

Being a Personal Support Worker

Today's society is rapidly aging. This has caused a greater strain on the health care industry. In today's job market Personal Support Workers are in high demand. Personal Support Workers play a very important role in the health care system. They provide in-home services and caring activities to older individuals who want to live independently.

The role of a Personal Support Worker requires a great array of skills and abilities. A lot of PSW's find the job very satisfying. Most feel lucky to play a small role in making someone else's life that much better. The emotional satisfaction of helping others is only one benefit to this line of work. Many PSW's learn to understand inter-related health care services, such as:

- Illness prevention
- Health promotion
- Diagnosis
- Treatment
- Rehabilitation

There are approximately 650 privately-run retirement residences in operation across the province. These residences house close to 40,000 residents. Of these residents, 73% have some form of mental disorder. Mental disorders include Alzheimer's disease and related dementias.

PSWs help care for the elderly, disabled, ill, and mentally disabled. This allows clients to live in their own homes or in residential care facilities instead of in long-term health facilities. These clients need more extensive personal and home care than family or friends can provide. Some PSWs work with families in which a parent is incapacitated, and small children need care. Others help discharged hospital patients who have relatively short-term needs.

PSWs provide housekeeping and routine personal care services. They clean clients' houses, do laundry, and change bed linens. They may plan meals (including special diets), shop for food, and cook. They may help clients get out of bed, bathe, dress, and groom. Some accompany clients to doctors' appointments or on other errands.

PSWs provide instruction and support to their patients. They may advise families and patients on nutrition, cleanliness, and household tasks. They may assist in toilet training a severely mentally handicapped child. Some just listen to clients talk about their problems.

In home health care agencies, a registered nurse, physical therapist, or social worker assigns specific duties and supervises PSWs. PSWs keep records of services performed and of clients' condition and progress. They report changes in the client's

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condition to the supervisor or case manager. In carrying out their work, PSWs cooperate with health care professionals, including registered nurses, therapists, and other medical staff.

2 As a Personal Support Worker your communication skills will be as important as any other skill that you will use. Communication with a mentally or physically impaired person can be difficult and frustrating. People, even professionals, may feel uncomfortable about talking to an impaired individual because they are not sure what will be understood. Your communication skills will help you get the results you want, including cooperation, joint decision making, and finding solutions to difficult issues. No matter what type of client you are working with, it is important to remember to take as much time as necessary to effectively communicate with them. Because this skill is essential to being a PSW it is important that anyone considering this line of work understand how to be an effective communicator.

Communication is an exchange of words and meanings. Successful communication occurs when all parties receive and understand the words and meanings. The message that is sent is the same message that is received. There must be a mutual understanding between the Sender and the Receiver for the transfer of ideas or information to be successful.

Successful communication is the simultaneous act of sending and receiving words and meanings. Even while we are talking, we are processing the Receivers' reactions to what we are saying. These reactions normally include non-verbal information. The Sender will adjust how we are communicating based on these reactions. For example, you may change your tone or volume, or you may try using simpler language.

If the subject of the discussion is one about which you feel strongly and the message from another person contradicts your beliefs, opinions or convictions, a normal reaction is to become angry, defensive, plan a rebuttal or even plan an attack on the other person. Once you become angry or start planning your response, you are no longer being an effective Receiver. When emotions are strongest, that is when being an effective Receiver is the most difficult and when it is most needed.

If you want others to understand you, you might start by trying to understand them. If a person feels understood, the messages they convey become less exaggerated and less defensive. The belief that they are 100% right and that you are 100% wrong, gives way to understanding the other's point of view. Understanding another person's point of view does not mean you agree with them. You may agree to disagree, you may influence the other's beliefs and sway them to

yours or you may learn something that will adjust your own beliefs. You may even start moving toward agreement.

General Tips

Watch your approach—make sure that your client sees you approach them. If they are unaware of your presence, they might become startled.

