



Long-Term Care Worker Mental Health: The View from the Bottom

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Long-term care work and workers

- intense, physically taxing
- Workers manage complex resident populations including combative behaviours of dementia from residents, such as being yelled at and hit (Knopp-Sihota et al., 2017; Titley et al., 2023).
- accompanied by limited pay and advancement opportunities (Bethell et al., 2017).
- predominantly women (90%)
- many of whom are born outside of Canada (Estabrooks et al., 2015)

Framings for how to better understand and respond to workers

- Syed (2021) explains a **feminist political economy** lens for thinking about how care work is perceived as unskilled and innate because it is primarily executed by women, which impacts the compensation that care workers receive.
- **epistemic injustice** (Fricker, 2007): “a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower” (p. 1).

Care aides distinctly susceptible to being overlooked

- Stelfox's (2022) characterization of LTC care aides as "voiceless other".
- Arrived at from analyzing representations of pandemic deaths in LTC and she concluded that although LTC care aides have "unique knowledge of death and dying in LTC, namely through that of touch and practical wisdom", their voices are often overlooked in favor of the "testimony of experts" (2022, p.14).

Worker accounts: needs and recommendations



Who did we hear from....

- **Data Collection:**

- Interviews with 75 LTC workers and leaders
- “Moral distress” survey with 484 LTC workers and leaders from BC, Alberta and Ontario
- Average age of survey respondents: Approx. 48 years
- Cruise, C., Celis, S. & Lashewicz, B. (2024). ‘I haven’t really gone through something like that’: Young long-term care workers’ experiences of working during the Covid-19 pandemic. *WORK: A journal of Assessment, Prevention and Rehabilitation*. DOI: [10.3233/WOR-230437](https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-230437)

Pandemic lessons

Knowledge translation video *We needed help, but we were supposed to be the help*” ([Watch here on Youtube](#))

Purpose:

Use an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991) to examine how worker distress risks can be shaped by gendered and cultural social locations and to help us create supports that are gender, culture and age sensitive.



We asked about “moral distress”

- results from guilt and/or shame that accompanies knowing what is needed, yet being unable to do what is needed owing to **constraints** outside one’s control (Dean et al., 2020)
- compared to individually focused concepts such as burnout, moral injury locates the source of problems in the structures and processes in which individuals are immersed.

Findings: sources of moral distress ¹⁰



- 64% of 484 survey respondents reported increased moral distress at work during the pandemic; symptoms experienced at least once a week included:
 - feeling frustrated or angry (40%);
 - feeling guilt or like a failure (26.3%);
 - feeling powerless (34.7%);
 - feelings physically exhausted (58.5%);

59% of respondents did not get enough sleep in a month



This surprised us...

- Of the 464 people who completed the survey up to the open-ended items, a total of :
 - 364 (78%) commented in response to question 1 (re: communication at work);
 - 323 (70%) commented in response to question 2 (re: mental health resource needs);
 - 379 (82%) commented in response to question 3 (employer provided support needs)



Stories of moral distress

- *Just the fear was debilitating...it was hard because you have your colleagues and they're all so checked out and they're angry. (Danika, Occupational Therapist, AB)*
- *We're yes people. We're helpers, and we don't put ourselves first. We don't. Until sometimes it's too late. I've actually watched my boss burnout...(Tyler, Director of Care, AB)*



Conveyed passion and agency yet needed help:

- Aggression de-escalation
- Transparent communication
- Appreciation; being heard
- Staffing levels



Worker recommendations

1: Prevention and control

- PPE, sanitation, and screening
- Vaccination and testing

2: LTC organization processes

- Staffing
- Communication and information
- **Management and leadership**

Management and leadership theme elaborated...

1. Frontlines stretched to the limits
2. Tremendous responsibility for leaders
3. Frontline workers feel abandoned
4. Leaders working behind the scenes
5. “Suits to scrubs”: leaders and workers together

- *And then when we worked in tandem...I got to really see and appreciate their roles...even in a building, you get so caught up in administrative work that you become a bit disconnected. So, it was really nice to be a front-line nurse, basically... just doing whatever needed to be done during that shift. Whether it's feeding residents, or helping with care, or giving meds, that sort of thing. (Tyler, Director of Care, AB)*
- *The management team definitely tried really hard to show solidarity and support...our administrator right now is really, really doing his best. So he even wouldn't take weekends off necessarily. He would work the same kind of crazy shift schedule that all of the PSWs and nurses and floor cleaning staff would be working, and same activities as well. (Elizabeth, Activity Aide, Screener, ON)*



Worker recommendations

3: LTC worker mental health

- Counselling and **group sessions**
- Time off and compensation
- Destressing resources/activities

Standard EAP/mental health response



Let's move closer to mental health as shared responsibility



Worker recommendations

4: Beyond LTC facilities

- Systems, structures, and society
- Government and health authorities
- News and media

Role of media...

- Roya, a Comfort Care Aide, expressed that people, particularly in the media, did not understand the true experience of working in LTC, and that it was unfair for the media to spread criticism of workers who were trying their best.
- Catherine, a dietician, described the media criticisms as “heartbreaking”.

Aligning with findings of others:

- White et al.'s (2021): LTC workers (n=152) perceived that during the pandemic, healthcare workers in hospital settings received more support and respect from the public than LTC workers.
- Further, workers felt vilified by the public blame and scrutiny directed towards LTC
- Castillo et al.'s (2022) content analysis of social media posts found content of social media posts about LTC shifted away from information-seeking and systemic issues and toward deficiencies in LTC's responses to the pandemic.

Push for more collaborative address in the workplace

- Impetus and opportunities for connections and demonstrations of vulnerability
- Promote mental health as everyone's issue and everyone's responsibility



Thank-you and Acknowledgements

- Funders:
 - Canadian Institutes for Health Research/Healthcare Excellence Canada
 - Alberta Ministry of Labour and Immigration

- Project Teams:
 - John Shyluk, Family caregiver
 - Navjot Virk/Jenna Naylor, The Brenda Strafford Foundation
 - Cherryll de la Cruz, Lifestyle Options
 - Lorraine Venturato, Faculty of Nursing
 - PhD trainees: Nick Boettcher; Kimberly Manalili
 - MPH and BHSc. Trainees: Cera Cruise; Sofia Celis
 - Mona Aboumrad and Britney Glowinski, Project coordinators