

# Supporting Under-represented Groups in Waterloo-Wellington's LBS Programs

## A Guide for Practitioners



## Acknowledgements:

**Executive Director:** Jane Tuer, Project READ Literacy Network (PRLN)

**Project Lead:** Ginny Carnevale

**Skills for Success Project LSP Under-represented Groups Working committee members:** Chris Prosser, The Literacy Group; Jaime Sobotka, St. Louis Adult Learning & Continuing Education Centre and Mira Clarke, Action Read Community Literacy Centre.

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The included resources are based on Skills for Success Project Phase 1 research, and Phase 2 community organization outreach and interviews, completed in 2023 by Project READ Literacy Network's Skills for Success Project LSP Under-represented Groups Working committee members. They are intended to help our LBS programs best support Indigenous persons, Transient/Homeless persons and persons with Moderate to Significant Anxiety as Under-represented groups in our LBS programs.

# Supporting Indigenous Persons in Literacy and Basic Skills Programs

## Suggestions for Best Practices

This research represents a first step towards better serving Indigenous people in English-stream Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs. It is the result of conversations with four Indigenous service providers and / or educators – smart and experienced people who have worked many years in education and social services. However, this research should be thought of as a starting point to better serving Indigenous people, a process that requires ongoing reflection, learning and work. It is by no means the authoritative final word on ‘best practices’ when working with Indigenous individuals and communities.

The following are four high level recommendations, followed by LBS category-specific recommendations:

- 1) LBS agencies must prioritize ongoing learning and relationship building with Indigenous organizations, individuals, and cultural sources going forward.
- 2) LBS agencies must work towards greater Indigenous staff representation in all agencies, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous.
- 3) LBS agencies need to offer more Indigenous resources to all learners
- 4) LBS agencies should look at ways to adapt their physical spaces.  
Organizations should think about how they signal culture within their spaces and find ways to provide information and create safe spaces in non-intrusive ways.

Huge thanks to Jan Sherman, Anishinaabekwe storyteller and educator; Kim Anderson, Professor, Department of Family Relations & Applied Nutrition, University of Guelph; Stephen Jackson, Anishnabeg Outreach; and Michelle Davis, Ontario Native Literacy Coalition for their time and thoughtful reflections.

## Information and Referral

- Listen carefully. Try to understand where a person is coming from. Know that it is okay to take your time making a referral if need be as there may not always be an obvious or perfect place to refer an Indigenous learner.
- Many Indigenous Peoples (and people from other cultures too) may not make eye contact during conversation. They may see it as disrespectful, aggressive or unimportant. Recognize that a lack of eye contact is not a sign of disrespect when working with Indigenous Peoples.
- Work on establishing a trust-based, respectful relationship. Ask open-ended, non probing questions that allow people to share what they are comfortable with. Avoid asking questions about topics that may make the person feel different or “othered”, such as asking about their accent or clothing.
- Make sure the organization is committed to the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Process (T&R), specifically how recommendations and actions from the T&R apply to organizations.
- Create commitment statements towards reconciliation & a road map to get there.
- Know and acknowledge whose territory you are on.
- Make sure staff understand the many ways in which the intergenerational trauma of colonization may affect a person’s ability to learn.
- Have information readily available about local programs that look at Indigenous identities and cultural reclamation, and programs that allow people to recover from trauma (e.g. cultural loss, alienation, genocide etc.).
- Many Indigenous clients may feel more comfortable working with Indigenous organizations. Find ways to support their learning in Indigenous spaces, or in Indigenous organizations.
- Be aware that urban-indigenous people may have unique needs / challenges such as feeling disconnected from tribal lands and or feeling inadequate for being urban; disconnected from community of origin etc.
- Locate and make referrals to programs that are land-based, which make space for social relations, which celebrate craft and creative expression, and which allow Indigenous people to reclaim Indigenous languages.
- Support other valuable kinds of literacy that may support Indigenous clients such as oral literacy, storytelling, and the learning of Indigenous languages.

- Recognize that we may need to address mental health before a person is ready to learn. Anishnabeg Outreach is developing a comprehensive self-directed mental health learning system.

## Marketing

- Focus on outreach and building relationships with local Indigenous organizations to establish a relationship of trust, common goals and working together.
- Marketing to Indigenous clients specifically should happen when an organization is ready to serve Indigenous clients in a culturally appropriate way.
- Connect with Indigenous Centres / Friendship Centres. Build relationships. These organizations are often the gatekeepers to Indigenous people in the community.
- Marketing should demonstrate a whole person approach to learning. We need to consider the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical practices that foster cultural pride and healing lead to a strong sense of self-worth.
- Have Indigenous facilitators oversee programs that include Indigenous ways of learning. Communicate this in marketing.
- Marketing should recognize that there are many forms of literacy, and that English or French may not be the first languages. Teaching Indigenous languages (even introductory) can be a great way to support the deepening of Indigenous cultural knowledge. At the same time, continue to focus on English literacy skills, which people still need.
- Social media is important for messaging, particularly if a person loses access to their phone and can't receive or make calls. Word of mouth remains important.
- Know that some people may feel mistrustful of non-Indigenous organizations marketing to Indigenous individuals.
- Recognize that some Indigenous people may prefer to work with Indigenous organizations. Be prepared to collaborate with Indigenous organizations to serve the learner. Keep in mind that they may not have funding to do so, so manage time requests respectfully.

## Assessment

Assessment is key because it sets the tone for everything that follows. Therefore;

- Bring a listening and humble attitude to all social interactions.
- Use accessible language.
- Come at things from a strengths-based perspective. Pathways to learning can and must be positive and celebratory, in addition to the other harder work that also needs to happen.
- Recognize that many Indigenous people may have traumatic educational experiences and that colonizers have used education as a tool of oppression in the past. This may come into the present day experience.
- You may need to build trust and a relationship before someone will disclose important information that may affect their learning. Be sensitive and observant. Do not assume that someone will feel comfortable talking to you or explaining his or her feelings or experiences.
- Without a historical understanding, behaviours by Indigenous clients may be misunderstood, and judged inaccurately by settlers. Assessors and instructors must be aware of and knowledgeable of this history, and open to learning more. This will help build trust and communication.
- One interviewee noted that there seems to be more anxiety than in the past, especially among young people. Review and apply recommendations for assessment from PRLN's **Supporting Persons with Moderate to Significant Anxiety in LBS Programs** document, as appropriate.
- Use assessments that respect / appreciate Indigenous ways of learning. There are several developed by Indigenous adult education organizations.

## Training Plan Development

- Be as flexible with program timelines as possible.
- Discuss individual learner's barriers that make it difficult for them to commit. These could include food, childcare, transportation; homeless/shelter, cultural connections / ceremony / language, home environment, health issues, lack of services/supports, or struggles with acceptance of their self-identity (cultural, gender, alcohol/drug use, poverty etc.). Try to provide information and supports where needed and requested (See **Community Resources - Additional Training and Supports for Staff and Learners** section in this document). Remind learners that these aspects are NOT all of who they are.
- Create a system that honors where each learner is on his or her learning journey.

- Do not assume that an individual wants an Indigenous based service.

