

SUMMARY REPORT

Recognizing the Mental Health Needs of an
Essential Workforce

Being a Direct Support Professional During
Pandemic Recovery

Azrieli Adult Neurodevelopmental Centre

Report Authors

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What is the study about?

Azrieli Adult Neurodevelopmental Centre scientists have been examining the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) in Ontario annually since the summer of 2020. This is a summary of the findings of the 2023 survey.

What did we do?

In June 2023, we asked DSPs to complete a brief survey about their mental health in the workplace. The survey focused on collecting information about the following:

- **Current working conditions**
- **Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on DSPs and people with developmental disabilities**
- **Their current mental health status**
- **Accessibility of mental health supports**
- **Recommendations on how to best support DSPs in their work moving forward.**

Whom did we hear from?

We heard from 603 DSPs from across Ontario. Those who participated in 2023 shared a similar profile to respondents from previous years:

- **83% identified as women**
- **58% were aged 45 years and under**
- **Respondents came from across all regions in Ontario**
- **One-quarter of DSPs had five years of experience or less, while one-third of DSPs had over 20 years of experience in the field.**

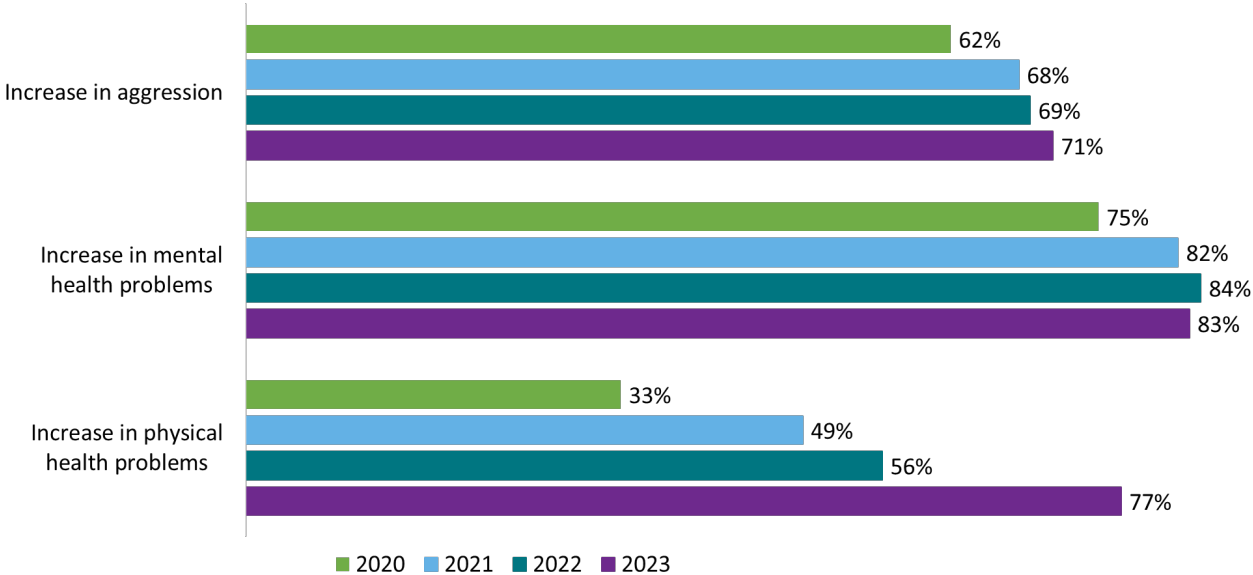
What did we learn?

DSPs reported that people with developmental disabilities and staff in the sector continue to experience many challenges that impact their health and wellbeing.

Challenges experienced by people with developmental disabilities

In 2023, staff report observing increased aggression, mental health, and physical health problems in the people with developmental disabilities they support. Importantly rates are continuing to rise as compared to previous years.

Figure 1: Observed changes in clients according to DSPs



DSP mental health

DSPs are also continuing to report high levels of moderate to severe distress. In 2023, 35.5% of DSP staff experienced moderate to severe distress. This finding is consistent with results from the 2021 and 2022 surveys, revealing a trend over a 3-year period where more than a third of respondents are experiencing high levels of psychological distress.

Loss, grief, and trauma

The following section highlights the experiences of DSPs in their workplaces and describes the impact of ***working through collective loss, grief, and trauma during the pandemic and beyond.***

In 2023, DSPs supported people with developmental disabilities through illness and provided support for end-of-life care. Results highlight that:

- **29% of staff supported a client with COVID in hospital**
- **13% of staff supported a client with COVID who died**
- **67% of staff supported a client in hospital for other reasons**
- **39% of staff supported a client who died for other reasons.**

Of those DSPs who experienced a client death since the pandemic, 98% reported that this significantly impacted their mental health, while only 9% received grief support from their agency.

