SUPPORTING THE WELL-BEING OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE PROVIDERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Evidence summary and links to resources and supports

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Ontario Centre of Excellence
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CONTENTS

BACKGROUND

The emergence of COVID-19 in populations across the globe has had a significant impact on the delivery of child and youth mental health services in Ontario. Service providers and organizational leaders have been required to shift their usual ways of working to adapt their services and deliver virtual and/or in-person care safely. These unanticipated changes, along with changes to community and family life in response to the pandemic (e.g. social distancing, self-isolation and quarantine) have created the *perfect storm* for the emergence of mental health challenges and burnout across direct service providers (Greenberg, et al., 2020; Moazzami, et al., 2020).

The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (the Centre) and Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO) have compiled several resources that may help support the overall mental health and well-being of the province's community-based child and youth mental health workforce.

In this resource, we share:

- A brief summary of factors that can contribute to, ways to identify and the possible impacts of mental health challenges and burnout among direct service providers.
- Practical tips and guidelines direct service providers may implement to help reduce stress and associated negative outcomes (e.g. compassion fatigue, mental health challenges and burnout).
- Links to support services and guidelines aimed at preventing mental health challenges and burnout of direct service providers in Ontario.

The contents of this document were gathered through a rapid, non-systematic scan of practice guidelines with the goal of providing timely support to direct service providers. A review of academic and grey literature uncovered several relevant, evidence-based resources offering practical recommendations on how direct service providers can manage their stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. The resources shared were not collected through an exhaustive search or systematic review but reflect information available at the time of writing. As new practice evidence emerges, recommended resources may evolve.

SUPPORTING THE WELL-BEING OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE PROVIDERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Research suggests that significant events (such as the current COVID-19 pandemic) impact individuals, organizations, communities and all levels of the healthcare system. In order to continue to meet the mental health needs of children and youth, agency leaders and direct service providers have made significant changes to the way they deliver services in person (i.e. having to implement physical distancing and safety protocols) and/or have quickly shifted to offering virtual care. The emotional and pragmatic impact of these changes can lead to compassion fatigue among service providers and can place them at higher risk of caregiver burnout and long-term stress. This, in turn, can weaken the broader service system over time (Dewey, Hingle, et al., 2020; Van Mol, et al., 2015).

Several terms are used interchangeably in the literature to describe the experience of burnout or compassion fatigue (otherwise referred to as secondary traumatic stress) among helping professionals. Compassion fatigue is a potential effect of long-term exposure to the suffering of other people, combined with an unsupportive workplace and lack of self-care (Sinclair et al., 2017). Caregiver burnout refers to the feelings of exhaustion, frustration and depression, along with negative feelings driven by concern (such as hyper-vigilance, avoidance and fear) that a service provider can experience as a result of ongoing exposure to a stressful context (Van Mol et al., 2015).

There is considerable overlap between the concepts of compassion fatigue and burnout, and several studies have found strong correlations between the two variables (Knight, 2013; Turgoose & Maddox, 2017). Burnout and compassion fatigue are both associated with feelings of exhaustion and hopelessness due to work-related stressors; however, burnout is the result of prolonged, unrelenting compassion fatigue in response to these conditions.

The current environment

Between coping with the current pandemic environment, and juggling home responsibilities with increased work demands, the present context has introduced several additional sources of stress in the lives of direct service providers, including but not limited to (Shanafelt et al., 2020):

- concerns related to proper and adequate access to personal protective equipment
- fears of being exposed to COVID-19 at work and spreading the infection to others including clients and/or family members.
- lack of access to childcare.
- longer work hours.
- challenges related to working at home with children present
- increased demands on time both within the home (i.e., children/family) and while working.
- lack of access to accurate information, and/or inconsistent or changing communication from government and related organizations.

Given these additional pressures and the prolonged nature of this stress, compassion fatigue and caregiver burnout are likely outcomes for mental health practitioners both through and post-pandemic (Browne, et al., 2020). Compassion fatigue can lead to exhaustion (mental, physical, emotional) and feelings of hopelessness, apathy, negativity, irritability, sadness, moodiness and disconnection. Associated symptoms include difficulty sleeping, avoidance or preoccupation with the trauma, increased startle response, obtrusive thoughts and/or images, depressed and/or anxious mood, decreased concentration, lowered self-esteem and loss of professional identity (Alkema et al., 2008; Berzoff & Kita, 2010; Figley, 2002; Radey & Figley, 2007). The emotional and behavioural impairment can result in caregiver burnout, which has been linked to several negative outcomes, including reduced quality of care (Panagioti et al., 2018).

Evidence on how organizations can address compassion fatigue and caregiver burnout

In 2019, the Centre developed a report that provides a summary of research related to the issue of burnout and compassion fatigue among child and youth mental health care providers, along with evidence-informed practices to address these issues. As well, we summarized findings from a review of evidence-informed interventions for burnout and compassion fatigue, and prepared an annotated bibliography outlining the organizational- level models and frameworks that reduce burnout and increase wellness in employees.

