

Association of Paediatric Chartered Physiotherapists COVID-19 Survey Analysis: Wellbeing

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Introduction

Wellbeing is recognised to be of great importance for healthcare staff, as emphasised by The NHS People Plan (2020) and the wealth of wellbeing resources that have been made available by organisations such as the Health and Care Professions Council Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, and The Kings Fund throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. There is also a growing body of evidence that links healthcare staff wellbeing with quality of care and patient experience, whilst recognising existing pressures upon the National Health Service (Kings Fund, 2018).

The Oxford English Dictionary offers a simple definition of wellbeing: *'the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy'*, whilst the New Economics Foundation (2012) proposed a broader definition: *'Wellbeing can be understood as how people feel and how they function, both on a personal and a social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole'*.

The UK Office of National Statistics (ONS) measures of personal wellbeing similarly include happiness, life satisfaction, whether individuals feel things in their life are worthwhile, alongside measures of anxiety.

In the months leading up to the COVID-19 lockdown imposed on 23rd March 2020 in the UK, the ONS (2020) found that ratings of anxiety and happiness deteriorated for the first time since they started capturing these measures in 2011. As of June 2020, ratings of life satisfaction have also continued to remain lower than before the COVID-19 pandemic (ONS, 2020).

These statistics illustrate the potentially wide-ranging impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on personal wellbeing. Physiotherapists, alongside other health professionals, faced many challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some experienced job loss or furlough, some were redeployed to new teams, whilst others rapidly implemented telehealth to deliver care remotely. These changes occurred alongside the challenges of complying with infection control and social distancing measures (Haines and Berney, 2020), whilst individuals simultaneously experienced the personal impact of the pandemic and mitigating measures imposed by the UK Government.

In appreciation of the importance of wellbeing and the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on personal wellbeing, the APCP COVID-19 working group sought to include the wellbeing domain in this survey.

Aim

This domain of the APCP COVID-19 survey aimed to explore the wellbeing of paediatric physiotherapists, to offer insight into individual's experiences, share learning, and prompt reflection. This information may also inform future APCP activities and support for APCP members.

Methodology

An electronic survey was sent to all APCP members between June 4th and June 17th 2020. A qualitative approach utilising Framework Analysis (Ritchie 2014) has been applied. A detailed methodology of the design, development delivery and analysis of this electronic survey is reported in the introduction and methodology section of this series. Further consideration of methodological limitations within this project have been detailed in the Introduction and methodology section. This domain of the survey was explored with one key question, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Survey question	Type of question
'Our working lives can often present challenges especially in times of change. The COVID-19 outbreak has led to massive changes to our professional and personal lives. Can you share the effect this situation has had on your wellbeing?'	Open ended

Sample

192 (41%) survey respondents from a total of 472 completed the wellbeing question.

These respondents represented paediatric physiotherapists across the UK, with all geographical regions represented. The majority of respondents identified they work in NHS roles (83%), with 11% in independent practice, 4% charity, and the remaining 2% identified as academic or other. The NHS Agenda for Change banding scale was represented as follows: 1% band 5, 21% band 6, 66% band 7, 6% band 8. A remaining 6% did not identify any banding, and reported working in independent, charity or academic sectors.

55% of respondents to the wellbeing domain identified as working within the neurodisability speciality, and 16% identified as working within musculoskeletal practice. The remaining respondents represented evenly the neonatal, neuromuscular, and respiratory specialities. The smallest speciality representation, as above, was education and research at 1%.

Results

Three key themes emerged from framework analysis of the wellbeing domain, as illustrated below in Table

2.

