

“Empathy and Burnout in private practice Physical Therapists”

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Abstract

Background - Empathy can represent a major role in the relationship between physical therapists and their patients. Submitted to particular work context and carrier conditions and exposed to high demands, physical therapy professionals become more susceptible to burnout. Empathy and burnout can represent opposite roles in clinical relationship, be influenced by gender, work conditions and circularly influence each other.

Objective - This study aimed (1) to study the relationship of empathy and burnout with professional conditions and gender and (2) to identify the relationships between empathy and burnout

Design - A cross-sectional study design was used

Methods - A questionnaire was applied to characterize demographic and professional variables in a population of 106 physical therapists in exclusive private practice. Jefferson Scale of Physician’s Empathy (JSPE) and Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) were used to assess Empathy and Burnout.

Results - The majority of the physical therapists studied revealed adequate levels of empathic components (115.3 - SD 9.8), significantly higher in female than in male professionals ($P= 0.009$). Moderate to high levels of burnout were detected, distributed homogeneously by gender, with 49.1% in Emotional Exhaustion, 33.9% in Depersonalization and 31.2% in Personal Accomplishment subscales. More empathic female physical therapists showed lower levels of Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization in burnout assessment. Both sexes presented a positive correlation between Personal Accomplishment subscale (lower burnout level) with higher empathy scores.

Limitations - The cross sectional design limited inferences of causality; limited number of participants and specific work environment unable to generalize.

Conclusions - Empathy presented higher values in female Physiotherapists; the total sample revealed a positive correlation of empathy with educational achievement, but not with age or years of professional practice. Empathy presented negatively associated with burnout in females and positively associated with Personal Accomplishment regardless physiotherapist gender.