

Enhancing Mental Wellness and Soft Skills Among Occupational Therapy Students Through Integration of Emotional Intelligence Curriculum

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Abstract

In response to the growing need of emotional intelligence skills in healthcare education, our initiative focused on equipping students with evidence-based, practical strategies drawn from Thomas et al.'s Emotional Intelligence Curriculum (EIC) (2018), specifically to prepare for level II fieldwork placements and stress management strategies. We created two practical tip vignettes demonstrating EIC concepts establishing confidence in the clinic and managing one's emotions. By integrating key components of the EIC, our study supports the development of essential soft skills that promote self-awareness, effective communication, and resilience in a professional setting.

Background

Emotional intelligence is a set of emotional and social skills that influence the way we perceive and express ourselves, develop and maintain social relationships, cope with challenges, and use emotional information in an effective and meaningful way (Multi-Health Systems, 2011).

Emotional intelligence is relevant to occupational therapy students as it is essential for interacting with patients, engaging with members of the community, and building relationships with colleagues. A core principle in occupational therapy practice is the client-centered approach, which prioritizes the patient's goals and how occupational therapists can support them in achieving these goals. Implementing a client-centered approach is deeply intertwined with emotional intelligence, which enhances conflict resolution, stress alleviation, empathy, and clear communication (Segal et al., 2024). Building rapport through trust, open communication, and mutual understanding is essential in establishing a harmonious client-centered relationship.

