidentiality: To minimize the risk of a breach of confidentiality during the research process: all data collected will be used for research purposes only and will be kept in strict confidence. No information will be given to anyone without permission from the participant. We will ensure confidentiality through the use of unique identification numbers. We will de-identify all data, including audio and video recordings, with a random identification number that is unique to the subject. We will store video and audio recordings on Microsoft OneDrive. We will secure all other electronic data in a REDCap database. The database will be secured with double password protection. The consent form includes the confidentiality statement required by the University of Missouri IRB and informs potential participants of the risks to confidentiality as well as the steps we will take to protect participant confidentiality. No paper-based documentation forms will be used.

Risk of emotional distress: investigators will inform participants of the potential for distress when answering interview questions and that they can stop answering questions or withdraw consent at any time without negative repercussions.

Risk of boredom: Participants will be allowed to take breaks at any point during the interview. Interview questions will be written concisely to minimize the overall time required for the interview.

What other choices do I have if I don't want to participate in this study?

You are not required to take part in this study. All participation is voluntary, and you can simply choose not to participate. You can look for other research projects you may be interested in instead of this study.

Will I receive compensation for taking part in this study?

You will not receive compensation for your participation in this study.

Are there any costs for participating in this study?

You should not expect any additional costs by agreeing to participate in this study. You should discuss any questions about costs with the researchers before agreeing to participate.

Will information I share be kept private?

The research team is committed to respecting your privacy and keeping personal information confidential. We will make every effort to protect your information to the extent allowed by law. Your records will be given a unique identification number and will not contain your name or other information that could identify you. The unique identification number that connects your name to your information will be kept in a separate, secure location. When the results of this research are shared, we will remove all identifying information including faces from all videos so it will not be known who provided the information. Your information will be kept as secure as possible to prevent your identity from being disclosed. We may share what we collected from you as part of this research, after removing identifiers including faces from all videos, for future research without additional informed consent from you.

Who do I contact if I have questions or concerns?

If you have questions about this study, you can contact the University of Missouri student researcher at mfk3f@missouri.edu. You can contact the University of Missouri advisor at (573)-882-0992 or melanie.tkach@health.missouri.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or muresearchchirb@missouri.edu. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

Do I get a copy of this consent?

You will receive a copy of this consent for your records. We appreciate your consideration for your participation in this study.

Consent to Participate - Signatures

Participant Signature	Date

Appendix K**Faculty Demographics**

- 1. How long have you been a full-time faculty member?
 - 3-5 years
 - 6-10 years
 - 11-15 years
 - >15 years

- 2. What is your highest level of education?
 - Clinical Bachelor's
 - Clinical Master's
 - Clinical Doctorate
 - Doctor of Philosophy

- 3. What is your primary focus area in the classes you teach?

- Mental Health
 - Community-Based
 - Acute Care/Acute Inpatient Rehabilitation
 - Pediatrics
 - Other: [Fill in the blank]
4. Which occupational therapy cohorts have you taught?
- OTD Class of 2024
 - OTD Class of 2025
 - OTD Class of 2026
 - OTA Class of 2024
 - OTA Class of 2025
5. How do you currently incorporate student mental health concepts and/or strategies in your classes?
- Explicitly
 - Implicitly
 - Not at all
- 6. Do you have additional training working with populations (e.g., students or clinical) experiencing burnout or mental health challenges?

Appendix L

Student Demographics

1. How old are you?
- 18-20
 - 21-23
 - 24-26
 - 27-29
 - >30
2. In what occupational therapy program are you enrolled?
- Bachelor's degree in occupational therapy assistant
 - Entry-level occupational therapy doctorate
3. In what year do you expect to graduate?
- 2024
 - 2025
 - 2026
 - Other: _____

4. What is your employment status?
 - Employed as needed (PRN)
 - Employed part-time
 - Employed full-time
 - Not currently employed