## Training

- Relationship-building based on personal safety, healthy boundaries, respect and reciprocity is important.
- Respect individuals as unique beings with their own stories, skills, past experiences, abilities and concerns. Flexibility within the program will help foster acceptance and respect for one another.
- Make sure staff are informed / equipped so that they can engage in respectful conversations when misinformation is shared and / or micro-aggressions occur. Chelsea Vowel's blog, specifically the section 'Indigenous Issues 101', provides good and accessible information that addresses widely held misinformation (<https://apihtawikosisan.com/blog/>).
- Know the difference between respecting and appreciating Indigenous cultures, and appropriating them.
- Be aware of personal biases, even those that at first glance may appear to be positive. It can be challenging when settlers have a romanticized idea about Indigenous peoples. This is another form of 'othering'.
- Build into the agreement among all learners and facilitators clear expectations around privacy, opportunities to "pass" or to excuse oneself from the group. Equal voices should include opportunities to be silent.
- Digital literacy is a huge need, from very basic to advanced.
- Micro credentialing is also a significant need, and getting into more advanced areas than in the past. Bundling these courses and credentials into one short-term program has been successful in many Indigenous literacy programs.
- Understand the impact of trauma in the learning space. Instructors need to be willing to learn too. Access resources such as those developed by the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition and Anishnabeg Outreach that help address trauma.
- According to the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition, there are many resources "that have been indigenized", but getting them into programs is difficult. Highest demand is for level 2 resources, especially with an employment or high school equivalency focus.
- Organizations should think about how culture is signalled in their physical spaces, and strive to make the space inclusive to Indigenous learners. For example,

having artwork on walls, interesting colour choices, books from an Indigenous perspective, bulletin boards that have program and event posters from Indigenous organizations, and bringing in nature and natural elements in the design and décor. As Stephen Jackson, Executive Director of Anishnabeg Outreach said, “Build a space that people want to be in.”

## Training Supports

- Indigenous people are more likely to live in a low-income household compared with non-Indigenous people. It is important to communicate training supports and be as flexible as possible in how they are implemented.
- There may be additional support that we can offer to Indigenous clients that we may need to consider.
- In some Indigenous communities there may be more fluidity and flexibility in the way families work. Extended family and the community may play a bigger, more direct role in rearing children. Recognize this in training supports where possible.
- See **Community Resources - Additional Training and Supports for Staff and Learners** for local available supports

## Follow Up

- A couple of interviewees commented on having observed more mobility in Indigenous communities. Programs should anticipate this by ensuring that follow-up is more mobility-proof such as using social media or email more.

## Additional Resources: Literacy Training, Background material and Community Agencies

### Literacy Training

- Seek out Indigenous based LBS training where-ever possible.
- Buy a membership to the [Ontario Native Literacy Coalition](#), whether you are an Indigenous Organization or not. With a membership, agencies can get 15% off [Turtle’s Back Publishing](#) books and resources. They offer books and resources developed and created by Indigenous writers. They also offer language books,



songbooks, and curriculum in Haudenosaunee, Wyandot, Anishinaabe (North and Central dialects), and Cree.

- **Apatisiwin Program** for lower level learners [Apatisiwin - Employment and Training Program - OFIFC](#)
- **The ArrowMight Project** is also very helpful for lower level learners. <http://www.arrowmight.ca/index.php.html>
- Check out **Anishnabeg Outreach**'s virtual "self-directed mental health management system" entitled [AO Nest](#). The program will be launched in 2024 and will be available to all community members in need of support including collaborating agencies whose clientele will benefit.
- **Good Learning Anywhere** offers online courses to help Ontario adults access job opportunities, develop life skills, and prepare for post-secondary. Their focus is in helping Aboriginal adults in Ontario achieve their online learning goals, but their program is open to anyone. <https://goodlearninganywhere.com>

## Background material

- [Kim Anderson](#) is a Professor and Canada Research Chair in the Department of Family Relations & Applied Nutrition, University of Guelph. She has written and co-edited numerous critically acclaimed books and journal articles on Indigenous women and activism, Indigenous families and mothering, oral history, knowledge transmission, and much more. <https://family.uoguelph.ca/people/kim-anderson>
- [Chelsea Vowel's Blog Law. Language. Culture](#) "Chelsea Vowel is Métis from manitow-sâkahikan (Lac Ste. Anne) Alberta, residing in amiskwacîwâskahikan (Edmonton). Parent to six children, she has a BEd, LLB, and MA. She is a Cree language instructor at the Faculty of Native studies at the University of Alberta. Chelsea is a public intellectual, writer, and educator whose work intersects language, gender, Métis self-determination, and resurgence."
- **21 Things you may not know about the Indian Act** by Bob Joseph is a powerful guide to understanding the legal repercussions of the Act on generations of Indigenous people.
- **Unreconciled: Family, Truth, and Indigenous Resistance** by Jesse Wentz is a "stirring call to arms" that explores that concept of reconciliation, and how to build a new, respectful relationship between the nation of Canada and Indigenous peoples.
- Check out the books and resources provided in the notes from the "Supporting Indigenous Learners" event hosted by Peterborough Native Literacy Program in

March 2022. The day included keynote speaker Kendal Netmaker, panelist and information about Indigenous programs.

<https://www.actionread.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Supporting-Indigenous-Learners-PNLP.pdf>

## **Community Agencies**

### **Indigenous Community Resources – Anishnabeg Outreach**

Anishnabeg Outreach has put together an excellent list of Indigenous based programs and projects on topics such as child birth, housing, child welfare, legal services, friendship centres and other local services.

### **4 Seasons of Indigenous Learning - Outdoor Learning Store**

“We offer the 4 Seasons of Indigenous Learning as an acknowledgement that authentically undertaking a personal learning journey towards Truth and Reconciliation takes more than just a day or month each year, but should be across all four seasons. This initiative encourages and empowers educators to deepen their understanding of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives while strengthening connections with the local land. This learning is open to EVERYONE. While the content of the modules in Season 1 is specific to Canada, it is transferable across Turtle Island (North America).”

### **Reconciliation Training – Anishnabeg Outreach**

“Healing is about moving forward, finding new futures, creating possibilities, alliances, and partnerships. Healing opens many doors and windows of opportunities. Once healing has occurred there is no end to the possibilities and outcomes. Healing, however, must occur for both sides in a conflict. If we just healed one group or the other, healing would never work. You must heal both groups of people at the same time. The only way to achieve healing for both sides is through partnership. When two groups of people are striving for the same goal the end result is a success as the conflicting issue has been resolved. Our reconciliation training is a step down the path of healing towards reconciliation. Together through partnership we can achieve reconciliation in our lifetime.”

### **Southwest Ontario Aboriginal Health Access Network**

“SOAHAC’s purpose is to improve access to, and the quality of, health services for First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples in the spirit of partnership, mutual respect and sharing.

We do this through a combination of health and social services, including:

- Traditional healing;
- Primary health care;

- Health promotion services;
- Cultural programs;
- Community development initiatives; and,
- Social support services.

The model of care recognizes Indigenous rights to determination in health, and Indigenous traditional healers and healing approaches, and blends them with culturally competent, western clinical practices in a comprehensive continuum of care from health promotion and prevention to treatment and rehabilitation. The model also recognizes the importance of the interconnectedness of individuals, families, Nations, environment and spirit world within our life support system.”

### [Crow Shield Lodge](#)

Crowshield Lodge is a Waterloo based agency who provide Indigenous land-based healing and education. They offer connection and belonging to a community dedicated to responsible land stewardship. Their work is grounded in the Seven Grandfather Teachings of respect, truth, wisdom, honesty, humility, courage, and love.