Get on their level—try to directly face the client on their level whenever possible. This allows them to watch your face for non-verbal communication clues. It also allows them to read your lips. Make sure that your speech is clear while talking with the client. Try to understand that people do not hear or understand as well if they are tired or ill. Remember to allow for personal space.

Remove distractions—try to get rid of any background noises or distractions when you are speaking with a client.

Keep it simple—use simple, short sentences to make your conversation easier to understand.

Practice time management—allow ample time to talk. Being in a rush will only increase everyone's stress and create barriers in communicating.

Honesty is the best policy—be honest and let your client know when you can not quite understand what they are trying to tell you. It is very annoying when people disregard what the client is saying because they find it too frustrating to figure out.

Get input from the client—ask the client what techniques or devices they might find useful in helping the communication process.

Watch for non-verbal facial clues—maintain eye contact and be aware of your facial expressions. Your client may tune in to what your face is saying more than what you are communicating.

Stick to one topic at a time—some clients may not be able to process a lot of information at one time. When you are attempting to communicate, try to stick to one topic at a time. Statements should be short and descriptive.

Break it down—break down what you are trying to say into smaller parts. This is especially important if you are asking the client to perform an action. Some clients may have difficulty in understanding how to complete a large task on their own.

Example

You need a client to remove their shirt. Rather than saying “please take off your shirt,” you should break it down step by step.

“You need to remove your shirt. Let’s begin with you unbuttoning your shirt. Now pull your one arm out of the shirt. Then pull the other arm out of the shirt. Now slide the shirt off your back.”

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One question at a time—ask one question at a time to minimize confusion. Give them plenty of time to answer questions and express ideas.

Do not order—try to not tell your client what they should be doing or not doing. Most people prefer to be asked rather than told what to do.

Tips on communicating with the physically impaired.

Hearing impairments

Check the hearing aid —if you know your client wears a hearing aid, check to make sure it is in their ear. Make sure that it is turned on, adjusted and has a working battery. If they still have difficulty in hearing, find out when they last had their hearing check.

Watch your tone—speak in a normal tone of voice and greet the person as you would anyone else. Do not shout. Shouting can be taken as an angry expression and may frighten your client.

Elaborate not repeat—if a client does not understand something the first time you say it, repeating it will not make it any clearer. Try saying it another way or try to include body language.

Write messages if necessary—with some clients it will be easier to communicate through reading and writing rather than verbally.

Visual impairments

Think visually—when entering a room with someone who is visually impaired, describe the room layout, other people who are in the room, and what is happening. Describe walks in routine places. Use sound and smell clues.

Keep the client informed—let the client know if you are leaving the room. Tell them if other people will remain in the room or if they will be alone.

Offer guidance—let the person take your arm for guidance. Ask how you can help.

Identify yourself—when you speak, let the person know who they are talking to.

Observe touching guidelines—say the client's name before touching them. Touching lets a person know that you are listening. Let the client touch you. Make sure that the touching is done at the appropriate time in the appropriate manner. However, some people may find touch embarrassing.

Include non-verbal clues—legal blindness is not necessarily total blindness. Use very expressive body language, like large movements and wide gestures. Treat the person like a sighted person. Use the words “see” and “look” normally.

Provide an explanation—explain what you are doing as you are doing it. For example, looking for something or putting the wheelchair away.

Let them try—encourage familiarity and independence whenever possible.

Maintain the environment—leave things where they are unless the person asks you to move something.

Tips on communicating with the mentally impaired.

Aphasia is a total or partial loss of the power to use or understand words. It is often the result of a stroke or other brain damage. Sometimes aphasia clients can express themselves and are able to understand you and sometimes, they cannot.

Get the patient's attention—make sure you have their attention before you speak. They may need extra time to become focused before beginning to process information. Frequently call them by name. It lets them know that you are speaking to them.

