

Mental Health and Coping in the time of COVID-19: Perspectives of Direct Support Professionals in Canada

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BACKGROUND

Direct support professionals (DSPs) are known to experience significant work-related stress.¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in additional and unique stressors for DSPs as a result of changing roles, conditions and the ongoing need to implement public health measures. Currently there is limited understanding of how DSPs are coping and their current mental health status.

There is an urgent need to go beyond broader health initiatives, and recognize the unique conditions, concerns and needs of DSPs in this sector.

The **aim** of this study was to understand the mental health needs of DSPs in the Developmental Services sector during COVID-19, and how these needs have changed over the pandemic.

METHODS

An online survey was distributed July 2nd to August 10th, 2020 (T1) and again November 20th to January 8th, 2021 (T2).

We conducted a targeted analysis of both open-ended and closed-ended responses related to identified concerns, needs and supports from the perspective of DSPs. Frequency counts were completed for open-ended responses and descriptive statistics were used for closed ended responses.

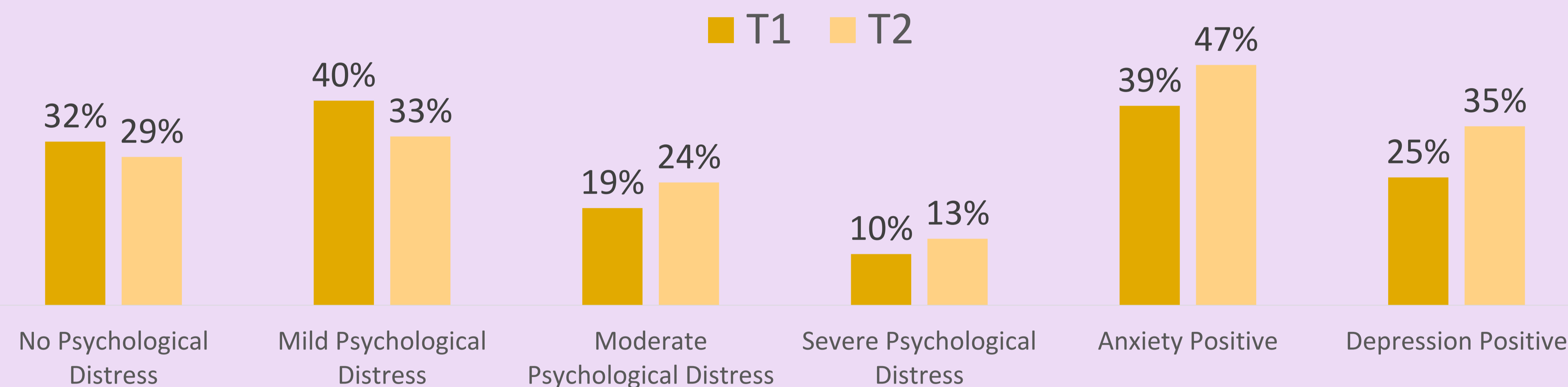
RESULTS

Participants were full and part-time workers employed within the Developmental Services sector in Canada. 868 DSPs participated at T1 and 170 at T2. The participants of T2 were largely reflective of the first cohort.

1. Gray-Staey, n.l. A., & Muramatsu, N. (2011). Work stress, burnout, and social and personal resources among direct care workers. *Research in developmental disabilities*, 32(3), 1065–1074. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2011.01.025>

Impact of COVID-19 on Staff Mental Health

Psychological distress, Depression, Anxiety Cut-Offs



Top Concerns

Time 1 – Summer 2020 (N= 256)

- **Safe Work Environment (54.7%)** e.g., Insufficient IPAC measures, exposure to chemicals and behavioural safety
- **Workload (45.9%)** e.g., Scheduling problems, staffing and training, new roles and job security
- **Social Support at Work (43.2%)** e.g., Need for peer support and organization/support from management

Time 2 – Winter 2020/21 (N= 155)

- **The ability to engage in preferred meaningful activities (66%)** e.g., Social activity, physical activity, hobbies
- **Access to family and friends (56%)** e.g., Time with family and friends, beyond what COVID-19 protocols allow
- **Workload (51%)** e.g., Scheduling problems, staffing and training, new roles and job security

Needs and Supports

Time 1 – Summer 2020 (N= 261)

- **Feeling supported in the workplace (37%)** e.g., having a safe workplace, better communication and support from management, peer support and team check-ins, access to funded health supports and therapies
- **Workload Changes (20%)** e.g., the need for extra staff coverage, time-off, and a return to normal responsibilities
- **Financial Compensation (17%)** e.g., to recognize the additional time, stress and responsibilities taken on during the pandemic
- **The ability to engage in meaningful activities and hobbies (10%) and therapeutic interventions for self-care (10%)**

Time 2 – Winter 2020/21 (N= 168)

- **Being able to see family and friends (65%)**
- **Financial Compensation (60%) e.g., to recognize** the additional time, stress and responsibilities taken on during the pandemic
- **Workload Changes (51%)** e.g., need for extra staff coverage, the need for time-off, a return to normal responsibilities
- **The ability to engage in meaningful activities and hobbies (46%)**
- **Feeling supported in the workplace*** e.g., better communication and support from management (37%), peer support and team check-ins (34%), access to funded health supports and therapies (33%)

DISCUSSION

Having access to a safe work environment was the top concern reported in Summer 2020. Six months later, one quarter of participants reported this as a concern, potentially as a result of improved IPAC measures.

Feeling supported in the workplace remained a consistent finding for this sector, which aligns with our understanding of the pre-pandemic needs of DSPs.

Importantly, we observed a notable increase in staff concerns relating to people with developmental disabilities' need to engage in meaningful activities and access to family and friends through unwavering restrictions. The impact on the health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities has remained important over time.

Recognition of this group as an essential workforce should include accessible mental health and continued organizational supports. Given the nature of this work, a greater emphasis on the mental health needs and well-being of the population they support is needed.

NEXT STEPS

The survey will be re-administered Spring 2021, which will reflect just under a year of working in these conditions.

Results will highlight the changing needs of this essential workforce, inform the development of targeted mental health interventions, and identify what is needed as we transition to a post-pandemic world.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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