# Supporting Transient, Homeless People living in poverty in Literacy and Basic Skills programs

## Suggestions for Best Practices

This research is a first step towards better serving transient and homeless people living in poverty in our Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs. It is the result of conversations with three staff members from local community organizations serving the transient and homeless populations in Waterloo-Wellington. These are experienced people who have worked many years serving these clients through their organizations in our regions. However, this research should be thought of as a starting point to better serving transient and homeless people living in poverty, a process that will require ongoing reflection and work. It is by no means the authoritative word on 'best practices' when working with transient and homeless individuals.

Huge thanks to Ian Fitzgerald, Cambridge Shelter Corporation. The Bridges; Travis Adams, The Stepping Stone, Guelph; Natalie Cooper, House of Friendship for sharing their time and expertise.

Here are several high level considerations LBS program staff need to understand and be aware of, followed by category-specific recommendations:

- Awareness of addictions. Many clients are working age but drug and depression (mental health) prevents them from reaching an employment goal.
- The majority of this community live with traumatic life events.
- That the majority of the community are male, in their 40s. Consideration of that generation and gender awareness is important.
- This community is living in crisis mode often or certainly very close to it and it can change quickly.
- These clients face hardship often after living most of their lives in relative comfort and stability. Most are living in shock and depression as a result.
- Most clients are of working age but have injury or physical barriers which prevent them from working.
- Mental health, anxiety, the need for medication and depression are very common barriers.
- Many live in seasonal or a cycle of homelessness.

- This community is very close and often dependent on each other. Communication/Word of mouth is very active.
- There is an increase in varying cultures from increasing levels of immigrants requiring shelters.
- Short term/drop in program models in a safe quiet environment work well. Many live in crisis and may find employment or housing and not be able to attend classes regularly.
- Clear language communication is required. Clients have poor relationships with government forms and processes.
- Clients lack the space and time to decompress and relax, which results in high levels of stress and inability to complete home assignments or work online away from the program.
- Seniors living in shelters have very poor access to IT and low levels of digital literacy.
- Lack of food security and hunger is always something that needs to be taken into concern. Without a stable diet or access to food that morning, learning can be greatly affected. The same with sleep, often these clients have not had a good amount of sleep.
- Learning and meeting etiquette is not always understood or known, considerations need to be made.

## Information and Referral

- Provide easy access to program information. Include program content and success stories from learners with lived experiences.
- Provide shelter staff with regular information sessions and updated information. Shelter staff are the main providers of information to clients for community services.
- Provide opportunities for “walk overs” and visits. Clients appreciate receiving information at “in house” sessions with refreshments provided.
- Use clear language with clients, be upfront with expectations and eligibility.
- Share names of learners with shelters to encourage wrap-around support and motivation from both sides.
- Look for opportunities for verbal conversations rather than sending a referral form.

- If any referrals are made, follow up on referrals up with clients. One to one connection and repetition encourages and motivates clients.
- Be aware that email and phone calls are not viable options, having literacy representation in the shelter is important.
- Clients following digital links to gain information or provide contact details is not a viable option.
- Numbers of ESL Learners are increasing. Clear guidelines on eligibility and referral procedures need to be in place. In addition, approved ministry rationale also needs to be in place.

## Marketing

- Provide posters and handouts in the shelter.
- Mix information with food, such as ‘take a doughnut and take a handout’
- Run information sessions and include guest speakers such as employers or/and past learners with similar experience. Run ‘meet the instructor’ sessions.
- Some clients are online, but not regularly. Email blasts may work. Social media is not effective.
- Group texts are effective when clients have credit and a reliable phone.
- “Refer a friend” reward system would be effective if there is a food or voucher incentive. Word of mouth marketing is always effective.
- Run Zoom information sessions as well as in person.
- Reduce logos and connections to Employment Ontario and government bodies due to trust issues.
- Overemphasize and highlight free programming and anything free for training supports.
- Highlight what can be achieved and obtained.
- Understand this community’s stigma to school and learning. School could have been very traumatic and involves clients of an age where major traumatic life events happened.
- Radio and public transport would be good, however tear away posters at laundromats, food banks and bus shelters would be good to try.

## Assessment

- Current LBS procedures may be too lengthy. In person, open conversations with a short questionnaire would be effective.
- Complete assessments in the shelter to start building that connection.
- Do not request information such as permanent addresses or reliable contact information. Use the shelter or ask if they can be reached via a free service voicemail.
- Online collection is good, having Zoom interviews or Google forms to collect Intake Information would be a good tool to offer, but it cannot be the only option for collecting this information.
- Consider focusing on short term goals. Long term goals are not considered by many clients if they live in a state of emergency.
- Having records or recalling information is difficult for a lot of members of this community. Consider what the bare minimum is for them to access training. There needs to be a discussion format to access information.
- Keep the length of intake short with as few appointments as possible. Drug dependency, mental health and living in crisis make it difficult to keep lengthy appointments. Attempt to have appointments in the shelter during a time when they are in to receive shelter benefits.
- Having low self-confidence and self-sabotaging thinking or behaviours are common. There is a risk that a self-reflection intake on goals and educational past and assessment results may have a negative effect. It is important to stay positive and work on strengths and opportunities rather than gaps.
- Intake needs to be supported from both organizations and this community may start strong, however barriers may mean they may push themselves too hard too fast.
- There may be some reluctance to work with OW and government paperwork and to share information. Everything needs to be clear and approved by the shelters with whom the clients have relationships with or past learners who they relate with.
- Understand this community's stigma to school and learning. School could have been very traumatic and involves an age where major traumatic events happened.

## Training Plan Development

- Short term training is better for the clients with a modular based format or ideally where they can pick from a series of workshops.
- Ensure there has been some lived experience consultation in the LBS process and share this with the clients.
- Develop the Learner Plan alongside the learner as much as possible to allow for them to feel control and ownership over learning.
- Be clear about the time and commitment needed. Offer assistance in finding ways to overcome any challenges as they arise. Planning and preparing early reduces stress and issues later.
- Have information shareable with the centre/shelter if the learner allows, as they will be a positive motivator.

## Training

- Current LBS length of learning requested will not work. The learning windows need to be shorter, modular and flexible. Programs should be half day, 1 day or at max two days.
- There must be a drop in and flexible mode for the clients. Plan on clients' attendance needs to be varied.
- Allow for sharing and communal time, but do not let it affect the learning time.
- Have shelter staff available throughout the learning and make sure the shelter conducts a risk assessment with LBS provider if delivered on LBS site.
- Have clear classroom expectations and ensure all learners agree to them and are aware of consequences.
- Try to have instructors with lived experience or have the same instructors return so they become familiar and know shelter staff.
- Run work related programs, however have independent goal groups too.
- Learning must be hands on, task based and allow the learner to see short term improvement.
- Learning process must allow learners to bring in short term concerns such as reading an email from the landlord, or responding to a lawyer or case worker.



- Training locations must have strong wifi and allow the learner to learn independently, safely and without distraction.
- Provide hybrid and independent study opportunities.

## Training Supports

It is recommended that Training Support funds be used in the following way to specifically support this group.

- Use of food and refreshments must be allowed as this is a motivator for attendance. (This is not currently an accepted use of Training supports for learners under MLITSD guidelines, however, this is a highly identified need in these specific circumstances working with this community as learners.)
- IT related costs will be beneficial, but for low cost items such as cameras and mics. It is not recommended for laptops due to shortness of programming.
- Accessibility barriers need to be addressed such as glasses, hearing support batteries and other items that are not available due to the transient nature of the client's lives.