Beyond the direct loss of life and the associated grief experienced by staff, DSPs also described in-depth the impact of working through cumulative loss during the last three years, which included ***loss of connections, loss of routine and supports, and a loss of autonomy and choice.***

Loss of connections: DSPs highlighted significant shifts in approaches to care and the need for more hands-off, indirect and depersonalized approaches. As a result, some staff felt that they were less connected to the people they supported. One DSP shared that prior to the pandemic, “[care] was more nurturing and [they] were able to sit close to [the people they supported] or hold their hand”.

Participants also identified the difficultly clients faced in ***‘losing connections’*** with the outside world. In the words of one DSP, “at the beginning of the pandemic, we were the only contact our individuals had besides phone or video calls with their families”. The prolonged lack of opportunities for connection and socialization resulted in many DSPs observing an increase in mental health issues, leading them to step in to “help fill [an] emotional gap”. However, it was difficult for staff to

support clients' mental health concerns as staff "didn't have any support [themselves]".

Loss of routine and supports: Despite being in pandemic recovery, the ongoing disruptions to programs and services continued to create a loss of routine and normalcy for clients. This in turn made work a lot more challenging for DSPs. One DSP noted: "there is less to do now [and] it is a lot harder to help our supported people socialize, work, shop, complete banking and medical appointments". The drastic impact on clients' ability to engage in meaningful activities necessitated an adjustment to how DSPs approached their work.

Loss of autonomy and choice: DSPs shared that the people they supported lost the ability to make decisions about their daily lives. As one participant described it, "it's different when they are stuck in the house more and feel as if they have no control over what they can do. It changed [the people we support] and our level of connection with them". Furthermore, some DSPs felt a personal loss of rights and the opportunity to make choices in how they worked, with one respondent stating, "I had my rights infringed upon due to COVID mandates".

DSP workplaces

DSPs were asked about their current work environments as well as any current challenges they were experiencing at work. Similar to reports in 2021 and 2022, the most frequently reported challenges were:

- **Lack of staff coverage (77%)**
- **Increased workload (57%)**
- **Supporting clients who experienced declines during the pandemic (e.g., daily living skills, health) (57%).**

DSPs used a variety of strategies to cope with their stress. Below are the highest-ranking strategies from respondents:

- **76% maintained social connections with family and friends**
- **70% engaged in meaningful activities and hobbies**

- **66% practiced self-care**
- **48% practiced mindfulness.**

Although staff recognized the importance of mental health supports, nearly half (44%) encountered barriers in accessing such supports. The primary obstacles reported were financial barriers (30%), limited time to seek supports (21%), and long wait times (21%).

When asked about the availability of an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) at their organization, 67% of DSPs reported that their agency has an EAP provider. Of those, 73% of DSPs indicated that they found it helpful. However, many staff expressed concerns with EAP, including:

- **Limited number of covered sessions (33%)**
- **Insufficient time to use the resources (24%)**
- **Unhelpful resources (10%)**
- **Lack of culturally competent approaches to care (6%).**

In 2020, our report emphasized the need for increased agency support for staff. When asked specifically in 2021, 56% of DSPs indicated feeling supported by their agency, however this percentage decreased to 46% in 2022 and dropped further to 35% in 2023. Alarmingly, 67% of DSPs indicated that they had considered leaving their agency sometimes or often in the past year. DSPs were invited to elaborate on their reasons for leaving and/or staying in their jobs.

DSP perspectives on reasons for leaving their jobs

DSPs shared that they had considered leaving their jobs in the past year for various reasons including **challenging work conditions, insufficient financial compensation, and issues with workplace culture and leadership.**

Challenging work conditions: DSPs highlighted increased workload and a shortage of staff as significant challenges. One individual described it as “[feeling] like the work is never-ending”. A lack of staffing resulted in an inability to leave work when shifts were completed, creating a feeling of being “stuck”. One participant also said

that the lack of staffing impacted the quality of care provided, leading to feelings of guilt.

Insufficient financial compensation: Many DSPs identified financial concerns and the stress of keeping up with the cost of living and financial obligations. Insufficient compensation was a primary factor, with one participant stating, “the main reason is the increase in the cost of living and inadequate pay at my job. It is hard to make ends meet”. Respondents also raised concerns about job security and the availability of benefits, with one DSP stating, “I do not have job security. The industry feels like it's being held together by strings and [that it] will unravel at any moment”.