Table 2: Wellbeing themes and subthemes

Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3
The emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic	Relationships	Maintaining wellbeing through COVID-19
• Stress • Fear • Living with uncertainty • Anxiety • Guilt • Motivation • Fluctuating emotions • Emotional and physical fatigue • Professionalism	• Family and personal relationships • Peer support • Leadership • Team dynamics	• Flexibility • Social connection • Work-life balance • Self-awareness • Sense of purpose • Finding structure and new routines • Keeping active • Learning and personal development • Gratitude

Theme 1: The emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Stress

The rapid pace of change and volume of information associated with the COVID-19 pandemic were often reported as sources of stress and exhaustion. Stress was also associated with changes in employment, redeployment, and challenging personal circumstances, as explored further in the Roles domain of this survey. Many respondents described the stress of conflicting demands on their time, i.e. juggling home working whilst home schooling children, or caring for elderly relatives. Stress was also cited as a source of strain on families and teams.

‘At the start of the situation, I have never known a more stressful, fast paced period of change within the NHS. Initially huge increases in stress, anxiety, lack of sleep, feelings of being unable to cope (hugely exacerbated by my husband having a frontline role within NHS and having same levels of stress, anxiety etc!) For a while we ate, breathed and slept Covid-19!! Never a winner for a happy family life - throw 3 children into the mix and you can imagine the chaos!’ (R.284)

‘It has had a huge detrimental effect on my mental and physical well-being - not just for me but my family and my daughter as well who has special needs. we have hit crisis point as a family and I

have now lost my job. my anxiety, stress levels and now financial worries are massive and I feel this has not been heard by anyone.' (R.32)

'I found the conflict between desperately wanting to help with the pandemic in a more direct way and protecting my home and family very stressful.' (R.37)

'Stressed and tearful at times, inability to cope with things that would usually not cause an issue, lack of tolerance, need for release.' (R.395)

Fear

Respondents described fear of catching or spreading the COVID-19 virus, fear of putting others at risk, fear associated with uncertainty, and fear of redeployment. The latter related both to concerns about working directly with people that have contracted the virus, and perceptions of own competence.

'I was extremely worried about being re-deployed and the risk this would pose to my son who is not classed as vulnerable but has significant respiratory issues' (R.37)

'Frightened about redeployment and will I be up to the challenge.' (R.110)

'Fear of the unknown in the beginning created stress in work environment' (R.383)

Living with uncertainty

Uncertainty was commonly reported as having a negative impact on wellbeing, also illustrating the wide-ranging personal impact of the pandemic.

'I am anxious about the uncertainties of the future. I can't see my fiancé, I lost my job, I am living at home with my parents (at the age of 40)' (R.112)

One respondent described gradually adjusting to live with uncertainty *'I'm a planner, so not having things in the diary hasn't been nice but that's changing now'* (R.34), whilst another described the importance of shifting the focus from uncertainty and to *'take one step at a time'* and *'deal with things as they come'* (R.189).

Anxiety

Anxiety was also associated with factors such as concern for own health and that of loved ones, and uncertainties about the future. Some reported anxiety relating to the changes in their working lives and for the children and families they were supporting, whilst others were anxious about the wellbeing of redeployed colleagues. In relation to redeployment, poor communication, lack of leadership and planning were also reported as sources of anxiety.

'A feeling of anxiety when I am working from home that I am not working hard enough, or that I am letting the children down in some way- not being able to keep an eye on them regularly I am worried that they may deteriorate.' (R.156)

'Anxiety and concern for self and team members with abruptly and significant redeployment with poor planning and limited communication and clarity' (R.271)

Guilt

Various respondents reported feeling guilt. They described dilemmas they have faced, often between professional duties and family responsibilities, or when comparing their own situation to that of others who had been redeployed.

'Feeling of guilt - what if I take the virus home?' (R.86)

'Despite being advised that our trust had comfortable staffing levels on frontline, I was then left with the guilt of not 'playing my part' in the campaign against COVID-19 and perceived judgement when explaining to others that I was working from home' (R.422)

'I feel guilty at ignoring the kids and not being the primary care giver because I am doing so many extra hours of work, I am exhausted' (R.22)

'Guilt of not being able to offer home schooling to my children unlike other parents in my daughters school' (R.300)

Motivation

Mixed comments were made about motivation, with respondents either reporting an improvement in motivation and productivity, loss of motivation, or the need to stay self-motivated due to remote working and social isolation.