## Training for LBS Instructors

- Work on networking and shared needs assessments with homeless serving organizations.
- Receive consultation from leaders/managers in homeless serving organizations.
- collaborate with community homeless serving organizations to provide professional development to LBS staff based on their own foundational courses for their staff and volunteers about how to best serve this population
- Professional Development training for LBS instructors and program staff to understand some of the needs of this group is recommended, including:
  - Bridges Out of Poverty Training
  - Compassion Fatigue training
  - Mental Health First Aid training
- In future, applying for funding to develop sensitivity training for LBS providers to work with homeless communities and their supporting organizations would be beneficial and enhance service for this group in our LBS programs.

## Community Resources - Additional Training and Supports for Staff

### Links to Recommended Professional Development training opportunities

- [Bridges Out of Poverty Training](#)
- [Compassion Fatigue training/Empathetic Strain](#)
- [Mental Health First Aid training](#)

### Legal Support for learners

The organizations below are valuable agencies when a learner or client is facing housing insecurity such as eviction, renoeviction, and other stressors that can lead a person to homelessness:

#### [Waterloo Region Community Legal Services](#)

Waterloo Region Community Legal Services provides free services to low-income individuals and families. Our services include providing legal information, legal support or advice and legal representation.

#### [Guelph-Wellington Legal Aid](#)

The Legal Clinic of Guelph and Wellington County provides free legal advice, for the areas of law we practice, to low income people who live in Guelph and Wellington County.

#### [CLEO \(Community Legal Education Ontario\)](#)

“Our work focuses on providing information to people who face barriers to accessing the justice system, including income, disability, literacy, and language.”

### Direct Referrals

#### **Waterloo**

##### [House of Friendship](#)

Mailing/Admin Address:

51 Charles St. E Kitchener, ON N2G 2P3

Phone: 519-742-8327

##### [Urban Native Transitional Housing Website](#)

Transitional housing for individuals who identify as Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuit – Status and Non-Status)

34 Bridgeport Rd. E., Waterloo

Phone: 519-340-1888

## **Cambridge**

### [The Bridges, Cambridge Shelter Corporation](#)

26 Simcoe St, Cambridge, ON, Canada. N1R 8P2  
'First Connect' - 519-624-9133.

### [Argus Residence for Young People](#)

Residential support for youth  
'First Connect' - 519- 624-9133

## **Kitchener**

### [Lutherwood Safe Haven Emergency Centre](#)

41 Weber St. W., Kitchener  
Phone: 519-749-1450.

### [One ROOF Youth Services Shelter](#)

35 Sheldon Ave. N., Kitchener  
Phone: 519-742-2788

### [YW Emergency Shelter](#)

84 Frederick St. E., Kitchener  
First Connect - : 519-624-9133.

### [Marillac Place](#)

For women between the ages of 16 and 25 who are pregnant, who have their child(ren) in their care, or who are attempting to regain care of their child(ren).

Address: 109 Young St, Kitchener, ON N2H 4Z2  
Phone: 519- 571-0722

## **Guelph**

### [The Stepping Stone](#)

Main Office / Overnight Emergency Shelter  
23 Gordon St. Guelph, ON N1H 4G9  
Prevention and Diversion Phone Number: 226-821-3345  
Main Phone Number (for all other inquiries): 519-837-0080

# Supporting Persons with Moderate to Significant Anxiety in Literacy and Basic Skills Programs

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## Summary of Suggested Best Practices

### Information and Referral

- Have information readily available which shares the basic details of a program such as its format, its location, and its expected duration.
- Be fully aware of whether supports can be provided by the agency for a client to attend programming if this is a need for a client.
- Ensure that all communication about programs is clear, concise, and universal across access points.
- Ensure that access point coordinators are appropriately trained to elicit certain information when a client is struggling to provide information.
- Create a document that collects the data needed for all programs to minimize the need for a repetitive and perhaps, intrusive intake process.
- Set up a process of document sharing when consent is received from the client. This will ensure that the client does not have to go through the stress of multiple interviews with the staff of different programs.
- Use the 'warm' hand off process for all referrals so that the client always feels supported with accessing a new service. The initial professional contact should not back away until a working relationship has been established at the new agency.
- Minimize the time between referral and program access.

### Marketing

- Market in diverse ways to reach multiple populations.
- Consider communicating with clients with high anxiety in text-based communication (emails, texts) as this population sometimes enjoys the increased separation of this style of communication especially post-pandemic.
- While print marketing might work better for some programs and their content, social media may be the better option for marketing others.
- Include a voice of someone who has been in the program and experienced similar barriers.
- Use terminology 'anxiety' if needed but also define it in basic language for someone who does not resonate with the label.
- Ensure that marketing strategies are proportional to current program capacity.
- While some programs would like to pursue radio, bus shelter posters or info sessions, ~~historically~~, the most effective form of program has been word of mouth.

- Leverage agency mailouts and community calendars to spread the word about programming.

## Assessment

- Be aware that until the client trusts you, they may not fully disclose information or barriers as shame, or the fear of judgment may reduce a client's willingness to disclose information.
- Be cognizant of the language being used. Strive for a person-first strength-based approach. Avoid industry acronyms.
- Work to see past any coping mechanisms which may be in place which mask mental health challenges.
- Be aware of any verbal or non-verbal manifestations of anxiety and if noticed adjust the assessment to re-establish comfort and security. Assessments and evaluations can be triggering to those who are challenged by performance anxiety. Its manifestation during assessment can lead to an inaccurate assessment of skill competencies.
- Work to frame the assessment as a discussion if possible. Train facilitators to gather information in a more fluid manner than a Q&A session.
- Explain why you are asking the questions you are asking, especially when the questions can be seen as 'prying' or the connection between the question and its relevance to the program is not evident.
- Access a variety of equity resources to assist in the assessment process – e.g. Translative supports, text-to-speech assistance etc.
- Be fully aware that a client's emotional response to a question can be directly related to how it is posed or approached by the staff member.
- Do not leave a client to fill out a verbose piece of legalese independently, ensure they always feel supported.

## Training Plan Development

- Realize that the irregularity of anxiety can make it difficult for clients to keep up with short-term programming that is only offered at select times of the year.
- Be as flexible with program timelines as possible.
- Meet with the client while developing or finalizing the learner plan to ask for their insight or feedback.
- Ensure that the client feels as if they are an equal partner in the process.
- Present the Training Plan as fluid and flexible to reduce the stressors of time or fear of failure.
- Check-in with clients regularly to discuss the plan and any changes that need to be made to better meet their needs.

## Training

- Be flexible with attendance and participation if possible. Sometimes they show up, sometimes they can't.
- Normalize conversations about mental health days and respond with equivalency to physically ill days.
- Scaffold the curriculum, if possible, to build in review for topics that may have been missed due to an absence or off-day.
- Ensure instructors are aware of verbal and non-verbal cues that indicate someone may be triggered.
- Ensure instructors are aware of basic de-escalation techniques that can be used in a classroom environment.
- Be cognizant that anxiety can present as disengagement or aloofness in the classroom.
- Check in with a student at break if they seem to be having an off day.
- Use visual cues, metaphors, and multi-module teaching.
- Build a classroom community where connections between students are encouraged and celebrated.
- Build universal emotional IQ activities into the curriculum for all students.
- Increase instructors to offer smaller class sizes if possible.
- Create Rules and Regulations with the students and expect everyone to adhere to them. Make sure consequences of failing to adhere to the rules are clear and transparent.
- Try to maintain stability amongst staff members as much as possible.
- Present staff as a team where everyone interacts with students so that students become familiar and comfortable with all staff members. This is especially important when a staff member must be absent for an extended period or leaves the organization altogether.