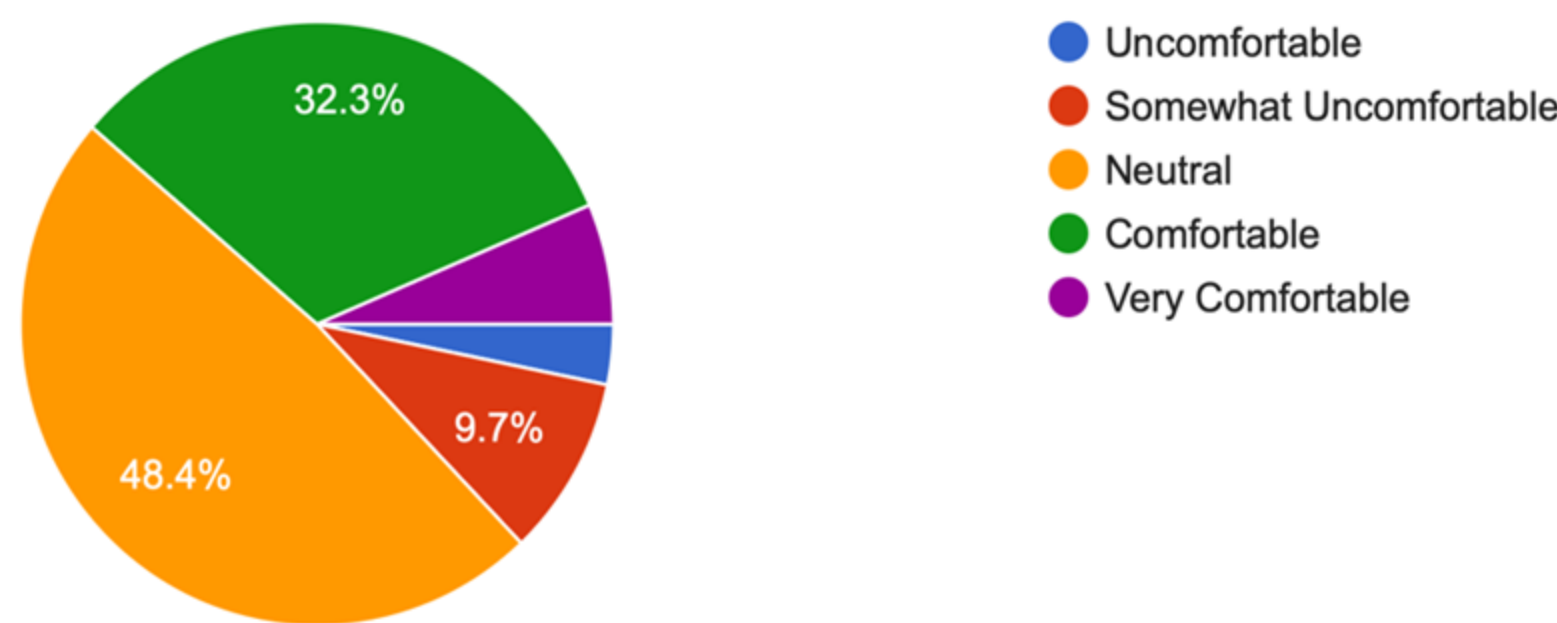
Methodology

Scripts for practical tip videos developed and recorded using mock clinical scenarios. Before and after engaging in the EIC videos, participants completed the pre and post-test survey with open-ended and Likert-scale-based questions in a Level I Fieldwork course. Participants engaged in the EIC videos, followed by their supplemental practical tip videos and discussion.

Findings

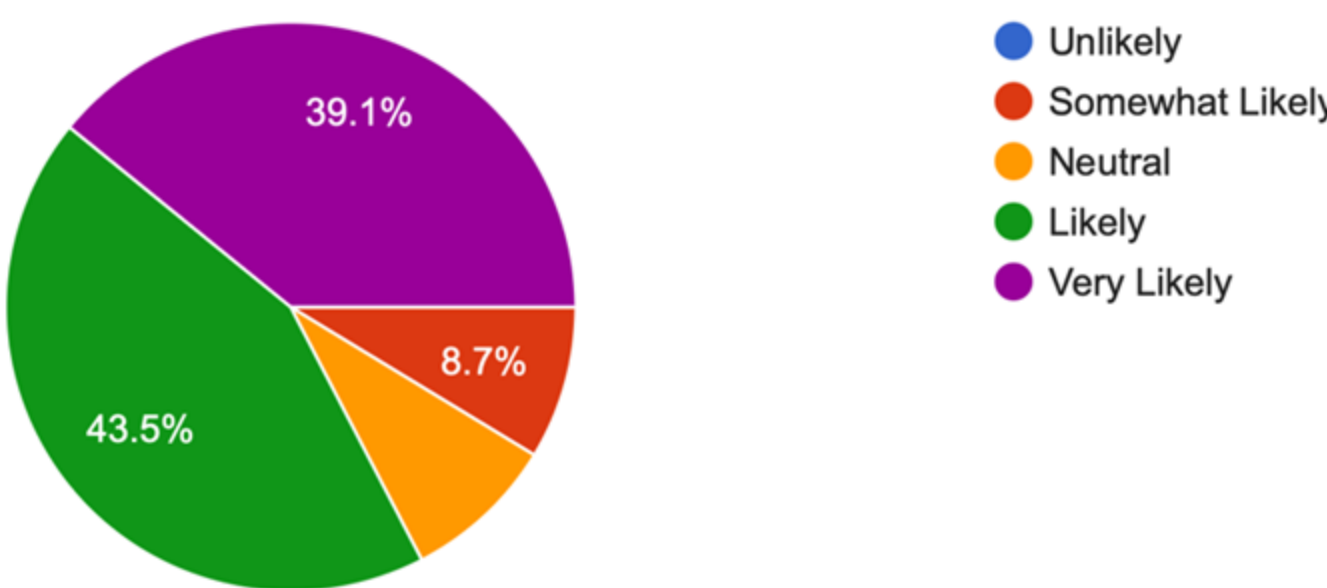
Pre-Survey

How comfortable do you feel in your ability to adequately plan and prepare for your upcoming fieldwork placement? Rate on a scale of 1-5, 1 uncomfortable, 5 being very comfortable.
31 responses

