

## Mental Health and Wellness Tips for Members During the Pandemic

This *Bulletin* provides members with information about protecting and improving their overall wellness during the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

### The Meaning of Wellness

Wellness is more than keeping physically and mentally fit. Many components help support a member's sense of wellness. These can include: economic stability; intellectual stimulation; meaningful work opportunities; social networks; spirituality; and a connection to nature and the environment.

Even at the best of times, the demands of working in a school environment make it challenging for members to maintain an optimum level of wellness. During the pandemic, the challenge to stay well has become even more difficult.

### The Challenge to Maintain Mental Health and Wellness During the Pandemic

The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) released a report in November 2020 called [Teacher Mental Health Check-In Survey](#). The report found that 46% of members surveyed across the country are reporting concerns about their own mental health and well-being as a result of the pandemic. More than 72% of members reported that meeting personal and professional expectations during the pandemic is "very draining" or "severely draining."

The CTF report confirms that many factors are affecting education workers' mental health during the pandemic:

- social distancing and masking requirements make it more difficult to connect with students and collaborate with colleagues;
- physical workspaces, either at home or at work, are challenging to navigate;
- access to the resources needed to work online effectively (e.g., technological devices, printers, reliable Internet, etc.) are limited;
- providing a positive learning experience for students has become much more difficult;
- education workers are concerned about the impact of the pandemic on their students' emotional health and well-being;
- education workers are frustrated because they feel they cannot meet the high professional standards they have set for themselves; and
- as COVID-19 transmission continues, education workers have health concerns for themselves, their families, and their communities.

A [December 2020 report](#) released by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) found that anxiety and depression among Canadians, in general, has increased during the pandemic. For example, the CAMH report found that 24% of women and 18.9% of men reported "feeling depressed occasionally or most of the time."

<sup>1</sup> Please note that the information in this *Bulletin* is not a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified medical health provider if you have questions about a medical condition or your overall health and wellness.

## Striving for Balance Rather than Perfection

The stress of simultaneously juggling multiple roles at work and home during the pandemic makes it difficult to achieve a sense of personal wellness. Redefining the concept of 'work-life balance' can help. Consider these tips to stay healthy and productive:

- Rather than attempting to find balance between work, personal needs, and responsibilities on any given day, achieving balance could be measured over a longer period of time. For example, it may be possible to find an appropriate balance in maintaining social connections with friends and family on a weekly or monthly basis, rather than trying to achieve balance on a daily basis.
- Adjusting your daily "to-do" list could free up time for personal pursuits. Give yourself permission to let go of non-essential tasks and responsibilities, on occasion.
- Setting clear boundaries between work and personal pursuits can help. Establish a clear start and end time to your work day, and reclaim personal time by limiting weekend work.

## Making Time for Exercise and Sleep

The CTF's November 2020 report found that 38% of those surveyed were "infrequently" finding time during the day to be physically active and that 36% were "infrequently" having sufficient sleep each night. Not getting enough physical activity increases the likelihood of heart disease, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, type 2 diabetes and obesity. Sleeping poorly, or not getting enough sleep, can adversely affect decision making, concentration, attention, and patience.

[\*Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines\*](#) developed by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP) suggest that most healthy adults between the ages of 18 and 64 should participate in at least 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous aerobic physical activities each week. It is also important to maintain a regular sleep routine that includes getting seven to nine hours of quality sleep on a regular basis.

Many apps and websites offer help to establish, monitor, and maintain fitness and exercise programs. For example:

- the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) and the [Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada](#) offer a number of tips to assist with getting and staying active;
- HealthLink BC provides information about [SMART goal setting](#) that can help with developing a personal fitness goal; and
- Ontario's University Health Network has created a resource called [Helpful Hints for Better Sleep](#) that helps identify sleep problems and provides tips on how to improve sleep.

## The Importance of Nutrition and Diet

[\*Canada's Food Guide\*](#) was recently revised to better align with current health and nutrition science. The *Guide* no longer focuses on portions and food groups. Instead, it recommends that:

- a variety of healthy foods should be eaten each day;
- water should be regularly consumed;
- a healthy diet includes a wide variety of vegetables and fruits, as well as whole grain foods and protein foods; and
- healthy eating habits include practices like cooking more often and eating meals with others, when possible.