## Training Supports

- Be flexible with transportation supports if possible as some students with significant anxieties have difficulties utilizing public transportation.
- Offer hybrid models or allow a student to attend online if they are not able to attend class in person on a given day to minimally impact student routine.
- Financially support with required technology and services
- Be aware that a student may not be receptive to employing an outside child care provider other than a family member due to anxiety concerns.
- Offer supports at a rate that is meaningful and on par with current prices.
- Consider supporting emergency food purchases if needed to alleviate the stress and anxiety with not having enough to sustain the student or their dependents.

## Follow Up

- Host feedback sessions and be creative with how they happen within varying communities.

## Training For LBS Instructors

- Try to secure funding that values the investment in Professional Development activities.
- Remain curious and look at the underlying behaviour and reasons for it.
- Be aware of conscious and unconscious biases and be brave in engaging in uncomfortable conversations with fellow staff and students to remove these from the classroom environment so all students can feel safe and welcomed.
- Participate in Round Table discussions with community partners such as "What is it like to support someone with anxiety?"
- Be open to exploring partnerships on how we can work together to support clients with anxiety challenges.
- Be aware that low literacy may correlate to a mental health issue which is often undiagnosed.
- Offer support groups and open discussions about compassion fatigue in the workplace.
- Ensure staff take regular breaks.
- Complete routine check-ins.
- Ensure staff are aware that they can take mental health days when needed.
- Organize onsite or online counseling opportunities.
- Encourage staff to use relaxation rooms, massage, meditation classes, etc.

## Information About Those with Significant Anxiety Challenges and LBS Services

According to [Statistics Canada](#), in 2022, over 5 million people in Canada met the diagnostic criteria for mood, anxiety or substance use disorder (Canada, 2023). This information supports the claim that there has been a pattern of increase seen in Mental Health challenges the past 10 years. In the publication entitled "Insights on Canadian Society: Mental Disorders and Access to Mental Health Care" (Stephenson, 2023), it was reported that the percentage of Canadians aged 15 years and older who met diagnostic criteria for generalized anxiety disorder doubled from 2.6% in 2012 to 5.2% in 2022. If one were to generalize this data, one could infer that out of every 20 people that accessed LBS services in Canada, it could be expected that 1-2 learners would be navigating some form of significant anxiety. This in fact is not the case.



An article published by Ezell et al. (Ezell, 2021) also points to the fact that the pandemic could have led to an additional increase of mental health challenges and effects of trauma in racialized communities. Additional research completed post pandemic indicates that there is a disproportionate prevalence of anxiety in certain populations, especially populations that are circumstantially more likely to have a need for Literacy and Basic Skills programming – including [BIPOC](#), [low literacy/ illiteracy](#) and [low socioeconomic status](#). Therefore, it can be assumed that the number of students in a given LBS classroom who are navigating anxiety challenges would be far greater than the 1:20 ratio mentioned above.

Unfortunately, it would be extremely difficult to accurately quantify the number of LBS students with significant anxiety challenges for multiple reasons including:

- 1) The stigma associated with anxiety
- 2) The lack of knowledge that anxiety can fall under the definition of a ‘disability’
- 3) The fear or hesitancy triggered by disclosure
- 4) The existence of coping mechanisms which mask mental health related challenges
- 5) The lack of information regarding what anxiety is and recognizing its impact in one’s daily living
- 6) The variance and or irregularity of the condition from day to day
- 7) The belief that prescription medications may ‘cure’ anxiety even after no longer taking them.

With this awareness in mind, it is essential that LBS services analyze their own service delivery and procedures through a lens of a person with anxiety to ensure that current practices minimize additional stressors or trauma and are inclusive to persons with anxiety. In a recent paper entitled *Trauma-Informed Andragogy: A Resource for Literacy & Basic Skills Educators* (2023), author C. Perchotko refers to the need to adopt formal practices in LBS by stating “if those who create, develop, and implement educational policy are sincere in their intentions to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion for underrepresented and marginalized learners, becoming trauma-informed is critical.” This means that it is our responsibility as Adult Literacy and Basic Skills programs to create a physically, culturally, and mentally safe environment for today’s learners with the full understanding that today’s learners on a whole are accessing services with a heightened level and complexity of mental health concerns.

As a result of this requirement, the following information was gathered to identify Best Practices for current LBS programs when providing services for individuals with anxiety needs. This information was gathered through several data collection methods including surveys of local community partners in Wellington and Waterloo counties, interviews with identified social service agencies that were respected for their work with this population, academic research, onsite observation of an LBS program and discussions with current students self-identified as having significant anxiety issues.

## Suggested Best Practices: Information and Referral

(Government of Ontario, 2020) *Information and Referral services ensure that information about the LBS service provider's program is available to learners, clients, volunteers, other interested*

*individuals and referring organizations. Through the Literacy Services Planning and Coordination (LSPC) process, a community-wide marketing and promotion strategy is developed. At this stage, the service provider will often conduct general literacy screenings of clients, to determine if the LBS program is appropriate. LBS service providers also offer information and referrals to all Employment Ontario employment and training programs and services.*

When discussing and analyzing Referral practices using the lens of a person with increased anxiety challenges, the priorities seem to be to ensure that current referral practices are as streamlined as possible and the amount of repetitive questioning (especially with questions involving self-declaration of mental health challenges and their impacts) is minimized.

In his paper, Perchotko (2023) states that: "The first step toward being trauma-informed is understanding the widespread prevalence of trauma in society (Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center, n.d.). For upgrading organizations, this also means knowing and understanding the population of participants who attend these programs. Knowing that marginalized and vulnerable populations are more likely to experience trauma can make all the difference in the approach that an organization or educator takes when supporting a particular student. The knowledge that trauma affects these populations at high rates provides impetus for Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs across Ontario to gauge the likelihood of serving trauma survivors". (Prechotko, 2023)

When discussing best practices with those that work in the field of supporting persons with anxiety, the following suggestions were made:

- ❖ Have information readily available which shares the basic details of a program such as its format, its location and its expected duration.
- ❖ Be fully aware of whether supports can be provided by the agency for a client to attend programming if this is a need for a client.
- ❖ Ensure that all communication about programs is clear, concise, and universal across access points.
- ❖ Ensure that access point coordinators are appropriately trained to elicit certain information when a client is struggling to provide certain information.

- ❖ Create a document that collects the data needed for all programs to minimize the need for a repetitive and perhaps, intrusive intake process.
- ❖ Set up a process of document sharing when consent is received from the client. This will ensure that the client does not have to go through the stress of multiple interviews with the staff of different programs
- ❖ Use the ‘warm’ hand off process for all referrals so that the client always feels supported with accessing a new service. The initial professional contact should not back away until a working relationship has been established at the new agency.
- ❖ Minimize the time between referral and program access

While some of the above suggestions seem to be ‘common sense’ in their approach, others may be more controversial. For instance, while one of the local experts alluded to a need for a universal screening or intake process, Prechotka cautions against it by stating the following “Some organizations may be tempted to apply a universal screening policy (Menschner & Maul, 2016). Without significant research prior to doing so, this is not advisable. Unfortunately, the utility and effectiveness in screening for students who live with trauma is presently questionable (Eklund & Rossen, 2016). Concerns surround consent as well as the validity and reliability of measures used in the screening process. Moreover, many trauma survivors lack trust in representatives of authority, so survivors may not be forthcoming with information pertaining to their trauma history. Although, if a trusting relationship is forged between an educator and a trauma survivor, survivors can become disposed to voluntarily share some of their deeply troubling memories and related coping mechanisms (Wartenweiler, 2017). On the other hand, some students readily divulge their trauma-related histories. Adult educators should be prepared to respond appropriately in both these instances (Carello & Butler, 2014).” (Page 19 and 20).

