



College of
Midwives
of Ontario

Ordre des
sages-femmes
de l'Ontario

Guideline on Managing Personal & Practice Health

May 2018

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Recognizing Sources of Stress in the Midwifery Profession.....	2
Recognizing Signs of Mental Illness, Addiction and Wellness Issues	3
Managing Physical and Mental Health & Wellness	3
Managing Practice Administration.....	4
Programs, Supports and Resources Available to the Midwifery Profession	5
Reporting Professional Misconduct, Incompetence and Incapacity	5

Introduction

Midwives may experience stressors that are unique to their work and affect their mental health and wellness. These stressors can compromise a midwife's professional judgment and conduct, placing the safety of themselves and their clients at risk.

According to the College's Professional Standards, midwives must:

- Ensure that any physical or mental health condition does not affect their ability to provide safe and effective care¹
- Recognize the limits imposed by fatigue, stress, illness and adjust their practice to the extent that is necessary to provide safe and effective care²

The College's Professional Standards also require that practice owners manage their practice in a way that supports the physical and mental well-being of all individuals involved in client care.³

¹ #43, effective June 2018. Available Online: <http://www.cmo.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Professional-Standards-June-1-Watermark.pdf>

The purpose of this guideline is to assist midwives in recognizing sources of stress in the midwifery profession along with signs of mental illness and addiction. It provides suggestions on how to manage personal health and wellness.

It also provides suggestions for midwifery practice partners on how to appropriately administer a practice to ensure the health and wellness of associates.

Recognizing Sources of Stress in the Midwifery Profession

There are a variety of sources of stress unique to the midwifery profession.

Sources of stress may include:

- The burden of personal responsibility for the well-being of clients
- Responsibility for the satisfaction of clients' families
- A high or unpredictable workload
- A fast work pace
- Working irregular hours (i.e. being on-call or engaging in shift work)
- Interprofessional conflict
- Location of practice (e.g. a rural practice location can result in difficulty accessing resources)
- Insufficient staffing
- Modern technology
- Traumatic incidents (e.g. witnessing a traumatic birth or being involved in one)

A midwife that does not have appropriate and effective coping mechanisms and support systems in place to deal with these stressors can be at risk of developing mental illness, addiction and wellness issues.

² *Ibid.*, #44.

³ *Ibid.*, #45.

Recognizing Signs of Mental Illness, Addiction and Wellness Issues

The following is a non-exhaustive list of some signs and symptoms of mental illness, addiction and wellness issues that may warrant further attention:⁴

- Exhaustion, fatigue or burnout
- Sleep disturbances
- Changes in appetite, diet or eating habits
- Reliance on alcohol, food, gambling, or shopping to destress
- Engaging in substance abuse
- Decrease in work productivity
- Health problems such as ulcers, headaches and/or high blood pressure
- Missing client appointments and/or practice meetings
- Deteriorating quality of work
- Impaired ability to make decisions and care for clients
- Frequent absence from work
- Anxiety on its own or accompanied by symptoms such as shortness of breath, sweating, dizziness or chest pain
- Depression
- Anger and irritability
- Having a negative attitude toward work, self, other people or life in general
- Withdrawing from social activities
- Difficulties with concentration
- Reduced ability to feel sympathy and empathy for clients, other midwives and loved ones (a.k.a. “compassion fatigue”)⁵

- Diminished sense of enjoyment of career or feeling disengaged with work
- Difficulty separating work and personal life

Midwives are reminded that they must only care for clients when they are well enough to do so. If a midwife knows that they have an illness that could be passed on to a client or that their judgment or performance could be significantly affected by a circumstance, condition or illness, they should act in their clients’ best interests by not practising and allowing another midwife or competent health care professional to assume client care. In the event a midwife does not do so, they may become subject to professional misconduct proceedings at the College.

Managing Physical and Mental Health & Wellness

Mental health is defined as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes their potential, can cope with the normal stressors of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”⁶

Midwifery is a demanding profession. Irregular hours, high workloads and traumatic birth events are just some aspects of the profession that can take a toll on a midwife’s mental health, as well as physical health. As a result, healthy living might not be considered as achievable to many midwives.

⁴ This list is not intended to be used for self-diagnosis.

