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Stepping into the Role of Direct Support Professional

**By: Jodie Tanner
Susie Hammond
Kate Hatt
Shakira Joudrey
Tyler Haddock
Donna Lee**

You have worked hard for the past two years, learning theories, discovering new ideas, and studying late into the night – now you have graduated from college and are just about to embark on your new career supporting people with disabilities. As new direct support professionals (DSPs) we know there can be many challenges – it can feel like you’re just being thrown into the job. After three days of orientation training, you find yourself on your own; it can be intimidating to feel the pressure of all this new responsibility in your hands. Having a few months under our belts now, we are ready to share what we learned as we stepped into the role of direct support professional. We found that it helps to remember that you will be okay, you will recall what you learned during your college courses, you will make a positive difference in people’s lives, and you will make it through the shift work with no sleep – just depend on that coffee for a little bit longer. Here is some advice we can offer as rookies to the field!

Build Strong Connections

**Editors: Dave Hingsburger, M.Ed.
Angie Nethercott, M.A., RP**

Making connections is something that starts from day one. Get to know each person you support by spending time with them, really be present with them so that you get to know that person’s unique interests, personality, and preferences. Do fun activities together that they enjoy whether that be baking cookies, going for a walk, or doing crafts. Although reading ‘the file’ may be a part of your orientation and can provide important information, it does not tell you who this person is. In fact, the file may end up tainting your perception of the person you are supporting. One of us read a file during our first days on the job in which the person’s doctor had written about how unattractive they were, and that he had ‘low social status.’ What a horrible way to be ‘introduced’ to someone! Do not base your opinion of this person on other people’s biases, rather, be sure to build your own connection with people – one that is based on empathy, relatedness, and finding common ground. Use your own life experience to understand the people you are supporting. Your own difficult life experiences can help you to relate to people you support who also have had tough things happen to them – use your experiences to build these connections. Do not take the spotlight or make it about you, but your perspective may be valuable as someone who has gone through something similar.



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Building connections with your coworkers is also important to invest in from the beginning. Ask for insights from other staff – “How do you handle this?” “Have you experienced this?” Don’t be afraid to ask for help and advice from your coworkers, they may be able to provide much needed perspective or offer particularly useful suggestions. Strong connections with a supportive team of coworkers also support your personal wellness as you share experiences, struggles, and insights. As professionals, we need to remember to effectively support each other to prevent burnout. Relying on this interdependence can create a healthy work environment for everyone.

Another area to build connections – or use the ones you already have – is in your community. Your connections with people in your community can help to create access. If you are a member at the local curling club, get to know the guy who organizes volunteers to help out at community events or, if you are aware of a great group of folks that get together to walk their dogs every Monday, you may be able to connect those you support to some great social opportunities.

Don’t be afraid to ask questions

Getting started can be very overwhelming – paperwork, reading files, getting to know each person, and connecting with staff. With all of that comes lots of questions that you should not keep to yourself – the more you know, the more comfortable you will be in your transition to your new experience. Use your training with supervisors and other staff to the best of your advantage. Be honest with yourself and with your coworkers about your challenges and comfort level, while ensuring that you are open to learning what you need to know. Check things out with your coworkers but know too that they are not the only source of information in the place that you are now working. When one of us was working a first overnight in an unfamiliar house, many questions came up that we had not anticipated. Some were answered by reading files but, the one thing that was most helpful was asking the people who lived in the home about their routines, the support they needed, and what they preferred to do.

Although other, more experienced staff can be an excellent resource for you, you may also feel at times that your ideas get dismissed or not taken seriously because of your newness. Respect their experience but also make sure that you value your own knowledge and understand that it is okay to question anything that does not feel right.

Responsibility and Mistakes

Each of us has had that moment early on when we think to ourselves, “I can’t believe they’re letting me do this by myself!!” There is a lot of trust put into DSPs, and it is up to us to uphold the standard. We can trust in our education, our training, and our judgment to meet the responsibility we are given. However, college does not always prepare you for the little hiccups that happen along the way; for instance, the first time one of us used the company credit card, the wrong PIN number was given, and this ended up resulting in a frozen credit card. Each of us has a similar story of getting the work truck stuck in a snowbank, taking home the only keys to the program, or getting lost while driving people somewhere important. Recognizing that

mistakes will happen, and that you will figure it out is part of the learning experience, as is taking responsibility for that mistake, apologizing, and ensuring it does not happen again.

Bring Yourself to Work

People will be more drawn to you if you are genuinely yourself when interacting with them; this is the best start to building a strong rapport. Often people think that, as a DSP, you have to be constantly perky and outgoing to keep things entertaining for those you support. While it is important to always bring your best self to work – make sure it is also your true self, otherwise you risk burn out. Some of us are naturally quiet people and have learned that this is often a gift rather than a detriment in our work. We have found that many people respond very positively to someone who brings a calm and quiet presence to an often busy and even chaotic environment. Sometimes silence is key – your calm presence can be much more beneficial in times of crisis than someone who jumps in talking, often overwhelming the person. Fixing the problem is not always the best place to start – listening is a better first response.

Occasionally, we may feel genuinely disgruntled, or frustrated, or exhausted. In these situations, it is necessary to remember that the people you are supporting deserve your very best, and it is up to you to pull that out of where you may be feeling in that moment. Check your attitude, the things that are worrying you, the annoyance you felt at the construction you encountered on your drive in and take a deep breath. Remember your mood can set the tone for someone else's entire day. If those attitudes, worries, and annoyances are really important to you, you can pick them up again after your shift but, in the meantime, step back from them and focus on the work you are called to do today.