Therefore, it is extremely important to ensure that any changes to program processes are implemented in a responsible way and only after the programs have completed their due diligence to ensure that the changes are evidence based and in the best interests of the clients.

## Suggested Best Practices: Marketing

In reference to the fact that Regions need to be fully aware of the available programs and services and must be able to speak to them with accuracy, it is important to consider how LBS programming is marketed. According to one of the professionals interviewed, it is difficult to know what programming is out there and who to reach out to even for those that work in the field. Therefore, it was important to consider both audiences when discussing best practices for programming promotion - potential clients and partner organizations.

According to a local expert, people need time to receive information and consider signing up. Ensure that there is enough lead time pre-program to follow that process. One to two weeks before a program is launched is not sufficient to build enrollment, nor inform community agencies. Additionally, the following should be considered when identifying best practices.

- ❖ Market in diverse ways to reach multiple populations.

- ❖ Consider communicating with clients in text-based communication (emails, texts) as this population sometimes enjoys the increased separation of this style of communication especially post-pandemic.
- ❖ While print marketing might work better for some programs and their content, social media may be the better option for marketing others.
- ❖ Include a voice of someone who has been in the program and experienced similar barriers.
- ❖ Use terminology 'anxiety' if needed but also define it in basic language for someone who does not resonate with the label.
- ❖ Ensure that Marketing strategies are proportional to current program capacity.
- ❖ While some programs would like to pursue radio, bus shelter posters or info sessions, these can be pricey and historically, the most effective form of program marketing has been word of mouth.
- ❖ Leverage agency mailouts and community calendars to spread the word about programming.

According to [INC.com](https://www.inc.com) (Gottzman, 2016) , there are 11 things that will encourage people to talk about a business or service

- I. Build trust
- II. Do a great job
- III. Ask for feedback
- IV. Request testimonials
- V. Don't over rely on social media
- VI. Find a high profile satisfied customer
- VII. Generate referrals
- VIII. Give back
- IX. Emphasize relationships
- X. Be responsive on social media
- XI. Say thank you for referrals through a phone call, personalized handwritten note or a small token of acknowledgement

Most importantly, when considering funding, it is important for all parties to understand that the introduction of any program requires time before any judgements can be made of program effectiveness - time to responsibly research and develop a potential program, time to market, time to intake, time to facilitate, time to reflect and time to build consistency in the program so the trust can be established. It is only after trust in the program and its staff are established that there will be a return on investment with regards to word-of-mouth referrals.

## Suggested Best Practices: Assessment

*(Government of Ontario, 2020) Assessment gathers information about a learner’s knowledge, skills, behaviours and abilities. It forms a critical part of everyday activities in a literacy program, as decisions are made on how to best meet learner needs. Assessment includes a range of approaches, from informal procedures to standardized tests. Assessments are conducted at intake, during programming, and when learners complete the learner plan.*

There are many considerations that need to be made for clients attending an intake and assessment for LBS services especially when it is likely that clients looking to upgrade skills may have more sensitivities and triggers than others. This is especially true when considering persons with anxiety. According to Linda Ray in [How to Conduct an Interview in for Social Services](#) “clients will hold back for many reasons. They may not have experience talking to government employees or figures of authority. They may be ashamed or embarrassed about their situations, or they may have a mental or physical disability that prevents them from free expression” (2022). This information coordinates with the information and suggestions we gathered from our local experts.

- ❖ Be aware that until the client trusts you, they may not fully disclose information or barriers as shame, or the fear of judgment may reduce a client’s willingness to disclose information.
- ❖ Work to see past any coping mechanisms which may be in place which mask mental health challenges.
- ❖ Be aware of any verbal or non-verbal manifestations of anxiety and if noticed adjust the assessment to re-establish comfort and security. Assessments and evaluations can be triggering to those who are challenged by performance anxiety. Its manifestation during assessment can lead to an inaccurate assessment of skill competencies.
- ❖ Work to frame the assessment as a discussion if possible. Train facilitators to gather information in a more fluid manner than a Q&A session.
- ❖ Explain why you are asking the questions you are asking, especially when the questions can be seen as ‘prying’ or the connection between the question and its relevance to the program is not evident.
- ❖ Access a variety of equity resources to assist in the assessment process – ie. Translative supports, text-to-speech assistance etc.
- ❖ Be fully aware that a client’s emotional response to a question is directly related to how it is posed or approached by the staff member.
- ❖ Do not leave a client to fill out a verbose piece of legalese independently, ensure they always feel supported.

## Suggested Best Practices: Training Plan Development

(Government of Ontario, 2020) *Learner Plan Development produces the learner plan to describe the goal path. It includes the learner's goal, background information, assessment results, milestone tasks, culminating task, learning activities, program duration, additional supports required by the learner, and referral results.*

- ❖ Realize that the irregularity of anxiety can make it difficult for clients to keep up with short-term programming that is only offered at select times of the year.
- ❖ Be as flexible with program timelines as possible.
- ❖ Meet with the client while developing or finalizing the learner plan to ask for their insight or feedback.
- ❖ Ensure that the client feels as if they are an equal partner in the process
- ❖ Present the Training Plan as fluid and flexible to reduce the stressors of time or fear of failure.
- ❖ Check-in with clients regularly to discuss the plan and any changes that need to be made to better meet their needs.
- ❖ Mix academic learning with socio-emotional learning.

One of the triggers for anxiety can often be associated with feelings of being out of control. This is especially important to consider when clients with anxieties are embarking on a journey with a new program. The importance of including the client in Training Plan Development is highlighted by Chat GPT below:

**Predictability and Certainty:** Predictability reduces the fear of the unknown, which is a common trigger for anxiety.

**Empowerment:** Feeling in control empowers individuals to take an active role in their lives. Empowerment fosters a sense of competence and confidence, reducing feelings of helplessness.

**Coping and Problem-Solving:** A sense of control enables individuals to engage in effective coping strategies and problem-solving. When people believe they can influence or manage a situation, they are more likely to approach challenges with a constructive mindset.

**Autonomy:** Autonomy, or the ability to make choices and decisions, contributes to a sense of control. Having control over one's actions and decisions promotes a feeling of self-determination.

**Reduced Uncertainty:** Control helps to minimize uncertainty, a common trigger for anxiety. When individuals have control over aspects of their lives, they can better anticipate and prepare for potential stressors.

**Self-Efficacy:** A sense of control contributes to the development of self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to successfully accomplish tasks and achieve goals. Higher self-efficacy is associated with lower levels of anxiety.

**Emotional Regulation:** Control over one's environment and responses can lead to better emotional regulation. Individuals who feel in control are often better equipped to manage and regulate their emotions in the face of challenges.

**Sense of Security:** Control provides a sense of security and stability. Knowing that one has the ability to influence outcomes creates a foundation for emotional well-being.

**Agency in Decision-Making:** Being involved in decision-making processes contributes to a sense of agency. Having a say in important matters can reduce feelings of powerlessness and anxiety.

**Enhanced Resilience:** A sense of control contributes to resilience—the ability to bounce back from adversity. Resilient individuals are better equipped to navigate challenges and recover from setbacks.