5. What is your marital status?
 - Single
 - Married
 - Divorced
 - Widowed
 - Other: _____

6. Do you have children?
 - Yes
 - No

7. Did you experience burnout prior to occupational therapy school?
 - Yes
 - No

8. Have you experienced burnout during occupational therapy school?
 - Yes
 - No

Appendix M

Faculty Interview Script

Introduction:

Thank you for participating in this interview. The purpose of this interview is to explore your experiences with student burnout during your time as a professor in the MU OT department. This interview will also help researchers gain your feedback on student mental health strategies that have been adapted from the Every Moment Counts embedded strategies program so that we can continue to refine those strategies for occupational therapy programs. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw consent at any point during the interview without any negative consequences. All of the information you provide will remain confidential. Before we begin, what questions do you have for me?

Part 1: Identification of Critical Episodes of Burnout

1. Describe your experiences and observations of student burnout during your time at the University of Missouri.
2. What differences have you noticed in the ways that students in different stages of their occupational therapy education (e.g., 1st year OTD student vs 3rd year OTD, OTA vs OTD etc.) experience burnout?
3. Describe a particular time where you noticed burnout among your students.

Part 2: Description of the Episode

4. Let's discuss the episode you just described a little more. What happened from start to finish?
 - a. What made this episode particularly challenging for your students?
 - b. What specific coursework or assignments were your students managing at the time that may have contributed to increased stress?
 - c. From your perspective, what were the stressors or triggers that lead up to the episode (academic or non-academic)?
5. What did you do to support your students when they experienced burnout?

Part 3: Reflection and Impact

6. How did this burnout experience impact students' academic performance, clinical experiences, or overall well-being?

Part 4: Coping Strategies and Support

7. What, if any, specific interventions or programs did you implement to address burnout for the episode you identified? How did those interventions or programs work out?
8. What do you think you could have done differently to better support your students in this scenario?
9. What do you think you did well to support your students in this scenario?

Student Burnout Wrap-Up:

Thank you for sharing your experiences with us. Your insights will help us better understand occupational therapy student burnout. What else would you like to add before we transition to the next phase of the interview? Next, we will discuss mental health strategies that our team has adapted for professional students. These strategies are based on the Every Moment Counts embedded strategies program. Before we begin, do you need to take a break?

Mental Health Promotion Strategies Interview Script

Our research team has adapted existing mental health promotion strategies for school-age children to meet the needs of occupational therapy students. We sought feedback from students and faculty on the student mental health concerns that matter most to them and developed a prioritized list of concerns and strategies that we can use to enhance student mental health in our program. We compared the strategies that are important to our students and faculty to the existing mental health strategies for school-age children and expanded definitions to match the needs of occupational therapy students. The strategies that we identified as important to MUOT students and faculty are:

Idea	Description	EMC Category
Clear Expectations	Increase communication about assignments	Create positive environments
Department events	Events to foster student-faculty connections and celebrate program milestones.	Caring connections
Flexible attendance	Permission to miss class for physical or mental health concerns without penalty.	Create positive environments
Flexible deadlines	Extended time windows to complete assignments	Create positive environments
Balance course assignments	Weight or balance assignments more evenly to support student success.	Create positive environments
Balance courses	Consider readings, assignments, and exams across courses to ensure a manageable workload.	Create positive environments
Talk about mental health	Ask students how they are doing, discuss student challenges and needs	Talk about mental health
Cohort events	Events to promote social connection among students (e.g., potluck, group hikes)	Caring connections
Morale boosters	Free department merchandise or food to promote positive emotions	Create positive environments
In-class strategies	Offer short movement breaks, teach coping skills	Offer calm moments

What questions do you have about the strategies or interview before we continue?

1. What strategies best represent your thoughts and experiences?
2. How can we change these strategies to better represent your thoughts and experiences?
3. What strategies would you add that are not currently represented?

