

THE PARADOX OF CARE: THE JOURNEY OF PHYSICAL THERAPISTS LIVING WITH WORK-RELATED LOW BACK PAIN

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of physical therapists with work-related low back pain (LBP) in clinical settings and patient care in San Fernando, La Union. It aimed to describe the physical therapists' experiences, challenges and coping strategies, utilizing a phenomenological approach guided by (3) frameworks; Precede-Proceed model, Planned Behavior Theory, and Self-determination theory to consider the participant motivational factors, and underlying causes. Data was collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with (8) eight registered physical therapists with work-related LBP and had been actively working in clinical settings for over two months. Findings revealed that physical and emotional strain is a constant aspect of clinical work, contributing to persistent work-related LBP. Despite knowledge of proper body mechanics, participants often prioritize patient care over their own well-being. To manage the condition, participants adopt a combination of ergonomic adjustments, emotional resilience, and social support. The study highlights a conflict between professional responsibilities and self-care among physical therapists. It calls for systemic reforms and supportive workplace environments that prioritize physical therapist health alongside patient care outcomes. By focusing on peer support, wellness programs, proper training, ergonomic workspaces, and further research, the well-being of physical therapists with work-related LBP can be better protected and sustained.

Keywords: *Clinical settings, Low Back Pain, Patient care, Physical Therapists, Work-Related.*

1. Introduction

In the physical therapy department, phrases like “Let me know if you feel any pain, Ma'am” or “Good job! Let's do a few more reps, Sir” highlight the supportive, movement-focused care therapists provide. According to the American Physical Therapy Association, these professionals use clinical expertise to treat the root causes of pain, not just the symptoms through detailed assessments of posture, strength, and mobility (Team, 2024). Yet despite their vital role, physical therapists themselves are at risk for work-related low back pain due to physically demanding tasks, poor ergonomics, and

high patient loads, as emphasized during World Physiotherapy Day 2024 in Kolkata, India (Bppoddar, 2024).

Building on this work-related low back pain (LBP) has become a growing global concern among physical therapists, with rates in Dhaka, Bangladesh increasing dramatically from 25% to 87.3% after entering the profession—largely due to poor body mechanics and repetitive tasks (Ahmed et al., 2023). Similar risks are seen in South Korea and Saudi Arabia, where prolonged standing, lifting, and high caseloads significantly contribute to LBP (Lee, 2020; Ibrahim Dewir, 2025). These trends highlight a shared occupational vulnerability, as global data show the lower back, thumb, neck, and shoulder are commonly affected in high-demand clinical environments (Gorce & Jacquier-Bret, 2023).

In addition to occupational factors, both male and female therapists in Jordan and Saudi Arabia report high LBP prevalence, with females particularly affected by prolonged standing or sitting tasks (Al-Bustanji et al., 2022; Kakaraparthi et al., 2021). Younger therapists aged 20–30 are more vulnerable due to longer hours and limited experience, while older professionals tend to assume less physically demanding roles.

Despite extensive global research, a significant gap remains due to the lack of consistent diagnostic criteria for identifying work-related LBP, with most studies relying on self-reported tools like the Chi-square test and Nordic Questionnaire, limiting diagnostic precision and treatment planning (Ahmed et al., 2023; Ibrahim Dewir, 2025; Gorce & Jacquier-Bret, 2023). For instance, Lee (2020) noted a 55% prevalence of LBP among physical therapists in South Korea, yet many cases may go undiagnosed without formal assessments. Moreover, while occupational risk factors have been identified across countries, there is still insufficient research on coping strategies and the long-term effects of LBP on professional sustainability and quality of care.

In the Philippine context, research on work-related low back pain (LBP) among physical therapists remains scarce; however, Sue (2019) reported a striking 91% one-year prevalence among Metro Manila therapists, linking it to physically demanding tasks despite proper body mechanics. This highlights the need for comprehensive interventions such as safety programs, ergonomic tools, and continuous training to effectively address LBP in clinical settings.

Therefore, this study aimed to describe the lived experiences of physical therapists with work-related LBP within clinical settings and patient care. Specifically, it sought to answer the following: (1) What are the lived experiences of physical therapists with work-related low back pain? (2) What are the challenges encountered by physical therapists with work-related low back pain? and (3) What are the coping strategies employed by physical therapists to navigate these challenges? Through these guiding questions, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of the professional realities faced by physical therapists, ultimately contributing to improved health outcomes and work environments.

2. Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative, specifically phenomenological approach. Qualitative research aims for exploring complex, real-world issues by capturing

participants' experiences and perceptions through observational and inquiry-based methods, aiming to understand the "how" and "why" behind human behavior and promote meaningful change. Phenomenological approach seeks to understand and reveal individuals' lived experiences by exploring their subjective perceptions and motivations through in-depth methods like interviews, while setting aside preconceived notions to emphasize personal insight and meaning. In this case, the focus was on understanding how physical therapists experience, challenge and cope with work-related LBP within clinical settings, uncovering the deeper meanings, attitudes, and workplace dynamics that influence their professional and personal well-being.

Participants and Locale

This study focused on physical therapists in the City of San Fernando, La Union, Philippines, who reported experiencing work-related LBP in clinical settings and patient care. To gather meaningful insights, participants were asked to share their lived experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms related to managing work-related LBP in their professional roles. To ensure the relevance and depth of the data, purposive sampling was employed, allowing for the intentional selection of participants capable of providing rich, context-specific information aligned with the study's objectives. Furthermore, inclusion criteria required participants to be registered physical therapists in the Philippines who were actively engaged in clinical settings and patient care for more than two months within the specified location. Conversely, those who did not meet these criteria such as individuals without work-related LBP, those with less than two months of clinical settings and patient care experience, those outside the 24 to 50 age range, pregnant women, or those with a prior history of musculoskeletal conditions were excluded from the study.

Data Gathering Tools and Procedure

A 30-minute one-on-one interview served as the primary data collection method, conducted with (8) eight physical therapist participants experiencing work-related LBP in clinical settings and patient care. These interviews used semi-structured questions and were audio and video recorded to capture their responses. Data saturation was achieved after interviewing all the eight participants, meaning no new thematic elements emerged, and the collected data consistently aligned with the study's objectives and inclusion criteria. To ensure the reliability of data-gathering techniques, this study followed the comprehensive procedure that includes ongoing refinement done by the Physical Therapy Research Adviser, the Lorma Colleges Dean of the College of Physical Therapy, the Research Institute of LORMA Colleges Campus for Health Sciences, and the LORMA Colleges Research and Ethics Committee (LC-REC), respectively. To ensure strict confidentiality and data integrity, all personal identifiers were removed from participant data, which was securely stored with limited access for five months post-study completion and publication before being permanently and irreversibly deleted.

3. General Themes and Concept

After brainstorming the data and comparing all the participants' responses, three creative major themes emerged: (1) Effort that Echoes; (2) The Weight They Carry with

the subthemes (a) Every Bend, Every Pain, (b) Heart's Quiet Burden, and (c) Stolen Time Rest; (3) Bending Without Breaking with a subthemes: (a) Anchored in Passion , (b) Awakening the Self, (c) What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, and (d) Harmony in Hustle.

3.1 Effort that Echoes

Physical therapists endure significant physical effort in their daily routines, constantly bending, lifting, and assisting patients as part of rehabilitation work. This lived experience of physical therapists with work-related LBP in clinical settings and patient care covers the echoes that circling behind care: Physical Discomfort, Heavy Workload, Overexertion, Busy Hours, and Psychological stressors.

Physical discomfort often stems from repetitive manual tasks and ongoing physical strain, especially in professions like physical therapy. One participant shared that *"It can be physically uncomfortable, sometimes even painful to lean forward or turn your body to monitor the patient's movement,"* particularly when working with children who require close guidance while walking. A concern supported by Pellissier et al. (2023), who identified awkward postures and manual patient handling as key risk factors for work-related LBP.

These challenges are intensified by the heavy workload physical therapists face, with high patient volumes limiting their ability to maintain proper body mechanics. A participant shared, *"With so many patients to attend to, it's difficult to maintain proper body mechanics,"* while another added that the demands often *"We work with patients daily, and the physical demands of the job often lead to episodes of low back pain."* This aligns with findings from Ceballos-Gurrola et al. (2024), who concluded that insufficient rest, physical load, and performance pressures heighten the risk of work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSDs).

Overexertion is another key contributor, especially during physically intensive tasks like patient transfers or responding to sudden movements. Participants described the toll of handling patients larger than themselves and the pain that emerges from guiding patient movements, saying, *"We can't avoid situations where some patients are larger than us, requiring us to physically move them,"* while another noted, *"When you're actively involved in guiding movement, that's when the physical strain really sets in and it starts to hurt."* These narratives resonate with Pellissier et al. (2023), reinforcing that overexertion during patient care is a significant cause of work-related low back injuries.