Allow ample time—give the client time to finish their thoughts or struggle to find the right words. Try not to quickly jump in and guess what they are trying to say. Point to objects or use gestures to help the client find their words.

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Remove distractions—avoid a setting with a lot of sensory stimulation, like a big room where many people may be sitting or talking.

Watch your personal space—be respectful of the person’s personal space and observant of their reaction as you move closer. Maintain a distance of 1 ½ —2 feet in the beginning.

Give them room—if a person likes to pace, walk in step with them while you talk.

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Watch for negative reactions—use distraction if a situation looks like it may get out of hand. For example, if the person is about to hit someone or if they are trying to leave the home or facility.

Watch your tone—use a low-pitched, slow speaking voice. This is heard better by older adults.

One question at a time—more than one question will increase confusion.

Repetition is the key—repeat key words if the person does not understand the first time around.

Watch your body language—only nod and smile if you understood what the client has said. Otherwise, keep this to a minimum. Your client may think you agree with them and not that you are confirming what you heard.

Let them be themselves—expect them to make errors, have emotional outbursts or display inconsistencies. Try to suppress any urges to correct or quiet them.

☞ Cultural Sensitivity ☞

Culture comes in many shapes and sizes. It includes areas such as politics, history, faith, mentality, behaviour, and lifestyle. Culture affects everything we do. This applies to all areas of human life from personal relationships, to conducting business. When interacting within our own cultural group, culture acts as a framework of understanding. However, when interacting with different cultures this framework no longer applies because of cross cultural differences.

Culture is behind our behaviour on the job. Often without our realization, culture influences how close we stand, how loud we speak, how we deal with conflict—even how we participate in a meeting. By failing to understand how culture impacts individual needs and preferences, we often misinterpret behaviours.

Cultural sensitivity is about having the knowledge, skills, and abilities to deal with a wide variety of people. We need to step outside our framework of culture to understand other cultures. Cultural sensitivity is about consciously not imposing our own personal values on someone else because they are different. Cultural sensitivity is having the ability to establish relationships with different people. It is what we see different about each other, what we see as the same, and knowing that what is different can be valuable and meaningful.

Spirituality is an important part of culture. Spirituality can be religious, non-religious, or both. It is about a philosophy of life and a world view. Spirituality is expressed through concepts and ideas about sacred beliefs, and religious rituals or practices. There is a significant difference between spirituality and religion.

What causes cultural insensitivity?

Being insensitive to different cultures is usually not intentional. Normally, it happens because we do not have the knowledge to understand where the other person is coming from. Sometimes, it comes from being scared or unsure of learning something new. Sometimes, it comes when we deny or overlook that we are all different. Sometimes it happens just because we feel rushed and do not have the time necessary to learn about other cultures.

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It is a tendency, for some of us, to assume that our own culture, with its values and customs, is the right one and other cultures, and value systems, are the wrong or negative ones. We often do this because we do not understand what their value system is.

Creating cultural sensitivity - so what can you do?

- Recognize the role culture plays in interactions and try to identify the critical elements of the cultures involved. What are your preferences and expectations, and what are the norms and preferences of your clients?
- Do not interpret any behaviour through your own cultural background. Most people do not intend to be deceptive, difficult, or unproductive; they are simply adhering to their cultural programming. However, to get the information and effective communication you need, you must find alternative approaches that are more in line with someone else's culture.

Tips on Creating Cultural Sensitivity

- Recognize your own personal biases, stereotypes, and prejudices.
- Recognize how your culture is viewed by others.
- Realize how the beliefs and behaviours of a cultural group affect you and learn to negotiate between different beliefs and practices of a culture and yourself.
- Learn to value how many different cultures there are.
- Learn verbal and nonverbal cues.
- Be more flexible.
- Share knowledge and experiences with others.
- Show respect for their culture.
- Learn how to pronounce names correctly. Their name is as important to them as yours is to you. Practice saying it until you get close to how it should be pronounced. Ask them if you have pronounced it correctly. They will be pleased that you are concerned with the correct pronunciation.
- Be yourself. Show that you care about them as people and that you honestly want to help.
- Take time to listen. If you do not understand, or you are not understood, take time to find out why. Explain or ask questions.
- The key ingredient to developing and maintaining a long-term relationship is old-fashioned friendship built on mutual respect and a desire for understanding.