Appendix N

Student Interview Script

Introduction:

Thank you for participating in this interview. The purpose of this interview is to explore your experiences of burnout as a student in a University of Missouri (MU) OT program. This interview will also help researchers gain feedback of student mental health strategies that have been adapted from the Every Moment Counts embedded strategies program so that we can continue to refine those strategies for occupational therapy programs. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw consent at any point during the interview without any consequences. All of the information you provide will remain confidential. Before we begin, what questions do you have for me?

Part 1: Identification of Critical Episodes of Burnout

1. Describe your experiences of burnout during your time at MU.
2. Describe a particular episode where you experienced burnout.
3. What made this episode particularly challenging or significant for you?

Part 2: Description of the Episode

4. Let's discuss the episode you just described a little more. What happened from start to finish?
 - a. What were the specific coursework or assignments you were dealing with at the time? What classes were particularly challenging at this time?
 - b. What particular stressors or triggers lead up to the episode (academic or non-academic)?
5. How did you respond during this time of burnout?

Part 3: Reflection and Impact

6. How did this episode affect your academic performance, clinical experiences, interactions with peers, or overall well-being?

Part 4: Coping Strategies and Support

7. What coping mechanisms did you use to deal with the stress or challenges of the episode?
8. What existing strategies or supports helped you during this time?
9. What other strategies or supports would have been helpful during this time?

Student Burnout Wrap-Up:

Thank you for sharing your experience with us. Your insights will help us better understand occupational therapy student burnout. What else would you like to add before we transition to the next phase of the interview? Next, we will discuss mental health strategies that our team has adapted for professional students. These strategies are based on the Every Moment Counts embedded strategies program. Before we begin, do you need to take a break?

Mental Health Promotion Interview Script:

Our research team has adapted existing mental health promotion strategies for school-age children to meet the needs of occupational therapy students. We sought feedback from students and faculty on student mental health concerns that matter most to them and developed a prioritized list of concerns and strategies that we can use to enhance student mental health in our program. We compared the strategies that are important to our students and faculty to the existing mental health strategies for school aged children and expanded definitions to match the needs of occupational therapy students. The strategies we defined as important to MUOT students and faculty are:

Idea	Description	EMC Category
Clear Expectations	Increase communication about assignments	Create positive environments
Department events	Events to foster student-faculty connections and celebrate program milestones.	Caring connections
Flexible attendance	Permission to miss class for physical or mental health concerns without penalty.	Create positive environments
Flexible deadlines	Extended time windows to complete assignments	Create positive environments
Balance course assignments	Weight or balance assignments more evenly to support student success.	Create positive environments
Balance courses	Consider readings, assignments, and exams across courses to ensure a manageable workload.	Create positive environments
Talk about mental health	Ask students how they are doing, discuss student challenges and needs	Talk about mental health
Cohort events	Events to promote social connection among students (e.g., potluck, group hikes)	Caring connections
Morale boosters	Free department merchandise or food to promote positive emotions	Create positive environments
In-class strategies	Offer short movement breaks, teach coping skills	Offer calm moments

What questions do you have about the strategies or interview before we continue?

1. What strategies best represent your thoughts and experiences?
2. How can we change these strategies to better represent your thoughts and experiences?
3. What strategies would you add that are not currently represented?

Appendix O

Research Tasks Checklist

1. Conduct face-to face interviews with OT students and faculty

2. Code interviews to develop themes
3. Present findings and recommendations to relevant stakeholders
4. Creation of action plan

Research skills checklist:

Directions: On a scale of 0-5, rate the performance for each skill. 5 = Excellent 4=good 3=fair 2=needs some work 1=unsatisfactory 0=skill not yet addressed

1. Enhanced active listening and communication skills 0 1 2 3 4 5
2. Designing and conducting qualitative research interviews. 0 1 2 3 4 5
3. Understanding of IRB regulations, procedures, and ethical considerations 0 1 2 3 4 5
4. Proficiency in incorporating feedback from capstone site mentor 0 1 2 3 4 5
5. Proficiency of implementing and adhering to research procedures 0 1 2 3 4 5
6. Proficiency in data collection and data analysis 0 1 2 3 4 5

Additional comments or concerns:

