

Your First...experience of occupational burn out.

Rose speaks to Helena, an occupational therapist, about her first experience of occupational burnout.

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Rose [01:00:08]

Welcome back to another episode of your First of Everything. Today I am joined by Helena, who is an occupational therapist, and she's going to talk to me about her first experience of occupational burnout. Hello, Helena. How are you?

Helena [01:00:21]

I'm all right, thank you.

Rose [01:00:22]

Good. So tell me about your first experience, then, of occupational burnout.

Helena [01:00:27]

Yeah. So I started working as an occupational therapist in September 2021, and I got off to a great start. I had a first six month rotation in an amazing neuro ward, and it was quite overwhelming, as it always is for new graduates. But I had the most amazing team and I really flourished. I was learning loads and I just had a really positive experience of that. And then about six months that I'd finished, I changed rotations like many of us do. We go into sort of rotational roles to get this sort of generic sort of skills of working in a hospital. And I chose the rotation of trauma and orthopaedics, which I'd already done as like an elective placement. So I thought, Oh, this will be good, I'll pick up where I left off there. And it was like my last placement. So I thought actually this would, it would be good to see where my skills are and how I am now. Yeah. And now that I've sort of graduated and got six month experience under my belt and I started working on this new ward and, and I really struggled the, the demands of the service itself was, was really intense. And even though I sort of knew a lot of the practice and I sort of that I was able to sort of thrive with that and lots of sort of factors of the work environment I found really difficult to sort of get through. And one of the things that I found particularly difficult was the fact that when I was working in an acute service, you get people who break the hips all the time. So A&E is always chock a block, and that leads you for all those things like your supervisions, where you actually tend to talk about your health and wellbeing, things like that. They all get you have to cancel anything that's not

essential training or things like that. And that was something that I really struggled with because I found myself sort of struggling in silence, as it were, and and I just gradually noticed a lot of little changes and things like I started sleeping in. I've never been that person. I've never been that person at all. So I was sort of missing my alarms. I just about managed to get to work and I'd get through the day again. I found the small things incredibly difficult and I just I'd find myself getting very irritable at things like, Oh, my password has just suddenly decided to change for this thing. This mundane tasks that should take five minutes then ended up taking 45 because the city system isn't updating. And that would be incredibly frustrating. And and I just found that all my sort of responses to things were completely off. You know, things that shouldn't have weighed on my mind just suddenly became really overwhelming. And and it made my working with the team really difficult. And and I think one of the one of the biggest challenges for me was I'd never been through anything like this before and I'd never really you know, everyone's had their own struggles in life. Everyone, you know, has had things that have tested them and challenged them. But at the time when I was going through it, I literally had no idea what was going on. And people were sort of saying, Oh, are you depressed? Or, you know? And I'm like, No, I don't think I am. I've got nothing to be depressed about. Or, you know, you talk about it a little bit university about resilience and burnout, but you never really think that would ever happen to you. And I think that's something that I you know, I was in denial with a lot of the time that I was like, oh, you know, I've, you know, studied really hard for this job. And I studied for a long time at university. And I was like, oh, I meant to be loving this job. If I admit that it's something that I'm really struggling with that's almost like ten steps back, like, where do you even start with that sort of acknowledgement that, Oh, actually this is not fulfilling what I thought it would? And so yeah, the whole experience was really emotionally overwhelming. I became incredibly tired. I'd get back from work, slouch on my sofa and just find it very difficult to even watch TV or, you know, focus or see friends. I found that really exhausting. And and a lot of those symptoms do mimic things like depression or, you know, just sort of these emotional disturbances that can happen. And I found that I'd lost taste in all my hobbies, all the stuff that you use normally to build emotional resilience, to cope with the work, stress, you know, working in the NHS, all those sort of coping strategies you have. I then found I wasn't able to do and that just left me in a bit of a sort of wallow pit. Yeah, that was my flat that I, you know, sort of sought for comfort in. And, and I when you work in health care you I feel like you put on the persona you get there and you have to be punchy for your patients and you have to it takes a lot of your energy to give back to people who need that to heal and they need the positive mental attitude and they need all of that because that's what you're there to provide them with. But then at the end of the day, I kind of found. I had none of that left to give back to you myself, which was really difficult and something that, you know, whilst I was in the midst of it, I found really difficult to even sort of identify what the cause was. Yeah. And, and yet it wasn't until I talked to a few other people that I was able to kind of sort of hear their experiences, I guess, and sort of think, Oh, actually that sounds very much like what I'm going through. And hearing other people say it almost validated that actually it's okay that this does happen. Yeah, of course. And that, you know, that that was like a really big part of it was I didn't feel like I couldn't admit it to myself because it almost felt like a big failure. I think that's something that, you know, I think I've hit on previously in other podcasts, particularly in our sector, we do feel like we are a failure if we aren't up and at it all the time and that we aren't our absolute best and most bubbly. And this this career path