## Suggested Best Practices: Training

(Government of Ontario, 2020) *The focus of the LBS program is the literacy instruction delivered to adult learners. All other LBS services support the training service. Learners not only acquire the skills, but also demonstrate the ability to use their newly acquired competencies for meaningful tasks.*

For everyone involved in an LBS learning environment, it is important to create a physically, emotionally, and spiritually safe space. This need includes maintaining a structured environment with set expectations that is trauma informed, flexible, strength-based, collaborative and student centered. Establishing this type of learning space is most especially important to help students navigate anxiety challenges.

In a blog posted by [Onechange.org](https://onechange.org) on Aug. 1, 2023 entitled The Power of Routines: 4 Ways Establishing Consistency Supports Mental Health, the author, Keiana Fountaine,

discusses the benefits of routine to mental wellbeing. In the article, the following four advantages of routines are discussed:

- 1) Routines create stability and provide a sense of control
- 2) Routines reduce decision fatigue
- 3) Routines enhance productivity
- 4) Routines promote self-care

Fountaine concludes that although routines are helpful, it is also important to make room for flexibility and it is always important to teach students that life can be unpredictable and therefore, adaptation and modification may be needed on a given day (Fountaine, 2023). It logically follows that the safety of the LBS classroom would offer a perfect place to develop resilience, adaptability, and emotion regulation in conjunction with academic upgrading.

Similarly, the following suggestions were made by those who work with persons with significant anxiety.

- ❖ Be flexible with attendance and participation if possible. Sometimes they show up, sometimes they can't.
- ❖ Normalize conversations about mental health days and respond with equivalency to physically ill days.
- ❖ Scaffold the curriculum, if possible, to build in review for topics that may have been missed due to an absence or off-day.
- ❖ Ensure instructors are aware of verbal and non-verbal cues that someone may be triggered.
- ❖ Ensure instructors are aware of basic de-escalation techniques that can be used in a classroom environment
- ❖ Be cognizant that anxiety can present as disengagement or aloofness in the classroom.
- ❖ Check in with a student at break if they seem to be having an off day
- ❖ Use visual cues, metaphors, and multi-module teaching
- ❖ Build a classroom community where connections between students are encouraged and celebrated
- ❖ Build universal emotional IQ activities into the curriculum for all students daily
- ❖ Increase instructors to offer smaller class sizes if possible
- ❖ Create Rules and Regulations with the students and expect everyone to adhere to them. Make sure consequences of failing to adhere to the rules are clear and transparent.
- ❖ Try to maintain stability amongst staff members as much as possible.
- ❖ Present staff as a team where everyone interacts with students so that students become familiar and comfortable with all staff members. This is especially important when a staff member must be absent for an extended period or leaves the organization altogether.

The above suggestions strongly correlate to the six values of a trauma informed classroom as discussed by Perchotka (2023). These include:

### *VALUE 1 – SAFETY*

Safety is the most important value (Carello & Butler, 2015). It is the foundation upon which all the other values rely for their stability. Safety is an essential feature in both the physical and virtual spaces of an educational institution (Henshaw, 2022)

### *VALUE 2 – TRUSTWORTHINESS AND TRANSPARENCY*

The following list offers a framework for the practice of compassionate discipline in the classroom (Davidson, 2017): watch for signs, do not mirror behaviours, stay calm, move slowly, be aware of safety, practice empathy, give space, invite students to cool down, encourage



cortical activities (e.g., mindfulness and deep breathing exercises), ask how to support the student better.

### *VALUE 3 – PEER SUPPORT*

Furthermore, trauma disrupts relationality (Carello & Butler, 2014). Therefore, whenever possible, educators should provide students with opportunities to connect with and befriend each other, so students can regain their sense of connectedness to others.

### *VALUE 4 – COLLABORATION AND MUTUALITY*

Often trauma-affected students lack interpersonal skills, such as the ability to communicate and collaborate, so activities that encourage interpersonal communication and collaboration are essential to student development, relationship building, learning, and success (Cramer, 2018).

Another way educators can provide the opportunity for student collaboration is to solicit the opinions of students regarding the type and timing of class activities they are to participate in. Providing the opportunity to volunteer in class also furthers the goal of achieving collaboration and mutuality in the classroom (Cramer, 2018).

Educators could encourage students to leave anonymous feedback in a suggestion box, regarding the improvement of or satisfaction with classroom safety. This also empowers students because they have a voice in the safe operation of the classroom.

### *VALUE 5 – VOICE, CHOICE, AND EMPOWERMENT*

While some already do so, educators can increase choice within individual courses by providing students more options regarding the assignments, tests, and activities they pursue.

For example, educators can program arts-based activities into class time. Participating in art-based activities can foster confidence, catharsis, creativity, critical thinking, meaning, communication, and collaboration (Cramer, 2018).

Next, including activities in the classroom that develop the cortical (top-down) and body (bottom-up) regulatory abilities help to empower students because they learn to better regulate their stress response, which, as an added benefit, increases their abilities to form rewarding relationships (Brunzell et al., 2016). Mindfulness-based activities and deep-breathing exercises are effective tools to help students learn to better regulate themselves.

### *VALUE 6 – CULTURAL, HISTORICAL, AND GENDER ISSUES*

Consequently, educators should practice sensitivity and cultural humility in the classroom.

- Perchotka (2023) pp.

In summary, a trauma-informed classroom is essential for vulnerable learners as it provides a holistic and compassionate approach to education. By recognizing the impact of trauma and

implementing supportive practices, educators can contribute significantly to the well-being and academic success of students facing adversity.

## Suggested Best Practices: Training Supports

(Government of Ontario, 2020) *Organizations are responsible for developing and implementing policies and procedures to support their allocation of training support Literacy and Basic Skills:*

*Service Provider Guidelines 50 to minimize barriers to participation and encourage learners to persist. Policies and procedures should include:*

- *Eligibility criteria for learners, and the documentation they must provide to establish need and to verify expenses.*
- *Eligible childcare service providers (cannot be the learner's spouse or relatives living with the learner);*

*Eligible expenses, for example, maximum rates for childcare, accommodation for persons with disabilities, public transit, private cars, carpools, and parking; and*

- *Policy and procedures for payment, including direct payment to learners; and indirect payment to suppliers, and circumstances where advance payment may be possible*

When exploring Best Practices for Training supports, it was discovered that learners who experience significant anxiety have the same needs as others: Childcare, translation supports, transportation, technology, access to reliable internet etc. Of note though, there are sometimes some additional considerations for those with anxiety.

- ❖ Be flexible with transportation supports if possible as some students with significant anxieties have difficulties utilizing public transportation
- ❖ Offer hybrid models or allow a student to attend online if they are not able to attend class in person on a given day to minimally impact student routine
- ❖ Financially support with required technology and services
- ❖ Be aware that a student may not be receptive to employing an outside child care provider other than a family member due to anxiety concerns
- ❖ Offer supports at a rate that is meaningful and on par with current prices.
- ❖ Consider supporting emergency food purchases if needed to alleviate the stress and anxiety with not having enough to sustain the student or their dependents.

It would be negligent if this paper failed to mention the impact that the increased cost of living is having on LBS learners. An article published by CTV News on June 14, 2023 “Grand River Transit will get a bit more expensive in July”, Kim Wilhelm from the Foodbank was quoted as saying “Every day people are forced to make that decision. ‘OK, today am I going to pay my rent or am I going to buy food, am I going to get that bus pass or buy food, am I going to pay that

car repair bill that gets me to and from a job, or should I buy food?” Where does Skill Upgrading fall into this list of priorities? For this reason, it is important that LBS programs not only offer flexibility in the Training Supports that they can provide but they also offer them at a rate that minimizes the impact of a barrier.