Appendix P**IRB Mental Health Resources Amendment****Mental Health Resources****University of Missouri Mental Health Resources**

Counseling Center (Virtual or In-Person)

Strickland Hall, 4th floor (use south stairs or elevator)

573-882-6601

Open 8 a.m.–5 p.m. Monday–Friday

Student Health Center

909 Hitt Street

573-882-7481

Open 8 a.m.–5 p.m. Monday–Friday

Wellness Resource Center

573-882-4634

mizzouwellness@missouri.edu

wellbeing.missouri.edu

Mental Health Resources in Columbia, MO**Counseling****Center for Family & Individual Counseling**

(573) 446-5034

2804 Forum Blvd #4, Columbia, MO 65203

Burrell Behavioral Health

(573) 777-7500

1805 East Walnut St, Columbia, MO 65201

Psychological Services Clinic

(573) 882-4677

211 South 8th St, Columbia, MO 65201

Psychiatry

- Dr. Muaid Ithman, MD: (573) 882-8913
- Dr. Lindsey Schrimpf, MD: (573) 882-2511
- Dr. Luke Lucas, MD: (573) 874-4177

National Alliance on Mental Health Resources**NAMI Missouri**

Address: 3405 W Truman Blvd Ste 102 Jefferson City, MO 65109-5861

Website: <http://namimissouri.org>

Phone: 573-634-7727

Email: info@namimissouri.org

NAMI Columbia, MO

Website: <https://www.facebook.com/NAMIColumbiaMO/>

Service Area: Columbia, MO and the surrounding area

Email: namicolumbiamo@gmail.com

NAMI Greater Kansas City

Address: 5231 NE Antioch Rd # 321 Kansas City, MO 64119-2646

Website: <https://namigreaterkc.org>

Phone: (816) 226-6798

Service Area: Greater Kansas City and the surrounding area in northwest Missouri

Email: info@namigreaterkc.org

NAMI Southwest Missouri

Address: 819 N. Boonville Ave Springfield, MO 65802

Website: www.namiswmo.org

Phone: (417)864-7119

Service Areas: City of Springfield, Greene County and surrounding areas in SW Missouri

Email: nami@namiswmo.org

NAMI St. Louis

Address: 1810 Craig Rd Ste 124 Saint Louis, MO 63146-4758

Website: www.namstl.org

Phone: 314-962-4670

Service Areas: St. Louis City; St. Louis, St. Charles, Franklin, Warren, Jefferson & Lincoln

Email: info@namistl.org

National & Online Resources

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988

NAMI HelpLine: 1-800-950-NAMI

National Crisis Support: Nationalcrisissupport.org

Crisis Hotlines & Resources: <https://www.apa.org/topics/crisis-hotlines>

Therapy Assistance Online (TAO): Self-guided strategies, free to Mizzou students

Appendix Q

Action Plan

Background About Burnout

- Research shows that burnout continues to be a growing problem among occupational therapy students and practitioners.
- Unaddressed student burnout can lead to long term implications including poor academic performance, leaving the program, and experiences of burnout once becoming a practitioner.
- In 2024, 27% of practitioners reported they were considering or planning to leave the field of OT, a 12% increase since 2020.
- In a study done by Popova (2023), 98% of students reported using at least one coping skill. However, students are still continuing to experience burnout.
- Adjusting pedagogical approaches and implementing embedded strategies may improve well-being and decrease burnout in occupational therapy students.

