



# Burnt out, overwhelmed, and unrecognized

How leaders can support psychological safety in long-term care

By Scott Mitchell

**T**here is an urgent need to protect the mental health and well-being of team members in long-term care. Frontline workers face heavy physical and emotional demands, time pressures, bullying, violence, racism, and a workplace culture that often devalues the role of care providers.

These conditions contribute to high rates of stress, injury and disability – factors associated with absenteeism, high staff turnover and recruitment challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has only magnified these issues and highlighted the need for change in Ontario’s long-term care system.

The Ontario Centres for Learning, Research and Innovation in Long-Term Care (CLRI) at the Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging has launched a new initiative to help promote and protect the mental health of all team members. The Workplace Mental Health in LTC project will support homes across the province to adopt the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace.

The Ontario CLRI is collaborating with OLTCA and other provincial associations, mental health experts, occupational health and safety organizations and related stakeholders

to develop a province-wide support system that enables long-term care homes to take practical steps to prioritize workplace mental health.

## Why mental health?

Working in long-term care is psychologically demanding. Emerging research shows that frontline workers are experiencing high levels of depression, anxiety, grief and post-traumatic stress. According to the Ontario government’s Long-Term Care Staffing Study, team members are “feeling burnt out, overwhelmed, and unrecognized.” The study points out that “poor working conditions are a key contributing factor to staff

dissatisfaction, turnover and the overall poor perception of long-term care as a career choice” (Ministry of Long-Term Care, July 30, 2020).

**Each organization's needs and chosen pathway towards a healthier workplace may be different, but there are a few common steps that experts recommend**

On the other hand, “Workplaces with a positive approach to psychological health and safety are better able to recruit and retain talent, have improved employee engagement, enhanced productivity, [and] are more creative and innovative.... Other positive impacts include a reduction of several key workplace issues including the risk of conflict, grievances, turnover, disability, injury rates, absenteeism and performance, or morale problems” (CSA Group, 2013).

**Adopting the Standard can help long-term care leaders to:**

- Identify and eliminate workplace hazards that pose a risk of psychological harm;
- Assess and control workplace risks that cannot be eliminated (for example, stressors due to organizational change or reasonable job demands);
- Implement structures, policies and practices that support psychological health and safety in the workplace; and
- Foster a culture that promotes and protects mental health.

Mental health issues account for one-third or more of short-term and long-term disability claims in Canada. Mental illness–related absenteeism and presenteeism (when an employee comes to work despite being sick and their performance suffers as a result) costs the economy \$6.3 billion annually (Deloitte, 2019).

Ultimately, a mentally healthy and resilient long-term care workforce would be more equipped to provide quality care for residents. Recognizing that “staffing issues are complex and

systemic in nature,” the authors of the Long-Term Care Staffing Study focus on five priority areas: increasing staffing levels; improving the culture of long-term care; improving workload and working conditions; effective leadership and access to specialized expertise; and attracting the right people and providing opportunities for learning and growth. The report highlights the need to protect workers from physical, mental and emotional risk, and urges the long-term care sector to adopt the National Standard.

**The National Standard**

The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace describes how organizations can take a systematic approach to improve workplace wellness. The Standard describes

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**You have more influence than you think:**  
 Psychosocial factors long-term leaders can affect at work:

- Organizational culture
- Psychological support
- Leadership
- Civility and respect
- Psychological demands
- Growth and development
- Recognition and reward
- Involvement and influence
- Workload management
- Team member engagement
- Work/life balance
- Physical protection
- Psychological protection
- Moral distress
- Psychological self-care

a range of psychosocial factors (including organizational culture, workload management, and psychological support) that can be influenced by leaders and team members in the workplace.

How do long-term care homes put the Standard into practice? Each organization’s needs and chosen pathway towards a healthier workplace may be different, but there are a few common steps that experts recommend.

Begin by establishing a foundation, which means learning about the Standard and ensuring that senior leadership is committed to change. Next, take time to assess what your organization is already doing to support psychological health and safety. Identify opportunities to improve and create an action plan that takes into account your organization’s current constraints and competing demands. Lastly, monitor your results and sustain the process.

The good news is that there are many evidence-based resources, planning guides and training programs now available to support long-term care homes that are ready to adopt the National Standard.

Most importantly, long-term care homes should understand that

adopting the National Standard is not a simple checklist or a one-time program, but rather a journey of continuous improvement. Leaders in long-term care should focus on the process itself and ensure meaningful participation by team members every step of the way.

The Ontario CLRI will be offering support and training opportunities for leaders, educators and team members starting this summer. Stay tuned for details about how your home can get involved. To learn more about the National Standard and find practical resources to get your home started on the journey towards workplace wellness, you can also visit [clri-ltc/mentalhealth](http://clri-ltc/mentalhealth). 

**Scott Mitchell** is a Knowledge Broker at the Ontario CLRI at the Research Institute for Aging (RIA) in Waterloo. Prior to joining the RIA in 2018, Mitchell was Director of Knowledge Transfer at the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario, where he developed programs to promote peer support, social inclusion, accessibility and mental health in the workplace.