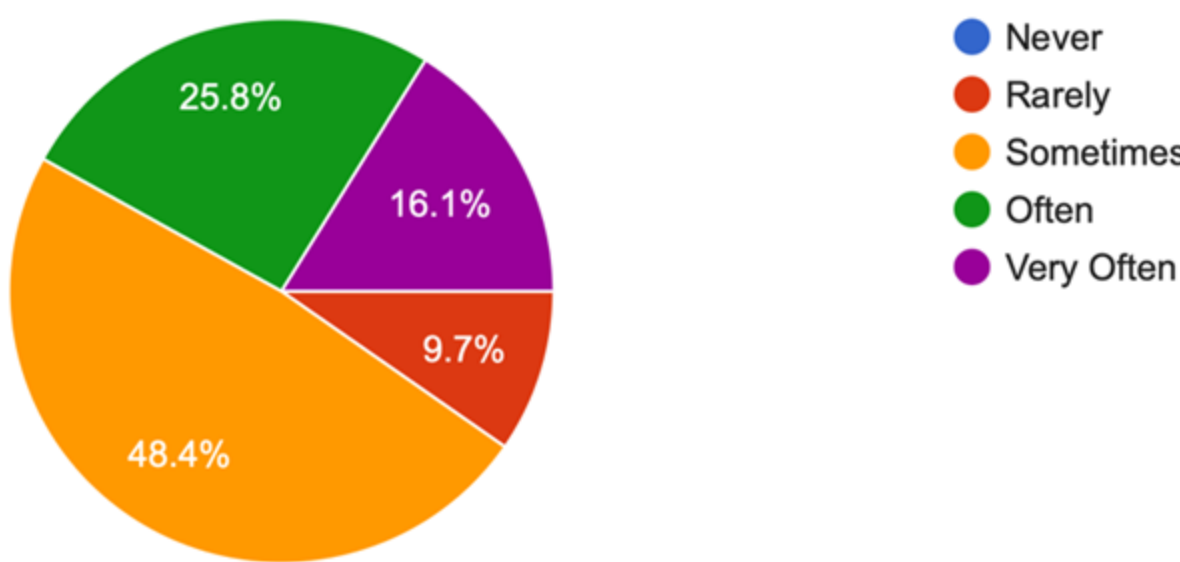


Post-Survey

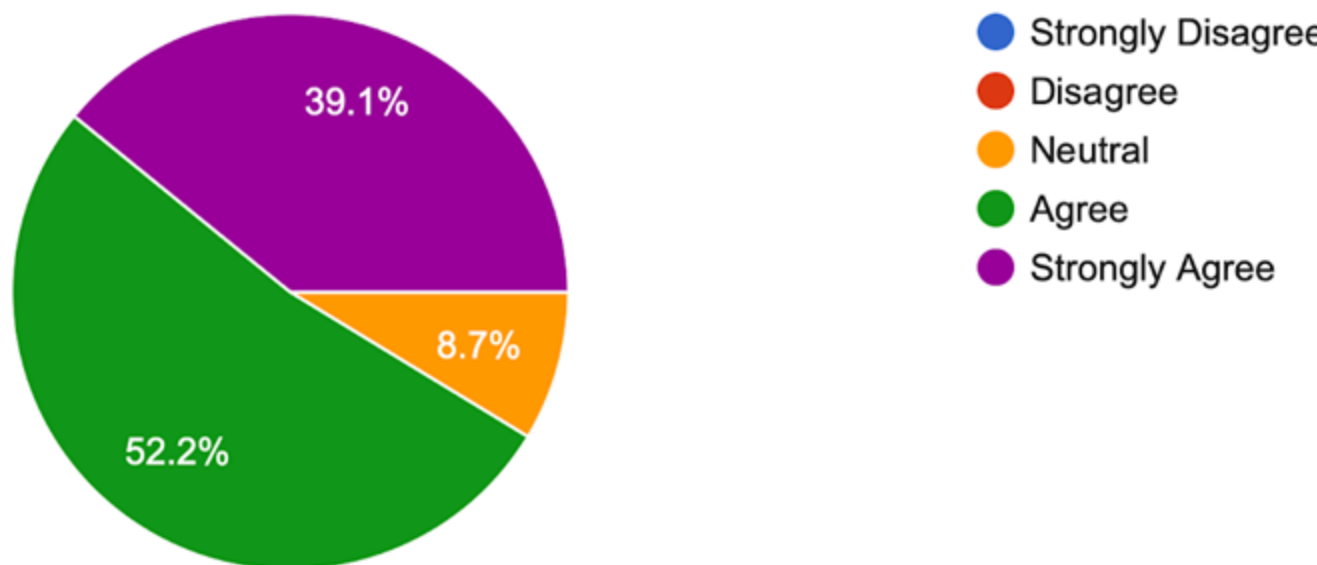
After watching the supplemental practical tip video Confidence in the Clinic, how likely are you to implement preparation strategies such as developing fieldwork goals? Rate on a scale of 1-5, 1 being unlikely, and 5 being very likely.
23 responses