## Managing Stress

Stress is a normal part of life, but experiencing too much stress can have a negative impact on your physical and mental health. Understanding the nature of stress can help you to manage stress. There are many reputable online sources to consult about stress, including:

- the Canadian Mental Health Association's [Stress](#);
- Anxiety Canada's [Coping with COVID-19](#);
- CAMH's [Coping with Stress and Anxiety](#); and
- the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada's [Reduce Stress](#).

Experts recommend a variety of strategies to help manage stress, such as: [meditation and mindfulness activities](#); [getting more sleep](#); [getting outside and enjoying nature](#); [starting a new hobby](#); [exercising](#); [using technology more selectively](#); and [maintaining supportive friendships and relationships](#).

## Supporting Mental Health

If you experience a deterioration in your mental health and well-being, it is important to seek advice from a medical professional. Additional supports can be found through the [Canadian Mental Health Association's community-based branches](#). Your employer may also provide access to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that offers confidential, short-term counselling services for employees to get help with personal difficulties, including depression and anxiety. Check with your employer as to whether it provides an EAP.

There are many virtual applications available to support mental and emotional wellness:

- [BounceBack](#) is managed by the Canadian Mental Health Association. It is a free program available for people aged 15 and older who are experiencing mild-to-moderate depression, anxiety, stress, or worry. Participants work with a coach over the phone to develop new skills to regain positive mental health. The site also includes online videos in several languages.
- [FeelingBetterNow](#) is a web-based mental health care program offered by the Ontario Teachers' Insurance Plan (OTIP). It is available to members with long-term disability coverage through OTIP.
- [MoodFX](#) is an interactive website developed, in part, by the University of British Columbia. It is designed to help people with depression and anxiety by providing simple and medically valid tools to monitor symptoms and functioning.
- [StressAssess](#) was developed by the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers. It features an online survey (or an app available for download) that assesses workplace stress levels. When the survey is completed, a score is provided along with advice and ideas on how to improve psychosocial health and safety.
- [TogetherAll](#) is an online, anonymous, peer-to-peer support community. Moderated by trained practitioners, participants can discuss concerns related to mental health and well-being. It also features resources and self-guided courses.
- [WellCan](#) is an app and website developed during the early stages of the pandemic by Canadian corporations and insurance providers in partnership with community and public sector agencies, including the Mental Health Commission of Canada. WellCan offers free mental health services through podcasts, tips, and articles on managing wellness. Resources for children and youth are available.
- The government of Ontario's website lists a wide range of [mental health, wellness and addictions support resources](#), including free online internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy providers available during the pandemic.

There are actions members can take during the pandemic to better manage their workload and support their wellness:

### Communication

- Set aside specific times to respond to work phone calls and emails, rather than communicating continuously throughout the day and evening.
- Make sure you are calm and rested when communicating with parents, guardians, caregivers, administrators, and your colleagues.
- Collaborate with colleagues when it might help save you (and them) additional time or effort.

### Organization

- Make your work space a welcoming location.
- Keep your work environment tidy and organized.
- Establish a procedure to manage electronic files and information more efficiently.

### Personal Care

- Make sure you eat nutritiously and stay hydrated.
- Make time to engage with colleagues a few times a week.
- Take breaks for short walks, to rest, and to exercise.

### Professional Boundaries

- Be cautious about what information you share with students and colleagues.
- Ensure your social media posts would be seen by your employer as professional in nature.
- Maintain communication with your principal about your program.

### Time Management

- Schedule and prioritize daily tasks so you are using your time efficiently.
- Be selective about how much time you spend on work tasks beyond the instructional day.
- Use a calendar to plan ahead for tasks that will require sustained or prolonged effort.
- Make sure that any extra responsibilities you offer to take on are manageable and won't make you feel overburdened.

Making even small changes in your work practices may provide improved balance in other areas of your life and can contribute to your overall feeling of wellness.

## **Additional Resources**

PRS Matters Bulletin #98 - [Member Mental Health - 2017](#)

PRS Matters Bulletin #67 - [Member Mental Health](#)

PRS Matters Bulletin #108 - [Supporting Members Throughout the Pandemic](#)

PRS Matters Bulletin #106 - [Workers Compensation for Chronic Mental Stress](#)

Government of Canada - [Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\)](#)

Government of Ontario - [COVID-19 in Ontario](#)

Government of Ontario - [Public Health Units](#)

RS:SM