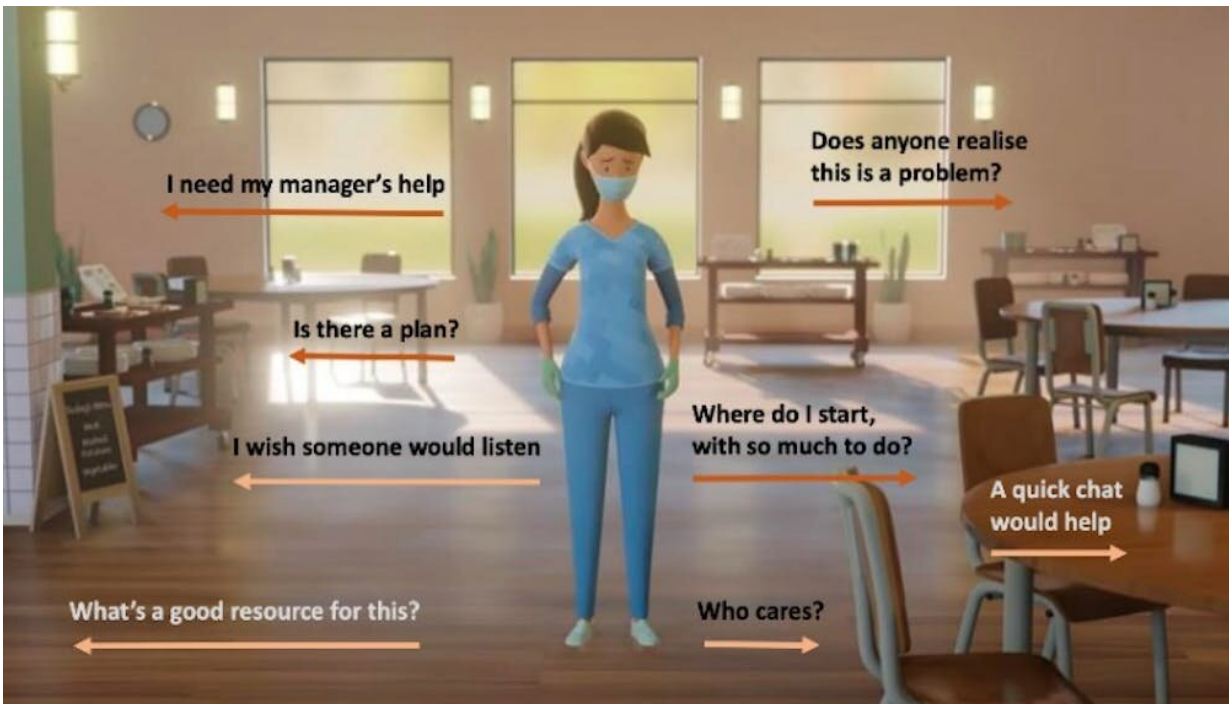


# Opinion: Long-term care workers' mental health is a shared, long-term responsibility

June 7 2023, by Bonnie Lashewicz and Pauline McDonagh Hull



LTC workers shared ideas for mitigating moral distress at work, and these focused on improved communication, collaboration and support. Credit: Bonnie Lashewicz and Pauline McDonagh Hull

As COVID-19 fades from public consciousness, workers in long-term care (LTC) are at risk of falling out of sight and out of mind.

Beyond the [death tally headlines](#) that [propelled them into the spotlight](#)

during the first waves of COVID-19, LTC workers had to manage unprecedented pandemic demands—and encountered correspondingly [extreme mental health challenges](#).

These [skilled workers](#) spend their days and nights at the side of residents who are navigating some of life's most profound experiences, including incapacitation, illness and death.

The unglamorous nature of this sector invokes topics [many would prefer not to think about](#), but it is vital we keep shining a light on LTC workers' needs to ensure that lessons from the pandemic are acted upon.

## **Recommendations for support**

Collaborating with LTC workers throughout Canada, our Calgary-based team of researchers, which includes those with first-hand LTC experience, aims to do just that. Through [Canadian Institutes of Health Research](#) funding, we produced a two-minute video animation to communicate the mental health needs of the LTC workforce, and are developing a mental health app tailored to LTC workers, funded by the Alberta Ministry of Labour and Immigration.