'It has been very motivating. I have been in a position where I have been able to do what was needed. it was difficult when things were uncertain and very disappointing when we were not needed for redeployment.' (R.17)

'I felt quite positive at first but as time has gone on and I am doing more and more video calls rather than treating patients face to face, I have found it difficult to remain motivated at work and I felt that my productivity has decreased as a result.' (R.413)

'Isolated and need to be self motivating and very limited interaction and external stimulus' (R.240)

Fluctuating emotions

Many respondents reported that their emotions fluctuated during the pandemic, linking this to a lack of social support and inability to participate in activities that usually maintain their wellbeing.

'my anxiety and mood currently fluctuate much more than previously because coping strategies (meeting friends, going to cafes, having a massage) have been stopped' (R.121)

'I have definitely been on a "Coronacoaster" in regards to wellbeing and emotions. Sometimes I have been in a very unsociable mood for no apparent reason and have struggled with lack of face to face interaction' (R.237)

Emotional and physical fatigue

Some respondents described feeling emotionally and physically drained. Some disclosed how increased stress affected their physical wellbeing, with reports of sleeplessness, feeling drained and exhausted, irritable bowel syndrome, eczema, and migraine. Fatigue was linked with the longevity of the situation, isolation, stress, the complexities of changes and pressures at work and at home, the emotional load of working with others that were also experiencing stress and anxiety, and the emotional load of clinical practice. It was also recognised that use of virtual platforms for appointments and meetings was mentally and physically tiring.

'It has been draining. And the realisation that the situation will not return to normal for some considerable time often leads to lack of motivation' (R.14)

'Working within a tense, highly charged environment due to whole workforce stress, anxiety, burnout is emotionally and physically draining.' (R.86)

'I'm exhausted. I'm a single mum trying to homeschool school a child with special needs and work full time and a lot of that work is emotionally draining.' (R.274)

Professionalism

A small number of respondents commented on their feeling of professionalism during the COVID-19 pandemic, as below:

'Working from home and being professional can be very difficult with small children. My son climbing on my head half naked and pulling faces whilst I'm on a zoom appt with a parent was difficult to swallow. It seems zoom has the same effect on my children as the phone, they suddenly behave like wild banshees disregarding all their usual limits! Each phone call or zoom appt I have this underlying anxiety about the bedroom door opening and what will commence.' (R.37)

'More wobbles at work - felt unprofessional but very supported!' (R.136).

One respondent shared that they found it *'Very difficult to be a therapist behind a computer screen. Struggling with not completing hands on and face to face sessions with children and families'* (R.85).

The impact of redeployment on professional identity, both positively and negatively was also highlighted:

'Initially very stressful working in a different area, requiring different skills and working as part of a new team - felt like I had started a new job! Lost a lot of confidence in abilities moving from a role which I have been doing for 12 years to a new role.' (R.214)

'During the outbreak I have been proud that I have still been able to go to work and make a difference and have retained my identity of being a physiotherapist, when I failed my mask fit it was like that identity had been taken away from me too which was difficult to process. Thankfully I passed the second time I was tested which was a big relief!!' (R.237)

Theme 2: Relationships

Family and personal relationships

Some reported that due to changes in their living arrangements for shielding (R.210), living alone (R.371) or social distancing measures they were no longer able to see loved ones. One respondent described the longing to hug their newly born grandchild (R.110). Some reported that they maintained contact with family and friends virtually, which helped them to cope with stress and to maintain a sense of wellbeing (R.186).

Whilst some appreciated being able to spend more time with their family due to home working, others reported that juggling roles and dealing with pressures and stress had a negative impact on the relationships within their household.