unfortunately requires an awful lot of ourselves. It day to day lives. You know, we have to be we have to give ourselves away to other people all the time. And what really resonated there with what you said was then I had nothing to give back to myself. And that's not you failing, that's you recognising that actually I need this time. And it's very, very real that these kinds of things happen. So how did you overcome that challenge then? I, I use lots of different things. So the first one that I looked at was my personal development program or like your personal development plan, as it were. When I first graduated, I remember I had my first day and I wrote down what I saw myself like in a year's time. Like what skills, What did I want to be as an occupational therapist in a year's time? And I had quite a clear sort of image of what my possible self would be then of what skills I wanted and, you know, what type of practice I wanted to develop and what my sort of learning needs were. And, and I used my supervision a lot, actually. I sort of put my foot down and said, Oh, I know we're going to cut. This has to be cancelled, but I want this reorganised back in this week because I want to discuss this because I felt like actually in the ward that I was in, I wasn't really getting the practice I needed to develop occupational therapy, specific skills, and I felt like that was a big contributor to me, feeling a bit down in the dumps and feeling like I was getting really stuck in something that I couldn't change. And so I used my supervision quite a lot there and actually talked to my supervisor about it and said, The first sector of your supervision is like health and wellbeing. And I kind of said, you know, this is having a really profound effect on me that I just feel like I'm not advancing, I'm not progressing, and I should be, you know, I'm right at the start of my career here and I need to put time and effort into it. And so I used them and they were really helpful in signposting for like the Health and Wellbeing Hub. And there was also like a note support group that we that we had in our trust. But no one, it was never if you were new to the trust, we weren't necessarily included in email. So she made sure that I was like up to date on those so that I could meet with other band fives like myself. And and that's why I sort of got into contact with other people who are feeling the same where I'm like, Oh, thank God. Yeah, right. You know, I mentioned in there that we talk about that sort of achievement fallacy of working really hard for something and you get there and it's not quite what you pictured it would be. And I think that a lot of us were experiencing that. And, you know, not all of us at the same time, but a lot of people sort of had that which really helped, you know, that peer support, I guess. Yeah, it was really helpful. Another thing I did was that we talked in supervision about our sort of strategies or resilient strategies really, and a lot of mine were quite physical pursuits. I'm quite sporty, I'm quite energetic, but obviously there were some days where I really could not face doing that because of the weather or just energy levels. So we came out with like I think we called it like sitting down activities, which was like I took up crochet. Oh, excellent hobby. And you know, it was really nice to have, even on the days that I felt like I had nothing to give or that was my sort of self care activity where I'm like, Oh, actually I can do something. And sometimes it's just the ability to do something that makes you feel like I've taken time, put time aside for myself, and that really helped. So we sort of came up with a list of activities that I could do on like the days where I was feeling really low or my energy levels weren't quite as good. We sort of came up with like a really resilience plan for it. And and that really, really helped. And I still I still apply it to this day, you know, making sure I put time aside, self-care time to sort of replenish that care quota. So I've still got some pennies in my penny, but like piggy bank to give back to myself at the end of a day. Yeah. And, and that was, you know, we had lots of different things from like social activities with friends. That was a big

one. And, and actually created quite a lot of change in my ward as well. So like on days where everyone sort of knew that it was a very stressful day for the whole sort of therapy team they started. We set up like a Rounders club. Yeah. And that brought everyone together so we could all sort of do a bit of activity, have a good laugh, or sometimes we'd, you know, go somewhere for a meal or a drink or something after work. So, you know, we could kind of know that we could talk to each other and just get the stress of the day out before taking that home. I think a lot of it. And so those really helped. And yeah, just taking a bit of time. Putting time. Side for me. And that was I kind of got the approval that that was okay to do, I think.

Rose [01:10:12]

Good. So, so what kind of advice would you give to a student then, if they were experiencing that occupational burnout?