We also published recommendations for how organizations across Canada can support LTC workers, in a [new report](#) commissioned by [Healthcare Excellence Canada](#) (HEC).

Our research to better understand and support LTC workers entailed in-depth interviews with 75 LTC workers at LTC organizations in Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario.

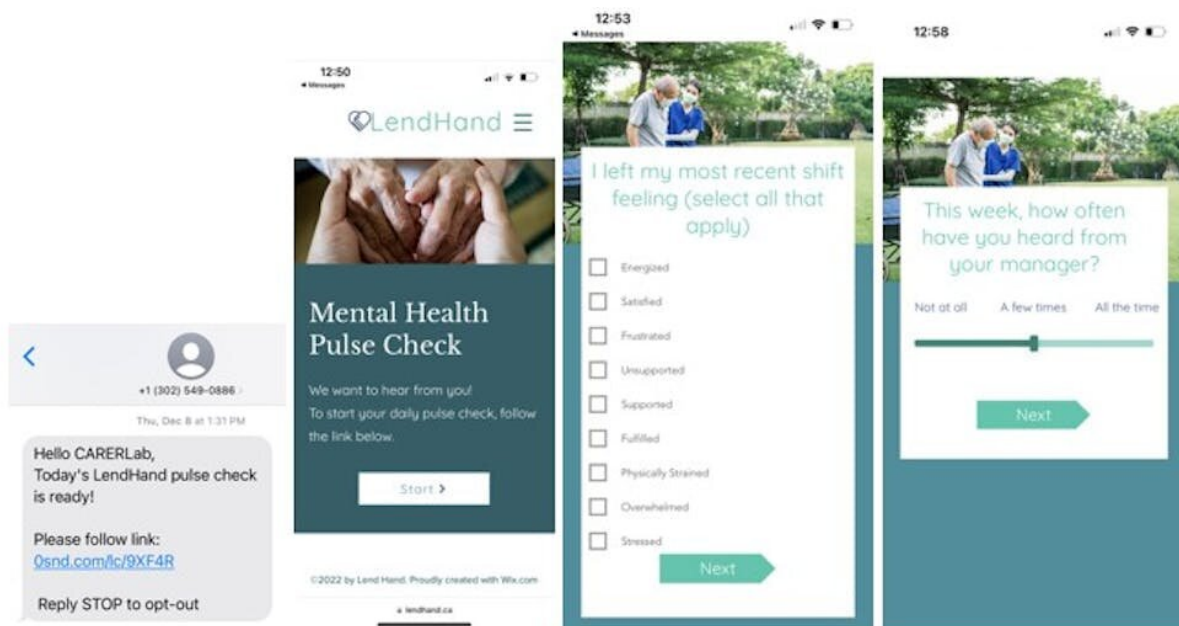
We asked about their mental health experiences in relation to their work, and we heard stories of strength and resilience along with stories of distress and fear. Our two-minute animation, "We needed help, but we

were supposed to be the help," encapsulates these responses.

## Work can provoke moral distress

We further focused our research by conducting an online [moral distress](#) survey to which 484 LTC workers responded.

[Moral distress](#) occurs when staff [know what needs to be done, but feel powerless to do it](#). We learned about a range of morally distressing aspects of LTC work during the pandemic, such as being unable to respond to residents' needs for attention, and being powerless to follow the wishes of their family members.



Example screenshots of some early features of our LTC app when accessed via phone. Credit: Bonnie Lashewicz and Pauline McDonagh Hull

These morally distressing experiences left workers feeling helpless and isolated, and we identified an immediate need for personal, tangible support on site.

## **Reducing moral distress through workplace community**

Importantly, workers shared ideas for mitigating moral distress at work, and these focused on improved communication, collaboration and support. We are now creating a user-centered mental health app that is being developed alongside LTC workers through participation in research focus groups.

Mental health apps can be a quick and effective way for improving user well-being, and are an [increasingly accessible, cost-effective workplace tool for employers](#). Our LTC app will include features for improving communication, such as real-time links with colleagues and managers about their mental health. We also plan to include peer support capability, plus peer and manager problem-solving features.