I often take time to reflect on my emotions throughout the day. Rate on a scale of 1-5, 1 being never, 5 being very often.
31 responses



I believe the information from the "Mindfulness of Emotions" will improve my ability to manage my emotions and emotional responses during occupational therapy fieldwork. Rate on a scale of 1-5, 1 being strongly disagree, and 5 being strongly agree.
23 responses



Objectives

- Evaluate the effectiveness of incorporating practical tip videos into the SUNY Downstate Emotional Intelligence Curriculum (EIC).
- Develop pre- and post-test surveys to measure students' self-perceived Emotional Intelligence (EI) after viewing the practical tip videos.
- Test the hypothesis that students' ability to understand and apply learned EI skills will significantly improve future fieldwork and clinical performance following the EIC practical tip videos.
- Working to develop skilled and effective occupational therapy practitioners who can connect with clients, collaborate with other healthcare disciplines, and navigate the complexities of clinical practice.

Participants

The participants of this research study included SUNY Downstate Occupational Therapy students who began the program in May of 2023, and are expected to graduate in December of 2025. A sample size of 23 students was used for our data analysis as our pre-test survey consisted of 31 students, and our post-test survey resulted in 23 student responses which is representative of over two thirds of our cohort.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed and used to assess students' emotional intelligence prior to implementation of the videos. Additionally, qualitative statistical analysis, including focus groups, were conducted to determine the impact of the practical tip videos on students' emotional intelligence skills. The SUNY Downstate Class of 2025 students completed the pre- and post-test surveys and watched the emotional intelligence curriculum videos, followed by the practical tip videos. The results of the surveys indicated the efficacy of our practical tip videos in enhancing emotional intelligence in preparation in application during Level I and Level II fieldwork. In addition, some students volunteered to participate in small group discussions to explain their in depth feedback verbally.

Discussion

This research demonstrated that two video vignettes "Confidence in the Clinic" and "Mindfulness of Emotions" significantly improved students' emotional intelligence, fieldwork readiness, and confidence. Results from the post-survey showed increased self-perceived emotional intelligence knowledge (from 41.9% to 60.9%) and familiarity with mindfulness strategies to support emotional regulation (from 41.9% to 52.2%). Focus groups revealed that students found the videos relatable and applicable through using strategies, such as journaling, proactive scheduling, utilizing movement for mental clarity, and the wheel of emotions to manage stress and enhance communication during fieldwork placements. These findings highlight the value of integrating mental wellness into the development of an emotional intelligence curriculum and emphasizing student feedback to create more engaging and supportive learning experiences. This research is currently in the dissemination phase, with a focus on sharing findings to enhance the development of future emotional intelligence curriculum design and to provide additional resources within occupational therapy education.

Implications for Future Research

This research contributes to the advancement of occupational therapy education by addressing a gap in the integration and application of practical strategies within the EIC. Skills such as clear communication, mindfulness of emotions, and preparedness play a vital role in increasing client satisfaction and improving the overall quality of care. By focusing on the development and application of these soft skills, the project aims to boost the confidence and abilities of OT graduates entering fieldwork and the workforce. Incorporating EI training into academic programs can better prepare future healthcare professions to handle real-world challenges, helping them transition more smoothly from classroom learning to clinical practice.

