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Working as a mental health practitioner has its own challenges, but throw in a pandemic and the list just keeps growing. Fifteen months ago I returned to work two weeks after the death of my mother to a list of challenges I never thought I would face. My preschool aged clients with autism spectrum disorder would be returning to the clinic after a break that started abruptly two months prior. While we were all trying to get back into our routine we were hit with our first covid exposure two weeks after our return.

In order to keep staff and clients safe we have had to wash our hands every time we entered a space, wear masks, double up on masks, wearing one mask for a week straight due to low supplies, goggles, face shields and change our clothes between sessions, or if a client coughed, sneezed, spit or wipe boogers on us. To say it was a lot would be an understatement. I wear glasses, so between the masks and goggles my glasses would fog up and I would be unable to see through them creating a safety concern that I needed to navigate while also keeping clients safe during challenging behaviors like hitting, kicking, biting and flopping to the ground. I wouldn't say it has ever gotten easier. I've just learned how to cope through those frustrations the same way I teach my clients to cope through all of the changes they've faced this year.

Our clients were facing challenges they had never experienced. If anyone was sick in their house or if there was an exposure at school, day care or at Fraser then they were immediately quarantined and their routines changed completely. This happened to me and my clients two weeks after returning to the clinic. We spent time isolated and alone for fourteen days, some getting covid tests while others waited out the quarantine hoping they wouldn't develop symptoms or that they didn't get any family members sick, and with every quarantine came increased mental health issues. When clients returned from their quarantine it felt like we were starting over and the clients were so frustrated because of it. We would see more behaviors, masks would be ripped off our faces and we would have to scramble to replace them. During the high intensity behaviors it was very difficult to breathe through the two layers of masks. As time went on our jobs became more difficult as everyone, including parents started to burn out. One of the other challenges has been the isolation from coworkers while in the building. Socializing has decreased due to the need to social distance and decrease risk of exposure. Not being able to see friends outside of the workplace for fear of spreading the virus across day treatment rooms, clients and their families or even our families has been so hard. While we know it has been the safest thing to do it has taken its toll on our mental health.

Our staff has worked tirelessly to keep client skills up, so much so that we often forget to care for ourselves. Every exposure or illness also meant we would quarantine which meant we would use our paid time off in huge chunks and when we really needed a mental health day, we would not have the time or the staff to be able to safely take a day off. This is still something we are struggling with today. I am so burnt out, and I know I am not alone. I need a day off, but my paid time off hours are low and what if I need to quarantine? If I am not paid, I will not be able to afford my mortgage, or bills. I will not be able to afford the self-care I need to recharge my batteries. These are the thoughts that go through my head every day as I come to work every day to provide therapy to a population struggling with every change that comes with this pandemic.

Even with high burnout rates, I, along with all of my amazing co-workers continue to show up and put our clients first. However, at some point, we will run out of gas and we will not be able to help them if we cannot help ourselves. When people are shown that they matter and are appreciated for the sacrifices they have made to help those in need during a high stress pandemic, it goes a long way.