'Family are a strength and my saviours.' (R.84)

'The positive in all of this is I am with my family all of the time, the children are happy and this is definitely good for my well being.' (R.37)

'Working predominantly from home with a 6yo and 1yo at home full time with no access to education. The balance of trying to juggle work, home schooling and general home life has been a challenge. The feeling that I'm doing everything 7 days a week with no break, needing to work on my typical days off to catch up on work/hours not achieved during the week due to child care. General strain on relationships within our household.' (R.68)

Peer Support

Maintained contact with peers was strongly identified as positively influencing wellbeing. Those working in their usual settings valued the ability to share experiences, share concerns, and have meaningful face to face conversations. Others working from home, lone practitioners, or those shielding, reported feeling isolated. They described the negative impact this had on their wellbeing.

'I am fortunate in that I continue to work from my main office base on my NHS days - this allows general discussions around well-being and has kept a sense of normality during the COVID restrictions. In my other job (University based) everything is now online from home and that is more challenging.' (R.16)

'Thankfully well supported by colleagues and trust otherwise I don't think I'd still be at work!' (R.198)

'Team support and morale has been vital, feel less isolated than those working at home' (R.206)

'I am really struggling mentally. I am having to socially isolate due to health conditions and pregnancy so I have not been in work since mid-March. I am lonely, feel utterly undervalued, I feel isolated from everything going on at work. I'm doing all I can to stay positive but it's getting harder and harder as the weeks go by.' (R.296)

Technology enabled respondents to keep in touch with colleagues remotely, however it was recognised that this did not fully replace the value of face to face contact, and that the need for face to face interaction increased as time progressed.

'I miss being with colleagues and although video is ok its not the same as being able to sit with a colleague and talk.' (R.333)

Team dynamics

Some respondents acknowledged how feelings of anxiety may ripple through a team, affecting team dynamics and the wellbeing of others. Others recognised how the COVID-19 pandemic positively enhanced relationships.

'Difficult managing team members anxieties and keep positive through such uncertainty. Trying to maintain an air of flexibility and positivity despite low mood and anxieties' (R.198)

'I have observed the fall out in many of the staff members I work with as they wrestle with working from home, juggling family commitments and unprecedented change.' (R.65)

'getting to know other team members during the difficult time has been bonding.' (R.17)

'It has made our family closer and our team work better together.' (R.278)

Leadership

Respondents with leadership roles described the challenges they have faced in supporting their teams whilst maintaining their own wellbeing. They also described positive emotions such as pride and appreciation. Others reported how strong leadership supported them through the pandemic.

'As a manager and clinician, the pressures of communication and translating all the ever changing information has taken its toll. Staff often expect clarity where there is none and you become the brunt of their frustrations.' (R.233)

'Personally it has been a time to be grateful for the team and the way they have adapted and taken on board new ways of working, stepping up to redeployment, working with technology, older and younger staff equally picking up the baton. That has been rewarding and I have felt very proud to lead the team.' (R.65)

Theme 3: Maintaining wellbeing through COVID-19

Flexibility

Although many respondents reported increased stress and anxiety due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some

respondents reported that their wellbeing has not been negatively affected, or they have now settled following initial anxieties. Some attributed maintenance of their wellbeing to flexibility and an ability to adapt and adjust to change.

'No issues really - it's just about being flexible and adjusting to new working practices' (R.452)

'There have been times at the beginning when it has been quite adrenaline driven, quite exciting times really as we plan and adapt to new ways of working and help staff groups to adapt and work differently.' (R.65)

Social connection

Social connection was reported as essential for wellbeing through the COVID-19 pandemic. A lack of social support had a significant impact for those who were feeling isolated and for those that may have been experiencing mental health difficulties prior to the pandemic. It was recognised that it is important to make time for meaningful interactions and conversations in the workplace, and to maintain contact with those working from home.

'I was struggling with my wellbeing prior to covid and support networks were stopped.' (R.310)

'Create social chat opportunities with colleagues in working environment to reduce intensity and pressure/ worries/ concerns from whole COVID situation' (R.338)

'Need to be more mindful of how this support can be offered and ensuring that people don't get lost or suffer in silence.' (R.215)

Work-life balance

Many respondents described how changes to their working patterns impacted on their work-life balance, with consequences for their wellbeing. Some reported difficulties maintaining work-life balance when home working, due to blurred boundaries and challenges in juggling responsibilities.