⁵ See the “Professional Quality of Life Scale” by B. Hudnall Stamm, 2009-2012. This is a self-administered test that measures compassion fatigue. Note that this test is not to be used as a substitute for seeking a professional diagnosis and care. Available Online:

http://www.proqol.org/uploads/ProQOL_5_English_Self-Score_3-2012.pdf.

⁶ “Mental health: a state of well-being” (August 2014), *World Health Organization*, Available Online:

http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/en/

There are however, a variety of wellness habits and practices that can be adopted by midwives to assist them in maintaining their physical and mental health. These include:

- Exercising regularly
- Getting sufficient sleep and rest
- Eating a well-balanced diet and not skipping meals
- Reducing or eliminating the use of alcohol, tobacco/nicotine, caffeine or other stimulants
- Monitoring the use of prescribed drugs to guard against dependence or addiction
- Learning how to pace oneself both inside and outside of the workplace
- Developing self-awareness and understanding of when practicing with a particular condition can compromise the safety of oneself and/or clients
- Getting self-care services, such as a massage
- Maintaining social outlets
- Having a support structure in place, including family and friends
- Having interests/hobbies outside of midwifery
- Taking breaks when possible, including vacations

Managing Practice Administration

The manner in which a practice is run can affect a midwife's professional experience and well-being.

Practices should consider the following to ensure the well-being of their midwives:

- Exhibiting positive leadership so practice associates feel valued and motivated to drive the midwifery profession forward

- Creating a practice culture which encourages a balanced life that includes personal as well as professional fulfillment
- Providing effective clinical leadership, mentorship and collaboration especially for new registrants
- Ensuring appropriate practice and hospital orientation, especially for new registrants and those new to the practice
- Ensuring the development and accessibility of appropriate practice protocols, including those pertaining to safe practice, which should address sleep deprivation and when midwives are entitled to seek relief
- Ensuring appropriate workplace organization such as having an effective and efficient system for filing, responding to office pages, and calling for back-up midwives
- Having sufficient back-up staff available
- Ensuring manageable scheduling of client appointments
- Ensuring proper debriefing
- Allowing for regular breaks and mental health days
- Continuously assessing and changing workloads to ensure manageability
- Supporting the participation of associates in professional development opportunities
- Holding regular practice meetings to reduce isolation and promote sharing concerns with other midwives
- Educating practice partners and associates about mental illness and addiction, including signs, symptoms and how to help other midwives who may be affected by mental health or addiction issues

Programs, Supports and Resources Available to the Midwifery Profession

Midwives who are experiencing physical, mental health, addiction or wellness issues are encouraged to seek assistance as soon as possible. The following are some programs that may help:

- [Lifeworks](#) – this resource is available to all AOM members
- [AOM On-Call](#) – a 24/7 advisory service available for AOM members
- Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Programs (MBSRP) – completing a MBSRP is covered by OHIP when referred to by your physician. You can ask your physician for more information.

Midwives are also encouraged to participate in ongoing professional development programs, which in turn may assist with personal management. For example, midwives can attain training in the following areas:

- Time Management
- Using technology
- [Workplace organization](#)
- [Communication strategies](#)
- Conflict Management

The following organizations provide additional information and resources relating to physical and mental health and wellness:

- [The Center for Addiction and Mental Health](#)

- [Mood Disorders Society of Canada](#)
- [Mood Disorders Association of Ontario](#)
- [National Eating Disorder Information Center](#)
- [Emotions Anonymous](#)
- [ConnexOntario Health Services Information](#) (for addiction, mental health and problem gambling services)
- [Ontario Association for Suicide Prevention](#)

Reporting Professional Misconduct, Incompetence and Incapacity

While midwives should offer support to other midwives that might have mental health or addiction issues, if those issues affect the ability to provide midwifery services safely, then midwives must report such conduct to the College.

In particular, if a midwife dissolves a partnership or association with another midwife for reasons of professional misconduct, incompetence or incapacity, they must file a report to the College.⁷

Midwives may also file a report with the College if they have concerns relating to a midwife's professional conduct, competence or capacity that do not fall into the category noted above.

Midwives may also file a report regarding poor practice management or administration that affects client safety.

Reporting concerns to the College allows the College to ensure the safety of both the public and midwife in question.

⁷ s. 85.5(1) of the *Health Professions Procedural Code*, Schedule 2 of the *Regulated Health Professions Act*, S.O. 1991, c. 18.



College of
Midwives
of Ontario

Ordre des
sages-femmes
de l'Ontario