One of our goals is to shift away from standard employee mental health approaches, which focus on individual actions outside of the workplace, such as meditation, eating and sleep habits. Instead, we want to emphasize that mental health in LTC is a shared responsibility.

By targeting the need for workplace communication, collaboration and support, our app will encourage proactive workplaces to initiate actions that have wider and shared responsibility for completion.

## Paths to Strengthen Long-term Care Worker Resilience

We interviewed long-term care and assisted living workers about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, and identified eight workplace practices to help others prepare plans for future pandemic and crisis response.



- Be on the ground, accessible, and act as an advocate for your team to positively impact their experience.**  
 Leadership and management can support workers' mental health during a crisis.
- Cooperate, as it can be a source of strength.**  
 Working under intense strain can provoke tensions in the workplace, but can also propel appreciation and support for co-workers.
- Make every effort to include essential care partners in care, even during crisis conditions.**  
 Care isn't only a physical act; emotional and spiritual care matter greatly and require inclusion of essential care partners.
- Prioritize peer support resources.**  
 Workers often feel other healthcare workers can uniquely understand what they experience at work. Create an environment conducive to peer support by ensuring staff have the time and opportunity to demonstrate care for each other all while being mindful that providing peer support can be an added demand.
- Communicate often, and in multiple formats, to create more learning opportunities for workers.**  
 During crisis situations, communication is ever changing yet this can be used to promote an atmosphere of mutual teaching rather than policing.
- Recognize worker skills and sacrifice.**  
 Workers need and value feeling appreciated by society and by their workplaces. Workers need encouragement and support in caring for their mental health, both in and outside the workplace.
- Make resources for long-term care workers transparent and equally accessible.**  
 Ensure frontline workers have the same access to information or resources as management and allied health professionals.
- Provide adequate resources to help prevent moral distress.**  
 Staffing shortages and inadequate personal protective equipment leads to worker distress and creates conditions that increase vulnerability to outbreaks and reduced standards of care.

**Learn more**  
 More details on what we learned through interviewing workers can be found in the [Staffing in Long-Term Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Insights, Lessons and Paths Forward executive summary](#). Learn how Healthcare Excellence Canada is supporting long-term care homes to work together to build better care with and for people and working in long-term care in Canada through the [Reimagining LTC program](#).

Healthcare Excellence Canada is an independent, not-for-profit charity funded primarily by Health Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Health Canada.



An infographic sets out recommended, actionable workplace practices suggested in a 2023 report on long-term care work. Credit: Bonnie Lashewicz and Pauline McDonagh Hull

## What more can LTC workplaces do?

During 2021 and 2022, the [Health Standards Organization](#) (HSO), a non-profit organization based in Ottawa, carried out a [public review](#) into LTC with the aim of creating new standards through consultation with residents, families, staff and stakeholders.

When the [final standard was published in January 2023](#), our team was gratified to see worker moral distress noted as a key consideration for enabling healthy, competent and resilient staff working under healthy conditions. We want our research to strengthen this push to effect real



change, and not only because this will improve the mental [health](#) of workers in LTC, but also for the downstream positive effect it will have on LTC residents.

With this aim, our research lab, the [Creating and Renewing Equity through Research Lab](#), [published our own report](#), commissioned by HEC, in May 2023.

"Paths to Strengthen Long-term Care Worker Resilience" reports the LTC worker ideas and feedback we collected, and sets out recommended, actionable [workplace](#) practices. These recommended paths are summarized in the infographic above. Going forward, it is critical that the [HSO standard](#) is implemented at all LTC workplaces across Canada, and that these workplaces have the provincial and federal support they need.

The COVID-19 pandemic may appear to be behind us, but for many [workers](#) in LTC, the pressure has not fully abated and concerns about future crises remain. As the director of care at one LTC home in Alberta told us: "We're yes people. We're helpers, and we don't put ourselves first. We don't. Until sometimes it's too late."

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Opinion: Long-term care workers' mental health is a shared, long-term responsibility (2023, June 7) retrieved 30 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-06-opinion-long-term-workers-mental-health.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.