'Working different hours to accommodate a young family, starting work at 6am and working until 11pm to get my hours done has been much harder than I could have imagined' (R.3)

'Feeling overwhelmed at times and stressed. Working at home in the evenings when I should log off. Poor sleep (I'm usually a good sleeper).' (R.101)

Others described how their circumstances enabled improved work-life balance:

'No commute means much less stressful mornings – I have been able to do yoga everyday before the children wake up' (R.449)

'My well being does not seemed to have been affected by the situation. I think there are positives of working from home and it has allowed more time to think and head space to focus on what is important.' (R.186)

'Lockdown was great- I live in the country, so a lovely work life balance struck.' (R.258)

Self-awareness

Respondents described ways they have been taking care of their own wellbeing, highlighting that self-awareness helped them to notice their emotions, and to be proactive in taking action to improve their sense of wellbeing.

'Have odd moments of feeling low but spot it and get out for a walk.' (R.34)

'I am aware of feeling overwhelmed at times and when I do I ensure I get out, walk, connect regularly with close friends with technology. Finding something creative to do and a lot of reading' (R.376)

Sense of purpose

A sense of purpose was positively associated with wellbeing, with some describing how the response to the pandemic provided them with a sense of purpose. Others described how a loss of sense of purpose negatively affected their wellbeing.

'Initially I was feeling very driven to ensure all my families and the staff I work with were safe and supported. I was happily working overtime to do what I felt was necessary' (R.37)

'On returning to paediatrics I felt that I didn't have a purpose.' (R.310)

'I have found it difficult to remain motivated and positive with so little to do.' (R.50)

Finding structure and new routines

The changes and restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic altered daily routines dramatically. Some reported that home working improved their daily routine, as they no longer commuted to work. Other respondents explained how finding new routines helped to give a new structure to daily life, which positively

influenced their wellbeing.

'I have been in more of a routine compared to my normal working life so it has improved my wellbeing as I can exercise regularly' (R.440)

'I have tried to maintain a structure to my week in terms of exercise and in fact I have been able to increase the amount I do over week, loving being outdoors and have accessed classes via zoom.' (R.376)

'I have joined 2 online training (exercise) programmes that get me out of bed at 7.30 for 30 minutes of yoga pilates or stretching... I work part time so this regular exercise helps shape my week' (R.343)

Keeping active

In addition to contributing to a sense of structure and routine, the importance of activity was recognised in relation to the increase in sedentary working practice and poor ergonomics of home working. A range of associated musculoskeletal problems were reported, including headaches, back and wrist pain.

'I have found a lot of the time I have been sat down which I do not think has had a positive impact on my overall wellbeing and mental health and it has left me feeling tired and sluggish' (R.413)

Exercise was also reported as a form of stress-relief, enabling opportunities to get outdoors and to connect with nature. Other activities reported included crafts, going for walks, running, yoga, and virtual classes or challenges. The virtual classes and challenges also contributed to motivation and connection with others.

'I keep up with outdoor exercise which is keeping me generally fit and mentally ok' (R.124)

'Exercise has been important, so much time now sat at a desk with back to back meetings' (R.65)

'I am lucky enough to live in a beautiful part of Scotland with a garden and lots of nature and walks on my doorstep and this has always been one of my ways of maintaining my wellbeing.' (R.111)

Learning and personal development

Some respondents reported a sense of satisfaction arising from changes in practice, as they had the opportunity to take more time for learning and service development. It was also recognised that although redeployment was challenging, it was an inherent opportunity for personal and professional development.

'I have also valued the time away from clinical duties to develop service and update my knowledge according to the evidence base.' (R.143)

'I very much missed my normal working team and my normal job but I have enjoyed the challenges it has brought and I feel I have learnt lots and overall it has helped my knowledge and development.' (R.129)

Gratitude

Respondents described what they have been grateful for during the pandemic, suggesting that awareness and gratitude may be helpful in maintaining a sense of wellbeing.

