

# Addressing patients' stress in musculoskeletal physiotherapy practice

## : a qualitative study

Eytan Copitch, School of Allied Health Professions, Keele University, Staffordshire, UK  
Supervisor: Dr Opeyemi Babatunde

### Background

Stress is a substantial public health challenge exacerbated in the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

Together with musculoskeletal (MSK) pain problems, patients increasingly present to physiotherapists with stress.

This study **aimed to:**

- Explore musculoskeletal (MSK) physiotherapists' perceptions about identifying, assessing, and managing patients' stress
- Explore patients' experiences and expectations of stress management as part of their MSK care.

### Methods

- Semi-structured interviews (7 MSK physiotherapists)
- Mini focus group (with 3 patients).
- Recruitment was undertaken through posters and social media adverts
- Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.
- Triangulation was used to gain an in-depth understanding of patients' and physiotherapists' perspectives.

### Implications for research and practice

Physiotherapists are well placed to address patients' stress

To improve patient outcomes, managing stress within MSK physiotherapy is important

Training, curriculum and guideline development to address the management of stress is a policy requirement

Further research on how physiotherapists may optimally identify and address stress as part of MSK care is needed

### Findings

Some key themes included:

"In my current role, say I see twelve patients a day every day, every single one of them is bringing stress to the table. Erm there's not one of them that isn't stressed." – George (PT, Male, 26 yrs)

▪ **Important to address stress**

"If you're not picking up that someone's pain might be related to their stress, erm then I think there's only so much erm of your job that you can do as a physio really, you're not going to be able to eradicate their pain or err lessen it to an acceptable standard for them if you're not examining every avenue" – Steve (PT, Male, 24 yrs)

▪ **Biopsychosocial and patient-centered approach to care is needed**

▪ **Patients expect holistic care**

"Erm I don't think you can really treat someone without knowing the bigger picture because your physical health and your mental health (Sophie: no) are so related aren't they (Lauren: yeah)" – Olivia (Patient, Female, 39 yrs)

"I used to feel stressed about how I was gonna manage these patients with stress because I didn't have probably the adequate training or enough exposure to how having to deal with it in the first place" – Emily (PT, Female, 27 yrs)

▪ **Addressing patients' stress has challenges**

▪ **Guidelines and multidisciplinary approach is essential**

"I think from a guidelines perspective, I think I'm not sure what the I'm not sure if there's any NICE guidance on it at the moment but if there could be some kind of national advice or guidance on erm like a more kind of a uniform pathway about how we signpost patients with stress, erm whether than be non-MSK or MSK-related and trying to break it down a bit more..." – Emily (PT, Female, 27 yrs)