Exploring Burnout and Well-Being Strategies for Occupational Therapy Students: A Qualitative Study

- The purpose of this study was to better understand occupational therapy student burnout.
- This study also helped us gain student and faculty perspectives on mental health strategies that have been adapted from the Every Moment Counts embedded strategies program to better meet the needs of MU OT students.
- Additional strategies were generated by students and faculty

Strategies

- Talk About Mental Health
 - Ask students how they are doing
 - Discuss student challenges and needs
 - Mental health peer discussion groups
 - Faculty discussing positive mental health behaviors and their own mental health practices with students
- In Class Strategies
 - Embedded strategies during class time
 - Offer movement breaks
 - Yoga stretches
 - Walk around the building
 - Teach coping strategies
 - DBT skills, mindfulness, body scans

- Optional well-being activities between classes or during class breaks
- Morale Boosters
 - Free department merchandise
 - More frequent breakfasts or food carry ins. Not just during finals.
 - Basket of snacks available to students
 - Pet therapy during high stress periods
 - Shout outs
- Acknowledgement of student and faculty accomplishments or positive moments throughout the week
- “Student of the Month”

- Clear Expectations
 - Increased communication about assignments
 - Clear rubrics
 - Examples of exemplar assignments on canvas
 - Specific feedback on assignments if there are missed points
- Flexible attendance
 - Permission to miss class for physical or mental health concerns without penalty
 - Flexible class format
- Option to attend via Zoom for time away from campus
 - One planned mental health day a semester that happens department wide

- Flexible deadlines
 - Extended time windows to complete assignments
 - Rolling deadlines
 - Buffer period of 3-5 days where submissions for bigger assignments will be accepted without penalty

- Balanced courses
 - Consideration of readings, assignments, and exams across courses to ensure a manageable workload.
 - Even distribution of assignments throughout the semester
 - Shared calendar among professors of exams and large assignments to avoid conflicts

- Balanced course assignments
 - Weight or balance assignments more evenly to support student success
 - Effort-reflective weighting of assignments
 - Scaffolded assignments

- Cohort events
 - Events that support social connections among students
 - Pot lucks
 - Group hikes
 - Annual BBQ
 - Group volunteer opportunities
 - Movie night

- Department events
 - Events to foster student/faculty connections
 - Celebration of program milestones
 - Holiday celebrations

Additional strategies generated by students and faculty

- Environmental changes
 - Class outside
 - Blinds open
 - Plants in the classroom
 - Warmer lighting
 - 2 test taking rooms, 1 quiet and 1 with music playing
- Student/Faculty liaison
 - Designated student that corresponds with professors about student issues, Canvas issues, confusion about assignments
 - Reduced the burden of a professor getting the same email 10 times about the same problem.
- Promotion of mental health resources
 - Reminder each semester of available resources
 - Canvas page with compiled list of resources
 - Additional education on resources for OT students who did not do their undergrad at Mizzou
- Mandatory one on one advisee meetings
 - One per semester, including over fieldwork
- Increased interactions between cohorts

- Collaborative assignments between cohorts
 - Increased mentorship between Big O, Little T
- Education about burnout and imposter syndrome
 - Many students have reported they didn't realize they were experiencing burnout until after the fact
 - In-class discussions about signs of burnout and how to cope
- Opportunities to get to know professors better
 - Information provided about teaching styles
 - Getting to hear about their weekend, hobbies, interests etc.
- Fieldwork Check-In Buddies
 - Students in similar settings can connect about intervention ideas, challenges faced, and can be used as a socialization opportunity
 - Beneficial for students in different states who don't have as big of a support system around them
 - Socialization opportunity before Capstone class for fieldwork students
- Designated person for student support
 - Hired part-time OT, or capstone student that helps students struggling with burnout or with other skills such as organization, self-care, motivation, or access to resources
 - Available to all students in the College of Health Sciences

Risk factor intake form

- Student Information Form
 - Adapted version of Dr. Gateley's student info form, with the inclusion of questions related to prior burnout experiences and coping skills
- Identifies risk factors/ protective factors before beginning program
- Would help professors and advisors monitor students at an increased risk of burnout

Resources

[Mental Health Resources for MUOT Students](#)

- Mizzou wellness resources & services
- Community resources
- NAMI resources

See, Say, Do Training

- Training offered to faculty at Mizzou to educate on identifying signs of student distress, what to say, and what to do if a student is experiencing mental or emotional distress
- To request a department training: <https://wellbeing.missouri.edu/see-say-do/>

Appendix R
Burnout Graphic