Know Your Role – and Your Boundaries

It is easy to start off in this field thinking that our job is to be friends with people with disabilities. We learn in college that, while we hope to have a friendly relationship with the people we support, our role is quite different than that of a friend. Friends are not paid to be with people, and don't collect data on their friend's behaviours and don't leave when a position with better hours comes along. We found that was important to remember when we started working – you will likely really enjoy the people you are supporting and may be anxious to show them how likeable you are. We want them to like us, but we need to be honest about our relationship. We like each other and enjoy spending time together, but it is not the same as friendship. It is important to start off with clear boundaries – and be able to communicate these boundaries without offending or seeming mean.

Equally important is not to assume we are in a position above the person we support. It can be helpful to remember that we are working for the people we support; it's a professional relationship rather than a friendship. We have found it important to get to know what respect means to the people we are supporting and demonstrate that – respect is an excellent deterrent to power trips. It is also okay if someone does not like us – our job is to support not befriend. In this case, it is necessary to be self-reflective, asking ourselves, "Is it just that we are different people with different interests, or am I doing something that annoys or triggers them?"

Speaking of Self-Reflection...

We highly recommend making self-reflection a daily habit. There are different ways to do this – it may be in the car on your way home from your shift, it may be through conversation with a trusted coworker, or it may be in writing via a journal. We find that regular self-reflection ensures that we are continuously learning, recognizing that everything, every day is a learning opportunity. Self-reflection can often lead to a better understanding of our own motivations or where we might do something differently or better next time. Those of us that choose a written form of self-reflection find it can be useful to go back and review how we coped with a previous situation, or all that we have learned over the past few months.

Be Open to Awkward Moments and Being Surprised

It can be surprising when people you support have questions about their bodies, or feel awkward when they ask about something to do with sex. We did not expect sex to be such a big topic, and often felt timid when the subject came up, being unsure of how to respond. When working with teens and adults though, these questions are common and reflect the natural sexuality of all people. Taking the time to listen to what they are saying, having a sex-positive attitude, and supporting people to find resources to answer their questions helped to increase our comfort level and build trust. We have learned to follow the person's lead, ensuring they lead the conversation, while also making sure they know we are open to discuss these things with them without bias or judgment.

Another surprise was around providing personal care. For some of us, this was something we just did not see ourselves doing, especially when our only experience of it was in a lab with mannequins at school. However, after graduating and finding ourselves working in situations where personal care is needed, we learned the importance of being honoured in this aspect of our jobs as in all other aspects. When supporting people in personal care routines, it is essential to make sure the person is comfortable with you and the way you are supporting them. We do this through taking our time, asking the person for both direction and permission all through the process and, where the person is okay with it, making the task fun with chatting, listening to music, and respectful humour. We went from being nervous about having to provide personal care support to recognizing it as simply another type of support a person may need.

Make Time for Fun

There is more to life than doing laundry, dishes, and cleaning the floors. As new staff, we can get caught up in the duties that need to be checked off the list, sometimes forgetting that the most important work is connecting with the people we are supporting. Check to see if the person you are with is happy – do they experience happiness frequently? What brings them joy? If there isn't something immediately obvious that makes them happy, work on filling that gap. If there are things that you know make them happy – do those things with them. Chores can wait – maybe not forever, but at least until a little fun has been had.

Prioritize Personal Wellness

We will wrap up our list of things we have learned with wellness – not because it belongs at the bottom of the list – but because ensuring time for focusing on our personal wellness has been something so important to us that we wanted to leave you with this as a lingering thought after you close the article and continue doing the work that you do. The job we do is rewarding but can also be challenging and sometimes draining. As a DSP, we experience a diverse and intense series of emotions – both our own and those that the people we support share with us. It is important to acknowledge how these can affect us. It is perfectly okay, even essential, to have that trait of empathy right on our tool belt, but it is also necessary to know how to process the emotional work that we do. As fellow DSPs, we can relate to how much you as the reader want to help people but remember, ultimately, when it comes down to it, you will not be able to support others effectively if you do not take care of yourself. Make personal wellness a priority. Take time to be quiet, to do something completely separate from work, like play with your pets, read a good book, take a walk in the forest, eat well, and get enough sleep. But also, do not let yourself become a hermit – you need a social support system. Get out with people! Plan time to spend with friends. Go to the beach. Modelling personal wellness is also great support work – practice wellness so that you can support wellness.

About the authors

Jodie, Susie, Kate, Shakira and Tyler all graduated from Nova Scotia Community College's (NSCC) Disability Supports and Services Program earlier this year and are now employed as direct support professionals in a variety of roles at various organizations on the south shore of Nova Scotia.

Jodie Tanner is a Participant Support Worker at an organization providing residential support.

Susie Hammond is a Vocational Instructor at a program providing employment and recreational options.

Kate Hatt supports people living in their own homes and apartments with an agency providing Independent Living Support services.

Shakira Joudrey supports students with disabilities at the local Centre for Education as a Child Youth Care Worker.

Tyler Haddock is a Recreation Coordinator at a residential facility.

Donna Lee is an educator and consultant who has worked with people with Intellectual Disabilities and the people that support them for over 30 years. She is currently faculty with NSCC's Disability Supports and Services program and is super proud of the Class of 2019!

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