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An occupational perspective on the lived experience of menstruation for autistic adults

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Abstract

Menstruation is known to have potentially adverse impacts at multiple levels of occupational performance (Armour *et al.*, 2019). Little research has to date, however, directly investigated the everyday menstruation experiences of autistic individuals, for whom menses and menarche are widely thought to be particularly occupationally disruptive (Steward *et al.*, 2018).

In this paper, a qualitative research design was employed to address the lived experiences of menstruation among a small set (N=6) of autistic adults in the UK. With institutional ethical approval (reference: 2511/SRPM/2021), in-depth online interviews were conducted. These yielded 34,734 words of transcript, which were thematically analysed using the six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006), and interpreted through an Occupational Perspective of Health Framework (Wilcock and Hocking, 2015).

Three interconnected global themes were identified. 1. 'Sense of self', addressing participants' sensory overload and amplified experiences of anxiety, 'brain fog' and concern with cleanliness. 2. 'Attributional work', addressing events and contexts which were taken to trigger and/or exacerbate key problems (such as the need to use public restrooms). 3. 'Reclaiming orderliness', addressing participants' pragmatic

strategies for overcoming the increased unpredictability inherent in their lives during periods.

It was concluded that menstruation poses specific, significant challenges for autistic individuals which require autism-specific solutions. These challenges impact individuals' ability to particularly perform occupations of self-care, productivity, and leisure. As such, Occupational Therapists have a key role to play in the provision of support to address the impact of menstruation on occupational engagement and participation.

References

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