Helena [01:10:20]

I'd I recommend that they contact a lot of people have like mentors or their whoever's their sort of lead lead of year to know how they're feeling because it does happen. You know you get occupational, you can get academic burnout when you're working really, really hard at something. I just, you know, recommend thinking about what they're currently what their current plan in place is. Are they do they find they're getting enough free time outside of that? Because a lot of it's due to stress. It's you know, when you get deadlines hitting, you know, and the stakes are getting a bit higher in education now, I'd recommend just making sure that they have enough spare time in there sort of for themselves that they're putting time aside outside of uni work, you know, not sitting down watching something whilst they're working on an essay or especially if you're going through placements and your work, you've got a full time job, then you know, making sure that afterwards they're having their own time. And I think when I was a student, I was in the same hospital as a few others, and every Friday we used to meet for a dinner. We used to go out and that was like our way because we were all in different wards. It was really nice to sort of have a little peer support group in the same who were going through the same experiences, some good, some bad, and there will be a bit of that, won't it? Won't there? So I think just using your peers to the most and being able to create a safe space to discuss the things that aren't quite right because sometimes I feel like we do get a lot of pressure to feel like, Oh, everything's great when actually I know as a student myself, sometimes it wasn't always that great and sometimes you had really tough days on placement and you know, you receive that feedback that makes you feel a bit low or a bit, you know, like you're not necessarily performing at your best, but that's how you improve. So I think having having the right people around you peer again, talking to your tutors, your lecturers, lecturers about difficulties you might be facing, see if you can get extensions on things to take the pressure off. Yeah, all those things do warrant, you know, a bit more additional support. Cause it's about having that outlet, isn't it, And having that communication that actually when you are drowning, I need some help, you know, to. To. Please let me. Please help.

Rose [01:12:18]

Yeah, absolutely. And what would you say then? Asked some of your future aspirations. Aspirations as a as an occupational therapist.

Helena [01:12:27]

And one of mine I actually trained as a PE teacher originally years ago, and I would love to go into lecturing at some point in the future. But at the moment what I'd love to do, I work in neurological practice at the moment and it was quite overwhelming to get into as a student because there's a lot to learn. And I did the Masters program, so it was a lot to learn in two years and I don't think you learn all the skills you might need to thrive there because there's just not enough time. And and I'd love what I'd like to do in the sort of future in the next year or so would be to create like a neuro practice day where I could go into universities and set up like a neuro sort of practice, what would I call it? And almost like just a whole day of learning specific neuro skills for OT practice. And I'd love to sort of focus a bit more on giving back in like from the education point of view. And I love teaching. I do a lot in my job now. I take on a lot of students and I think it's really valuable to, you know, be able to teach the next sort of line of professionals. I think that's amazing. Yeah. And so that's kind of my I want to sort of focus a little bit more on that and put a bit more time into that. Yeah. And I'm also quite keen on research. I'd love to do that. I just do not have the time and I don't have the time. I'm still learning a lot as it is. So yeah, yeah. I'd like to work a little bit more with sort of, you know, universities, institutions like that to, to enrich the sort of teaching of a little bit more.

Rose [01:13:51]

But is there any advice you'd give to anybody thinking about coming to be an occupational therapist, you know, to go and train?

Helena [01:13:58]

Well, I would say about about our role occupational therapists come from such diverse backgrounds. There's not it's not there's not a one size fits. You know, it's everyone. There is a role for everyone in occupational therapy and whether that's in paediatrics, whether that's in, you know, working with refugees, working in care homes, working in hospitals, they're you don't have to be academically bright in any way. You can change the profession with all these skills, life skills that you might have had. It's a it's an amazing profession that is really open to everyone. And and I think that's something that's really unique about it is that, you know, you can really shape practice when you become an occupational therapist. And and, you know, it's not it's not as quite as medical as what people might think. So as a health care like profession, it's actually quite accessible to a lot of people. And I think that if people knew more about it and there was a bit more word out there about what the role is in all these different settings, I honestly feel like it could, you know, uptake could be increased. And I just think if anyone's interested, just Google look around and explore it a little bit more because you won't see it on Casualty or on Grey's Anatomy. They won't really go into what it is, but my advice would be just do not be shy. There's a. Amazing online community of occupational therapists who will be willing to give experience out to anyone who asks. And. And yeah, just whatever you think makes you you. There is a place for that in occupational therapy at some in a group in in your practice itself and it's open to everyone I think.

Rose [01:15:25]

Well thank you very much for sharing your experience and coming in and chatting to me today.

Helena [01:15:31]

No worries. Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Rose [01:15:34]

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