Busy hours further exacerbate physical strain, leaving little opportunity for recovery. One participant shared, *"We rarely get the chance to sit down and spend most of the day on our feet,"* while another mentioned pushing through discomfort due to tight schedules. Serranheira et al. (2020) support these insights, linking prolonged standing and limited rest to high rates of lower back pain among therapists.

Finally, psychological stressors play a critical role in the onset and persistence of LBP, with therapists reporting emotional fatigue and internal pressures that intensify physical pain. Participant reflections such as, *"My lower back pain tends to get triggered, probably due to stress,"* underscore the connection between emotional strain and physical symptoms. These accounts suggest that promoting mental well-being is just as essential as addressing physical demands in reducing work-related LBP among physical therapists.

3.2 *The Weight They Carry*

Despite intentional efforts to apply proper body mechanics, the fast-paced clinical environment and constant time pressure often forced therapists into poor posture, worsening their physical symptoms. Additionally, the “weight” they carried was not solely physical but also deeply emotional—marked by internalized expectations, professional guilt, and emotional exhaustion. Consequently, many continued to work quietly through pain, out of professional obligation, fearing judgment or a decline in patient care quality.

This theme underscores the lived experience of physical therapists whose own bodies become sites of strain, even as they work to rehabilitate others. It speaks to the resilience and quiet endurance required to navigate the challenges of both physical and emotional strain, often without the opportunity for rest or recovery. This theme is further explored through three subthemes: (1) Every Bend, Every Pain, (2) Heart’s Quiet Burden, and (3) Stolen Time to Rest.

3.2.1 *Every Bend, Every Pain*

Despite their training in proper body mechanics, physical therapists often find themselves in awkward, high-strain positions due to real-world clinical demands such as managing low beds or assisting uncooperative patients. As Participant 1 remarked, *“Using low beds for patients who can’t walk or stand triggered lumbar pain”*, while Participant 2 noted, *“Lower back pain can really interfere with treating patients,”* reflecting how even routine care exacts a physical toll. Echoing this, participant 5 reiterated, *“Even when the techniques are correct, there’s still a significant amount of strain,”* especially with physically demanding patients. This is echoed by Le et al. (2024), whose findings identified awkward postures and repeated patient transfers as major contributors to musculoskeletal injury.

3.2.2 *Heart’s Quiet Burden*

Beyond physical strain, work-related LBP weighs heavily on the emotional well-being of physical therapists, challenging their identity as reliable caregivers. Participant 1 shared, *“But there are also ‘toxic days’—very hectic and overwhelming. The stress builds up, and you stop noticing your own posture,”* illustrating how psychological stress undermines both posture awareness and self-care. Participant 8 added, *“There’s also the fear of possibly dropping the patient. That affects my confidence as a physical therapist, especially since I have low back pain myself. That’s something I struggle with. It’s stressful.”* highlighting how chronic pain can erode confidence and heighten emotional distress, while Participant 6 revealed the unspoken norm: *“I often hear others say, ‘I can lift it,’ but in reality, they are also in pain.”* This is expressed by Hagen et al. (2025), who reported that high job demands and inadequate support lead to reduced mental health and work engagement among physical therapists.

3.2.3 Stolen Time to Rest

In the fast-paced clinical environment, rest is more often an exception than a norm, with physical therapists routinely sacrificing recovery for patient care. Participant 1 shared, *"We sometimes experience situations where three patients arrive at the same time. Even with interns and coworkers, everyone has a full load,"* while Participant 6 observed, *"Our only designated break is usually lunch. But even that sometimes gets taken away,"* echoing Burri et al. (2022), who link insufficient recovery opportunities to chronic stress and burnout.

3.3 Bending Without Breaking

This hope served not merely as a coping mechanism but as fuel for their ongoing dedication to patient care. Their determination to stay well wasn't just about self-preservation; it was about sustaining the capacity to help others heal. This alignment of personal recovery with professional service reflects a dynamic psychological strength, where hope is not passive optimism but an active force that propels them forward.

This empowering mindset is vividly captured through four lived subthemes: (1) Anchored in Passion, (2) Awakening the Self, (3) What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger, and (4) Harmony in Hustle.