'Being more grateful for the little things' (R.390)

'Overall it has been a very stressful time in both job and home and trying to juggle it all. I'm grateful for supportive team and family/friends during it all' (R.291)

'I am grateful to have a good core group of friends/mentors who are in the same situation and we all are sharing and supporting each other.' (R.408)

Discussion

The wellbeing domain of the APCP COVID-19 survey has demonstrated the varied impact of the pandemic on paediatric physiotherapists across the UK. Some clinicians reported no change or an improvement of their wellbeing, with positive emotional experiences including excitement, pride, motivation, strong sense of purpose and a sense of achievement. Positive circumstantial changes included greater flexibility, more time at home and with family, and more time for self-care. Others described feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, stressed, and anxious. Many described difficulties coping with change and uncertainty, and the challenges of managing the conflicting demands of daily life. Time was a critical factor that influenced wellbeing, as many who reported a deterioration in their wellbeing recognised additional pressures on their time. Conversely, those who reported an improvement in their wellbeing generally reported increased flexibility with their time and more time available for activities such as exercise.

Alongside the other domains of this survey, the findings of the wellbeing domain illustrate that within a single team or family, individuals could be experiencing the pandemic differently depending on their own personal circumstances and the resources, support, and coping strategies available to them. Damian Barr (2020) captured this with the fitting analogy: *'We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some are on super-yachts. Some have just the one oar.'*

This leads to the concept of resilience, which is described as the ability to withstand setbacks and bounce back from adversity (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2001). Respondents to this survey described many coping mechanisms that may have positively influenced their resilience, such as exercise, support from others and staying socially connected. Flexibility and the ability to adapt were also positively associated with wellbeing

The ability to select from a range of coping strategies in response to change has been described in literature as psychological flexibility. Dawson and Golijani-Moghaddam (2020) also concluded that psychological flexibility was positively associated with wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, as it disposed individuals to adaptive coping responses. Flexibility was also identified as a factor that individuals would like to retain in the Moving Forwards domain of this survey.

The experiences shared within the wellbeing domain of this survey have also emphasised the importance of personal reflection, and of taking time for one's own wellbeing, and that of others. A number of the elements that appeared to contribute positively to respondent's wellbeing have been captured with the anagram 'Feel fabulous' (Figure 1), which although not exhaustive of factors that can promote wellbeing, may offer a light-hearted reflection aid. Firstly, as respondents recognised the importance of self-awareness, it begins with appreciation of the range of emotions that one may feel. It then follows that flexibility, time to adjust, building resilience, accepting uncertainty, continuous learning, embracing opportunities, being understanding towards others, and social and peer support, may all also improve an individual's sense of wellbeing. It is also important to recognise that staying connected is both positive for one's own wellbeing, and that of others, as some respondents stressed the importance of reaching out to colleagues that may be feeling isolated.

Signposting to support is also of vital importance, as also found in the Roles domain of this survey. Links to a range of wellbeing resources, including a downloadable copy of the infographic below, have therefore been made available on the APCP website. (Figure 1).



Figure 1.

Limitations

It is recognised that only 41% of total survey respondents completed the wellbeing question, which may have been influenced by the wording and position of the question towards the end of the questionnaire. As respondents may have commented on their wellbeing in response to other survey questions, it is therefore important to consider these findings alongside the other domains of this APCP survey.

Conclusion

The wellbeing domain of the APCP COVID-19 survey has revealed the broad and varied impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on paediatric physiotherapists in the UK. It revealed that individuals have faced changing circumstances and fluctuating emotions, and that wellbeing is a complex and dynamic concept.

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the importance of taking positive steps towards health and wellbeing, as per the NHS People Plan (2020), so that organisations, teams, and individuals, can not only cope, but flourish, when faced with challenges of any scale in the future.

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