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- Do not allow cultural differences to become the basis for criticism and judgments. Differences are neither good nor bad. What we do with them is the key.
- Address everyone by their last names unless they ask you to call them by their first name.
- Do not shout. Speak slowly. You can help someone to understand by repeating what you are saying several times in different ways and by using gestures, pictures and other non-verbal forms of communication.
- Observe rules for touching and distance. When either you or your client breaks any of these rules, the other will feel uncomfortable.

Working Conditions

As a Personal Support Worker you may provide ongoing or short-term home support services for individuals and families during periods of incapacitation, convalescence or family disruption. You may work in government and non-profit agencies, home care agencies, or become self-employed. You may perform housekeeping and other home management duties in private households, and other residential establishments. You might act as a companion and provide elderly and convalescent clients with companionship and personal care in residential or institutional settings.

There is a lot to know about providing personal care for individuals. Our focus is to familiarize you with activities you will be required to do when you enrol in a Personal Support Worker Certification Course. As a Personal Support Worker, you will:

- Provide personal hygiene to clients.
- Plan and prepare meals.
- Perform housekeeping duties such as laundry.

You might also:

- Read notes from the healthcare team
- Read policy change reports from the agency you are working for.
- Use maps to locate client homes.
- Complete time sheets

Personal Support Workers need to have general knowledge of health and safety issues, time management skills, and listening skills. The work is neither glamorous nor easy, but it is rewarding. It can be a physically demanding job. You will have days when you may have to deal with medical emergencies. You may have to deal with clients who do not want to eat, take their medication, or bathe. You may also have days when you must drive 20 kilometres south of town to meet with a client for an hour, then go 10 kilometres east of town to meet with another client.

You will also have days where you learn something new and feel good about it. You will have days where your client thanks you for doing a good job.

The PSWs daily routine may vary. You may go to the same home every day for months or even years. However, most PSWs work with a number of different clients, each job lasting a few hours, days, or weeks. PSWs often visit four or five clients on the same day.

Surroundings differ from case to case. Some homes are neat and pleasant, and some are untidy and depressing. Some clients are pleasant and cooperative; others are angry, abusive, depressed, or otherwise difficult.

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PSWs generally work on their own, with periodic visits by their supervisor. They receive detailed instructions explaining when to visit clients and what services to perform for them. It is a good idea that, during your initial meeting with your client, you take a notebook and ask them what they expect from you. About one-third of PSWs work part-time, and some work weekends or evenings to suit the needs of their clients.

PSWs are responsible for getting to the client's home. You may find yourself spending a good portion of the working day traveling from one client to another. Because mechanical lifting devices that are available in institutional settings are seldom available in patients' homes, PSWs must be careful to avoid overexertion or injury when they assist clients.

PSWs should have a desire to help people. They should be responsible, compassionate, emotionally stable, and cheerful. In addition, PSWs should be tactful, honest, and discreet because they work in private homes. PSWs also must be in good health.

Advancement for PSWs is limited. In some agencies, workers start out performing homemaker duties, such as cleaning. With experience and training, they may take on personal care duties. Some PSWs choose to receive additional training to become nursing and home health aides, licensed practical nurses, or registered nurses. Some experienced PSWs may start their own home care agency.

PSWs should not

- Be insincere about what the job entails. Clients can pick up on your feelings of being just a babysitter.
- Think of their clients as being a charitable project. Clients need to feel that they are being respected and not simply tolerated.
- Think they are the expert on what the client needs or wants. Clients need to feel that they are in control of their own life.