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The Good, The Bad, The Ugly: Work and Life as a DSP

A DSP in the field (literally): Supporting someone with diverse abilities working on a horse farm

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Jodie and Kien facing the day at a horse farm

My name is Jodie, and I am a vocational counselor at the Chilliwack Society of Community Living where I work with participants finding their dream job. I have been working in the social service field for over 30 years and reside in the lovely community of Rosedale British Columbia.

I have the privilege of supporting a young man named Kien working at a horse farm. This photo essay explores the Good, the Bad and the Ugly aspects of life for a DSP – through the lens of supporting someone with diverse abilities to work on the farm.

Working conditions at the farm can be interesting, but when an individual is passionate about their work that gives the support worker great satisfaction in their role.

I am a strong advocate for the individuals I support, my coworkers and the community at large.

Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) are drawn to the field of developmental services, and some stay in it for decades. Others last a short time and move on.



The Good: working outdoors with horses, supporting people with their dream job!

The satisfaction of supporting people to live their dreams



A happy moment as a DSP supporting at the farm with Peanut the horse.

Being in the great outdoors is such a therapeutic thing for anyone – especially for people with limited opportunities to access nature when living on a limited disability income.

As a DSP, supporting an individual with diverse abilities that loves the work and feels accomplishment in a job well done, is extremely fulfilling.

Just being on a horse farm gives a peace of mind caring for these gentle creatures, these

beautiful horses.

Doing this job as a DSP involves spending quality time getting to know individual people with diverse abilities and learning about what their passions are; what the aspects of being alive are that bring them joy and fulfillment.

Once I have an understanding of the strengths of a person I support and truly understand what motivates them to contribute to the world, we build community connections and pathways to foster inclusion.

The Bad: The manure piles, the low wages, the long hours!

The overtime, the pressure of being short staffed are a little like piles of horse manure

Kien holds out a pitchfork of horse manure as Jodie supports him working on a horse farm.

The pay a DSP receives is hardly enough to cover basic living needs. The working conditions aren't great either. It's common for us to get called in to work overtime. Because putting the people I support first is very important for me, I want to say yes. Then I end up burnt out.

The staff shortage has continued since the pandemic. Organizations are now hiring unqualified staff – and it brings down the quality of our work. The people we support suffer. Those are just some of the things that DSPs face everyday.





Jodie at the office

At the end of the day on the farm, the paperwork still needs to be done. DSPs need to be provided with time to complete the necessary paperwork. Workers often work hours completing paperwork into the wee hours after they've completed their paid shifts.

The Ugly: the never-ending horse manure, low morale and underappreciation.
The need for recognition and mental health support for underappreciated DSPs can be similar to having protective rubber boots to wade through manure!



Boots and Poop – a DSP needs protection on the job!

On the horse farm I wear rubber boots to deal with the manure. I need to protect my feet. How do we support our mental health as DSPs? What protection are we given?

Although the work of a DSP can be challenging, we would not be in this work if we did not love what we do. With the proper recognition and support for the support workers there would be no limits on what we can accomplish with the amazing individuals we have the privilege we serve.

Things may get messy, but we are able to get support ourselves, like our mental health and wellness from family, friends and capable co-workers. We look after ourselves, but the system needs to recognize our work and efforts as well. Having a management team available for DSP support would be an added benefit in the long term. Supported DSPs can give the best support to individuals we serve.

DSPs can get their empty tanks filled with the support of co-workers, family, friends at the end of a long workday. When DSPs can find a peer or co-worker to navigate a tough day, that support can be crucial in a system that may lack resources to support DSPs. DSPs deserve to be supported by their management team at all times to keep quality DSPs thriving in the field.

Support workers need recognition for a job well done. Wages need to be higher and hours increased, to allow all the necessary paperwork and job tasks that need to be completed daily. Many DSP's experience burnout and will leave the profession if working conditions are not improved.

I hope the images shared, and my analogy of life on a horse farm to the work of a DSP will give a better understanding of what DSPs deal with daily in all types of support settings. This is an illustration of the good, the bad and the ugly of DSP work in Canada.



Jodie having dinner after a long day with her husband Bernd.



Jodie and Jack the horse sharing a moment in the life of a DSP