Workplace culture and leadership issues: Many DSPs continued to report that they felt undervalued and underappreciated by their organizations. Some felt that their concerns were not being heard while others felt there was a lack of consideration for their mental health. One participant expressed frustration with Management, stating, “[they don’t know] what it’s like working front line every day and the amount of physical and mental strain it puts on us”. Another noted, “I feel little when I express my mental health to my workplace management; it sets me back because they make you feel uncomfortable when calling in”.

DSP perspectives on reasons to stay in their roles

DSPs also provided many reasons that motivated them to stay in their roles, with ***relationships and organizational support*** identified as key factors.

Relationships: Strong relationships with supervisors, coworkers, and the people they supported, especially those with developmental disabilities, were all listed as compelling reasons to stay in their jobs. Participants expressed a sense of responsibility for providing care to their clients, as well as joy and love in their interactions with clients. One respondent said they stayed for “the clients we work with, their faces when they see you, the joy in their eyes”. The personal fulfillment derived from these working relationships and the meaningful nature of the work were motivating factors to stay. One participant stated, “I get filled with joyous pride and satisfaction knowing I can be a small help to increase the quality of living for those I care for”.

Organizational support: Participants identified various organizational supports as reasons to stay, including benefits, pension plans, competitive pay, opportunities for professional development, and sufficient vacation and sick time. Contextual factors within their work environments, such as desirable hours, job and schedule flexibility, convenient work locations, manageable workloads, and a positive work atmosphere or culture, were all cited as reasons to remain in their current roles.

Moving forward

When asked what would be most helpful to them moving forward in their work with less distress, a majority of DSPs selected the following:

- **Improved financial compensation (79%)**
- **Extra staff coverage (62%)**
- **Time-off (58%)**
- **Improved communication from management (52%).**

What does this mean?

This year's survey provided us critical insights into the current mental health and challenges faced by DSPs in the workplace. Despite an end to the acute phase of the pandemic, the wide availability of vaccines, and the resumption of many activities, DSPs continue to report the same degree of psychological distress as in prior years. The findings from this report clearly indicate the need to invest in the health and wellbeing of DSPs as well as the people with developmental disabilities they support. While this call to action is not new, it has been renewed and strengthened by the results of the 2023 survey. Below are recommendations for potential next steps to action this work.

Investment in staff recruitment and retention: The ongoing staffing crisis in the developmental disability sector, exacerbated during the pandemic and continuing into the pandemic recovery phase, underscores the need for intensified investment in staff recruitment and retention strategies, including competitive compensation and benefits. DSPs are reporting increased difficulty in their work because the

people they support do not appear to be thriving and the requested supports, such as access to additional qualified staff, have not been put in place.

Trauma-informed approaches: Recognizing and addressing the cumulative impact of pandemic loss and grief on both staff and clients is critical. To improve staff morale and retention, organizations should continue to focus on health promotion and wellness initiatives, as well as invest in trauma-informed approaches to provide training and resources to support staff in managing loss and grief.

Enhanced mental health support: Given the ongoing psychological distress reported by DSPs, more needs to be done to support their mental health at an organizational level. This could include activities such as expanding access to counseling services, creating a supportive workplace culture where there is space to openly talk about mental health, enacting policies that support mental health, supporting mental health promotion activities and facilitating access to mental health resources.

Adapting to the current environment: Acknowledging that the current work environment for DSPs has changed post-pandemic is an important step. Annual training, as well as support programs need to be adapted to meet current workplace challenges. This commitment will ensure DSPs are equipped with the needed skills and resources to tackle even the most complex of daily tasks.

Addressing the mental health of people with developmental disabilities: Due to the essential nature of the work that DSPs do to support the daily lives of people with developmental disabilities, and the relationships that this support is built upon, it is not surprising that DSPs appear to be impacted and concerned by the distress experienced by the people they support. It is essential that mental health promotion efforts attend to **BOTH** the health of staff and people with developmental disabilities. As noted in these results, failure to attend to both groups' needs has the potential for significant mental health consequences, and the risk of continued high rates of distress noted in staff and people with developmental disabilities.



Conclusion

These recommendations build on those from previous reports and provides an important longitudinal lens in which to assess the mental wellbeing of this workforce over time. The continued and evolving challenges reported by DSPs call for more intensive and targeted efforts to support DSPs in their roles. The persistence of the psychological distress in this year's survey also suggests continued monitoring to assess the effectiveness of implemented strategies.

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