In the context of the current pandemic, it is important to note that there are several risks and protective factors that can either exacerbate negative outcomes or enhance coping and positive outcomes in service providers. Specifically, lower levels of compassion fatigue and burnout in direct service providers have been associated with the following personal and organizational protective factors:

- physical activity (Sliter et al., 2014)
- use of self-care strategies (Alkema et al., 2008)
- self-compassion, including self-kindness (versus self-judgment), common humanity, and mindfulness (Beaumont, Durkin, Hollins Martin, & Carson, 2016)
- trauma-informed self-care (Salloum et al., 2015)
- higher levels of emotional intelligence and adaptive coping (ability to identify and manage one's own emotional state) (Turgoose & Maddox, 2017)
- dispositional mindfulness (strong awareness and attention to thoughts and feelings in the present moment) (Turgoose & Maddox, 2017)
- organizational commitment and group cohesion in the workplace (Li et al., 2014)
- higher levels of social support both within and outside of the organization (Rzeszutek, et al., 2015)
- positive perceptions of support and fairness in the work environment (Turgoose & Maddox, 2017)

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While these protective factors may help maintain positive experiences while on the job and may reduce the risk of burnout, those individuals experiencing high levels of stress may require additional, more specialized supports (Salloum et al., 2015). In addition, organizations may need to implement a number of strategies to provide support for mental health service providers to prevent the development of compassion fatigue (Stebnicki, 2000) including:

- Tailoring clinical supervision to the needs of newer and less experienced service providers and responding to compassion fatigue as it relates to personal and professional development.
- Holding regular team meetings that allow professionals to communicate and process their feelings regarding any work-related stress or anxiety.
- Organizing (virtual) peer support groups to allow professionals to share and develop insights about work-related stressors, their emotional reactions and how to cope. These sessions should be facilitated by qualified professionals that do not work directly with the organization.
- Promoting education and wellness programs for employees across the organization (e.g. mindfulness, physical exercise, diet, nutrition, and attitudes/perceptions related to loss and grief).

Properly preparing staff for the job and associated challenges can reduce the risk of future mental health problems through and following the COVID-19 pandemic (Dewey et al., 2020). According to Greenberg et al. (2020), service providers should not be given false reassurances during these difficult times; instead, agencies should be transparent about occupational risks that might affect staff and clearly communicate how the organization will address these. Staff should be made aware of the resources and supports available to them so that they are well equipped to face emerging challenges.

Compassion fatigue and caregiver burnout are rooted in broader systemic issues and are likely to become more widespread during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizational leaders need to strengthen efforts they may already have in place for supporting mental wellness and actively monitoring and/or preventing the emergence of mental health challenges in the workplace.

Resources and supports for direct service providers

British Columbia Ministry of Health

- [Supporting the psychosocial well-being of health-care workers during the covid-19 pandemic (BC)](#)

Canadian Forces Health Services Group

- [Sustaining the wellbeing of healthcare workers during COVID-19 pandemic (tip sheet)](#)

Guarding Minds at Work

- [A set of resources designed to protect and promote psychological health and safety in the workplace.](#)

Mental Health Commission of Canada

- [List of resources for psychological health and safety in healthcare](#)
- [Webinar — best practices for supporting the mental health of healthcare workers during COVID-19](#)

Mental Health Works

- [Free webinars on workplace mental health amid COVID-19 concerns](#)

My Workplace Health

- [How to Reduce Coronavirus Anxiety in the Workplace](#)

Ontario Hospital Association

- [Recommendations to support health care workers employed at multiple sites or organizations](#)
- [Strengthening mental health and wellness during COVID-19](#)

Stronger Minds

- [Free digital program for all Canadians — to support your mental well-being through the COVID-19 crisis](#)

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

- [Mental health and COVID-19 resources for health care workers](#)

Wellness Together Canada

- [Free digital program for all Canadians — to support your mental well-being through the COVID-19 crisis](#)
- [Mental Health and Substance Use Support](#)

World Health Organization

- [Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak](#)

Mental health services for mental health practitioners

Below are several mental health services that are being offered to mental health practitioners, free of charge. These services are offered across Ontario. It is recommended that an individual who is currently receiving mental health and addictions services contact their current service provider first. In addition, organizations may offer an employee assistance program to provide confidential, short-term counselling services for employees.

BounceBack®

- [BounceBack](#) or can be reached at [1-866-345-0224](#).

Canadian Mental Health Association

- [Here 4 Healthcare](#) provides many resources including tip sheets, exercises and additional links to supports for direct service providers

Canadian Psychological Association

- [List of registered psychology practitioners offering their services to front line health service providers at no cost](#)

ConnexOntario

- [ConnexOntario](#) or can be reached at 1-866-531-2600

Ontario COVID-19 Mental Health Network

- Volunteer network [facilitating pro bono mental health services for health care workers impacted by COVID-19](#)

Ontario Shores

- [Health Care Worker Assist](#) offers a variety of direct support services for health care workers who are experiencing increased feelings of anxiety and depression

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