## Suggested Best Practices: Follow Up

*(Government of Ontario, 2020) LBS service providers contact learners at exit, and at three, six and 12 months after they leave the LBS program. This service documents the value and effectiveness of the other four services.*

When considering Follow Up practices, it is important to realize that the success of an LBS program cannot be easily quantified. It is not inherent that an individual’s inability to find or maintain employment (which has been identified as a measure of success) is a) applicable to all LBS learners at the time that feedback or b) directly related to a student’s participation in LBS.

As Perchotka (2023) states “Most experienced adult educators are aware of the disturbingly low participation and goal completion outcomes for many adult upgrading learners. In fact, many participants tend to float from one adult upgrading program to another, over many years. Eventually, some do find and successfully complete a program that resonates with their current situations and dispositions, but many do not”.

Of additional importance, when asking for feedback that has a strong indication of what is a successful outcome and what is not, one must realize that a client struggling with anxiety may be hesitant to provide feedback as they may internalize feelings of failure if they are not able to answer each question with a report of success. This reality could significantly impact the collection of feedback data post program.

One local expert suggests the following to collect feedback post program:

- ❖ Host feedback sessions and be creative how they happen within varying communities

## Suggested Best Practices: Professional Training for LBS Instructors

Throughout the investigation of Best Practices to Support Persons with Anxiety in LBS programming, one recurring theme was evident – the competencies of the staff. These are the individuals who work hard to create and maintain an environment in which all students can experience success and feel welcomed and inclusive. They are the individuals who need to constantly assess what a student needs on a given day and how they can meet that need. They establish relationships with all students so that even if a student was not successful with programming on this attempt, they know that they can come back. They will always be welcomed in a classroom that doesn’t require them to check all their worries or experiences at the door. The LBS classroom is a safe space to build the skills for their future.

As a result of this, it is important that the Ministry evaluates funding for LBS classrooms so that organizations have the ability to invest in skill development for staff and allows instructors to make a reasonable wage so that they are able to commit to LBS programs as a long-term career plan. This will allow LBS practitioners to become more skilled in the subtle skills and nuances that are essential in the classroom especially when supporting those with mental health challenges. Unfortunately, professional development takes more time and resources than what some service providers may be able to fit into the budget while still meeting Performance Commitments.

By investing in Professional Development for practitioners, LBS organizations would be able to ensure the following best practices:

- ❖ Remain curious and look at the underlying behaviour and reasons for it.
- ❖ Be aware of conscious and unconscious biases and be brave in engaging in uncomfortable conversations with fellow staff and students to remove these from the classroom environment so all students can feel safe and welcomed.
- ❖ Participate in Round Table discussions with community partners such as "What is it like to support someone with anxiety?"
- ❖ Be open to exploring partnerships on how we can work together to support clients with anxiety challenges.
- ❖ Be aware that low literacy may correlate to a mental health issue which is often undiagnosed.

In addition to meeting the needs of students, staff must also be trained and encouraged to practice self-care. LBS practitioners are required to build compassionate and empathetic relationships with all students to foster a student's academic and emotional growth. The risk of doing so on an ongoing basis, is that practitioner's can be at increased risk for Compassion Fatigue. According to the Canadian Medical Association (Canadian Medical Association, 2020), Compassion Fatigue is defined as "the cost of caring for others or for their emotional pain" and could manifest in the following ways.

- feelings of helplessness and powerlessness in the face of patient suffering
- reduced feelings of empathy and sensitivity
- feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by work demands
- feeling detached, numb and emotionally disconnected
- loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy
- increased anxiety, sadness, anger and irritability
- difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- difficulty sleeping and sleep disturbances like nightmares
- physical symptoms like headaches, nausea, upset stomach and dizziness
- increased conflict in personal relationships
- neglect of your own self-care
- withdrawal and self-isolation

- an increase in substance use as a form of self-medication

Not only do practitioners need to be trained to watch for signs of fatigue in themselves and others and respond accordingly, but they also need the opportunity to develop skills and routines for daily life management to reduce the risk of developing CF symptoms. In addition, it is essential to ensure that a program is appropriately staffed so that managers can provide appropriate supports to staff when needed instead of being tasked with being a manager and an instructor concurrently. Additionally, it would be recommended that LBS programming house the appropriate staff contingent to allow for staff members to take time off and focus on rejuvenation and restoration instead of worrying about the workload that will be waiting upon their return.

According to an article published on GoodTherapy.org (2020) the following workplace practices may assist in combating the likelihood of developing Compassion Fatigue in practitioners:

- ❖ Support groups and open discussions about compassion fatigue in the workplace
- ❖ Regular breaks
- ❖ Routine check-ins
- ❖ Mental health days
- ❖ Onsite counseling
- ❖ Relaxation rooms, massage, meditation classes, etc.

## Community Resources - Additional Training and Supports for LBS Staff

- 1) [UW Centre for Mental Health and Treatment \(CMHRT\)](#) – Community Education and Outreach offers workshops for staff and also has print resources available for select topics.
- 2) [Canadian Mental Health Association](#) – offers Workplace Mental Health Training, Takeaways Toolkit and certification in Psychological Health and Safety Training.
- 3) [Extend-A-Family](#) – facilitates workshops for community members which may be appropriate for staff.
  - 3- hour Understanding Conflict & Communication – become more aware of your conflict styles and practice communication to deal with conflict and improve empathy
  - 2- day Crisis Prevention by Safe Management training for \$95.00 for those not affiliated with EAFWR. Topics include dealing with difficult situations, verbal and non-verbal de-escalation techniques and how to avoid injuries if the behaviour escalates.

- 4) [Wellbeing Waterloo Region](#) – offers resources on the website and links to Trainings and Supports but is no longer active in the Waterloo community after disbanding the group in March 2023
- 5) [Camino Well Being and Mental Health](#) offers a variety of programs to learn about different topics and build community. A list of current programs can be found [here](#).
- 6) [Guelph Community Health Centre](#)
- 7) LinkedIn Learning resources on Emotional Intelligence Development <https://www.linkedin.com/learning/topics/emotional-intelligence>
- 8) **Yes I Can A Mental Health Guide for Adult Literacy Facilitators**  
**by Project READ Literacy Network**

This guide provides information and strategies for supporting adult learners living with mental health conditions or disorders.

As an adult education facilitator, you are in a position to support adult learners living with mental health issues on their learning path. This guide has been developed to support you, the facilitator, on your professional learning journey. It is intended as a helpful addition to your toolkit.

[Watch this Training Webinar Recording](#) to find out more about this resource.

[Click here](#) to download the Mental Health Guide Q&A – CHAT Summary.

[Free Download](#)

## Conclusion

Creating a supportive environment for individuals with anxiety in an academic upgrading program is pivotal for their success and well-being. A comprehensive approach involves fostering open communication, understanding the unique needs of each learner, and implementing flexible strategies that accommodate anxiety-related challenges. Emphasizing a positive and strengths-based perspective, providing access to mental health resources, and promoting self-regulation techniques can contribute to a more inclusive and effective learning experience. By prioritizing the mental health and academic needs of individuals with anxiety, academic upgrading programs can empower learners to overcome challenges, build confidence, and achieve their educational goals. Ultimately, a compassionate and individualized approach is key to unlocking the full potential of those navigating academic upgrading while managing anxiety.

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