3.3.1 Anchored in Passion

Fueled by a profound sense of purpose, physical therapists navigate the challenges of work-related LBP with a heart anchored in care and commitment. As Participant 1 shared, *"Being a physical therapist is not just about having knowledge or being smart, it's also about having heart and passion,"* revealing how compassion forms the backbone of their practice, sustained even through pain. This commitment radiates through their mentorship, as Participant 2 explained, *"We usually have interns around, so we teach them the proper techniques like stretching and body mechanics so they can assist under supervision, which helps ease our load,"* reflecting how passion not only drives care but also inspires collective growth and injury prevention. Ferreira et al. (2021) further affirmed that knowledge sharing among healthcare professionals enhances team cohesion and emotional resilience, improving overall well-being in clinical settings.

3.3.2 Awakening the Self

Drawing from their academic training, participants actively translate knowledge into protective practices against work-related LBP. *"Since we're knowledgeable about preventing low back pain, we're more aware of what not to do to avoid worsening our condition,"* stated Participant 2, highlighting how self-regulation begins with education and mindfulness. Reinforcing this, Participant 3 added, *"This awareness helps us correct ourselves and push through with proper body mechanics, especially when performing exercises with patients,"* reflecting a dynamic process of internal reflection and intentional physical engagement. Supporting this, Lima et al. (2021) found that professionals

who maintain strong postural awareness experience lower rates of work-related LBP and improved career longevity.

3.3.3 *What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger*

Harnessing their professional expertise, participants turn to therapeutic exercise and stretching to manage work-related LBP with resilience and resourcefulness. As Participant 2 revealed, *"After duty, we often treat each other here at work, and at home, I usually rely on deep stretches and exercises to cope with back pain,"* while Participant 7 shared, *"I used to work out at the gym, but I stopped because it actually aggravated the pain. Now, I focus on jogging instead,"* with Participant 7 adding, *"As PTs, we know how to use the machines, so I sometimes apply hot moist packs and TENS to relieve the pain along with stretching exercises,"*. These strategies align with the insights of Koes et al. (2020), who emphasized that personalized activity, supportive devices, and tailored therapy foster effective pain control and promote enduring occupational health.

3.3.4 *Harmony in Hustle*

Amid the demands of their profession, participants recognize the healing power of intentional rest in managing work-related LBP. *"The most important thing is getting 8 hours of sleep. I've observed that when I manage to get that amount of rest, even amidst a busy schedule, my back pain often disappears,"* shared Participant 4, underlining sleep as a foundation for recovery and readiness. Echoing this sentiment, Participant 7 stated, *"Rest is now more important, because, for example, if you have a patient with back pain, how can you treat a patient with back pain if you have back pain yourself?"* Ricci et al. (2020) further stress that supportive workplace cultures emphasizing rest lead to higher job satisfaction and reduced absenteeism. By prioritizing well-being, physical therapists not only ensure personal resilience but also elevate the standard of care they provide.

4. Conclusion

Synthesis

The study reveals that physical therapists with work-related LBP endure a demanding reality marked by physical strain, emotional stress, and limited rest, all while remaining deeply committed to patient care. Their lived experiences reflect a constant tension between professional duty and personal well-being, as they manage pain from repetitive movements and internal pressures to perform without showing vulnerability. Despite these challenges, they demonstrate resilience by employing coping strategies that blend ergonomic practices, emotional strength, and social support. Techniques such as posture correction, stretching, therapeutic tools, and mindful self-care allow them to stay functional while preserving their identity as both healers and individuals. These findings emphasize the need for systemic changes that support not only physical health but also emotional and professional sustainability in clinical environments.

Recommendations

Physical therapy professionals should establish peer support groups and conduct integrated workshops focusing on injury prevention, emotional self-care, and stress management to address both the physical and mental aspects of work-related low back pain. The Philippine Physical Therapy Association could enhance support by deploying mobile “Wellness Wheels” that provide not only physical check-ups but also mental health consultations, mindfulness sessions, and wellness resources directly to therapy centers. Moreover, physical therapy curricula should incorporate training on ergonomics, emotional intelligence, and burnout recognition, equipping students with both physical and psychological coping skills. Educational institutions like LORMA Colleges are encouraged to promote hands-on research exploring the links between musculoskeletal health and emotional resilience. Lastly, healthcare institutions should prioritize ergonomic improvements, ensure adequate rest periods, and offer accessible mental health services, while researchers continue to explore comprehensive, context-specific interventions that holistically support the well-being of Filipino physical therapists.

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