

# “This Is Going to Affect People in More Ways Than One ... Even After It’s Over”: Perceptions of Recent Graduates of the Impact of COVID-19

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**PURPOSE:** In the spring of 2020 hundreds of occupational therapy students were in their final semester preparing to graduate and begin their careers as therapists when COVID-19 changed the world. Practitioners, educators, and students had to immediately shift to virtual interactions to participate in everyday activities while experiencing significant unknowns and valid fears. This graduating cohort likely had little to no education or training on how to deliver occupational therapy in the wake of COVID-19. However, COVID-19 has changed how healthcare access and delivery occurs. Likely, occupational therapists will work with clients who had the virus with acute or chronic outcomes to their health that directly impact their daily occupations. There may also be clients who present with post-traumatic stress, trauma, and/or other secondary conditions from going through the pandemic that require assessment and intervention (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Some of the highest levels of clinical reasoning for an occupational therapist include both pragmatic and ethical considerations (AOTA, 2015). The pandemic has catapulted issues of equity, access, and justice concerns for assessing client needs and intervention decision-making (AOTA, 2020). Many of the issues that are the foundation of these concerns have rarely been discussed or described in the academic preparation of occupational therapy students (Braveman & Bass-Haugen, 2009). Reflecting on issues that are critical to attend to in this unprecedented time, do graduates have the capacity to understand how interactions with clients might change and what perceptions do they have of the impact of COVID-19 on client interventions? To answer this and other questions, recent graduates were interviewed during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (April–June, 2020) to identify if, and how, COVID-19 might impact their future interventions.

**DESIGN:** We used qualitative thematic analysis to achieve the final overarching themes. This study is part of a larger 5-year study of OT students across their academic program. Participants were recruited from three universities’ graduating occupational therapy graduate program student class lists. Participants voluntarily completed the informed consent to participate.

**METHOD:** A total of nine recent graduates participated in semi-structured individual interviews to explore their perceptions on the impact of COVID-19 on their future delivery of OT interventions. First cycle data analysis used descriptive and in-vivo codes and second cycle coding used pattern coding to identify emergent themes from across interviews.

**RESULTS:** The findings suggest that most students did not feel prepared to work in a pandemic climate; however, all students were able to identify anticipated changes at the individual client level and at a systemic or policy level. Ethical dilemmas on how best to provide equitable care in the wake of the virus were common across all participants.

**IMPACT:** These findings highlight the importance of how educators might better prepare students for working in a context of unpredictability and national disasters as well as offer insights to administrators and clinical supervisors on the perspectives of these new clinicians.

## References

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