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# **Coming Apart at the Screens: Canadian Video Relay Interpreters and Stress**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study addressed the concern of video relay service (VRS) interpreters experiencing stress, which can lead to burnout. In contrast to the relatively long history of VRS in the United States, the Canadian Deaf community gained access to VRS services only in 2016. Yet to date, there has been no Canadian research on the work environment of VRS sign language interpreters. For this study, Canadian interpreters were interviewed about their experiences working in a VRS setting and the associated stressors. The interviewed interpreters also had potential strategies and solutions to manage their stress effectively. The goal of this pilot study was to capture the experiences of Canadian interpreters as they navigated working in VRS environments. The results may help promote awareness amongst current and future interpreters working in VRS settings while inviting the exploration of potential solutions to address the stress. Additionally, the study results hold relevance for Canadian interpreter education programs that strive to constantly update their curricula to ensure appropriate knowledge and skills among program graduates.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Video relay service (VRS) is a form of technology that allows Deaf and hard of hearing people to make telephone calls in their preferred language via interpreters working at call centres or similar locations. Though the technology for VRS is not new, VRS was implemented in Canada only in 2016, which leaves many unknown factors of how VRS impacts Canadian interpreters. Interpreters typically experience stress in a variety of settings (Bontempo & Malcolm, 2012; Dean & Pollard, 2001); however, this study focuses on the stress that interpreters may encounter in VRS settings and what strategies they might employ to mitigate those stressors. In turn, the challenges of VRS may reveal diverse strategies for dealing with stress as identified by interpreters.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

This preliminary research study focuses on Canadian VRS interpreters and stress. There has been little research about this topic given that Canadian VRS is relatively new, having been first implemented on September 28, 2016 (Canadian Administrator of Video Relay Service (CAV),

2016). Thus, there is a need to explore the strategies that interpreters utilize to reduce the amount of stress they may experience in this complex setting.

Some unique factors to VRS include the lack of context and preparation for each call that is typically found with other interpreting assignments, the use of technology and malfunctioning technology, both parties not seeing each other directly, and the sheer variability of callers and topics emerging during a call (Napier et al., 2017). This study was an opportunity to examine the ways in which Canadian VRS companies provide training for interpreters that addresses the many demands of this line of work. To manage such demands, it is crucial that interpreters become aware about the potential stressors of working in VRS. The findings of this study explored factors causing stress and specific strategies VRS interpreters use to avoid and reduce such stressors. This research holds implications for Canadian interpreters and may result in interpreters employing additional strategies for their work, potentially leading to more effective interpretation services. Additionally, there are implications for interpreter education programs preparing interpreters for the ever-changing field, which also fueled this research.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The following section examines some of the current literature on the challenges facing interpreters in VRS settings as well as strategies to mitigate those challenges.

### **VIDEO RELAY SERVICE**

VRS allows many Deaf and hard of hearing persons to communicate more freely over the phone in their native signed language — which, in a Canadian context may be American Sign Language (ASL) or Langues des Signes Québécoise (LSQ) — instead of using English (Brunson, 2011). The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) (2007) estimates that more than 4,000 sign language interpreters have worked in a VRS setting in the United States since VRS was formally established in 2000. Canada did not have VRS until 2016, but it has quickly become an employment setting that interpreters are drawn to, whether contracted or employed. Typically, an interpreter works in a call centre or remotely at home and interprets phone calls via video with the Deaf or hard of hearing person and a standard telephone with a hearing person. There are several companies hosting call centres in Canada, including Utah-based Sorenson Communications, which has four Canadian centres primarily serving U.S. citizens. In the United States, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has oversight of VRS and is responsible for setting standards for call-handling procedures (RID, 2007). In Canada, this function is managed by the Canadian Administrator of Video Relay Service (CAV), a not-for-profit corporation mandated by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) (CAV, 2016). CAV also contracts with several video interpreter providers (VIP) that provide call centres and sign language interpreting between ASL and English along with French and LSQ (CAV, 2016). VIPs in Canada include Convo, IVéS, Interprétation Signes et Paroles (ISEP), Northern 911, Sign Language Interpreting Associates Ottawa Inc. (SLIAO), and Sivet (CAV, 2016).

### **VIDEO RELAY SERVICE CONCERNS**

Studies (Bower, 2015; Wessling & Shaw, 2014) have documented interpreters' concerns about working in VRS settings. One of the unique challenges of VRS work is that the interpreter facilitates a conversation between two parties who cannot see each other, which is very different

from *in situ* work for interpreting assignments, where both parties can see each other. VRS users, like hearing callers, make calls for a vast range of reasons, including emotionally-charged situations, which often affect interpreters. Wessling and Shaw (2014) conducted a study of the persistent emotional extremes of VRS interpreters and found that the majority of participants reported experiencing negative emotions such as anger (77.5%), sadness (76.7%), and frustration (40.9%) in response to a VRS call. Emotional extremes can be concerning when paired with fast-paced environments and having to quickly change topics and contexts while working numerous calls. Consequently, after a call is completed, an interpreter may feel satisfied and positive about their work, yet must be prepared to interpret the next call — which could involve difficult content that leaves them feeling less satisfied or positive about their work.

Interpreters must be emotionally prepared to interpret any call that comes into the queue, but also be prepared for any topic that may arise. This can be challenging to achieve, especially when without preparation materials and/or contextual information beforehand. Janzen and Shaffer (2013) stated that “coherence between participants depends on shared knowledge” (p. 65), and constructing that meaning is what is known as intersubjectivity. When interpreters feel that they lack sufficient information from the interlocutors, they may try to use contextualization strategies to gain a clearer understanding of the topic in order to complete the interpretation (Janzen & Shaffer, 2013). The lack of ability to have a shared context can be stressful, which leads to adopting strategies to mitigate the stress, especially because long-term exposure to stress can lead to burnout (Adigun, 2019).

#### **VIDEO RELAY SERVICE DEMANDS AND CONTROLS**

Building on the original work of Karasek (1979) and Karasek and Theorell (1990), a later study by Dean and Pollard (2013) offered methods for understanding, analyzing, and talking about how to best provide interpreting services. Dean and Pollard’s framework, the Demand Control Schema (DC-S), guides interpreters in the development of effective ethical decision-making. The term *demands* refers to a “factor that rises to a level of significance that will, or should, impact the decision-making involved in [the] work” (Dean & Pollard, 2013, p. 4). Factors fall under four different categories: environmental, interpersonal, paralinguistic and intrapersonal.<sup>1</sup> A *control* can be described as “how the interpreter interacts with and responds to the demands of an interpreting assignment. It does not refer to ‘controlling’ the situation or ‘taking control’. The term control is best understood as a noun, not a verb” (Dean & Pollard, 2013, p. 15). Using the DC-S framework, interpreters can accurately prepare for assignments in a way that reduces their cognitive load when demands arise, which may lead to a reduction in stress (Dean & Pollard, 2013).

Working in VRS settings can make it difficult to identify specific demands and controls because each call has a different context with various demands. If interpreters identify more general demands that relate to working in VRS, they can also employ various controls. One example of a demand frequently cited by interpreters is the stress associated with working with a consumer that the interpreter may not have the fluency for, so they may choose to implement a control of calling a colleague to assist. Having the support of a colleague provides resources for the interpreters and allows for better management of their environment (Humphrey, 2015). An interpreter implementing adequate controls may help with reducing the amount of stress

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the different categories, see Dean & Pollard, 2013, p. 5, Table 1.1.

experienced during a call. When interpreters are less stressed and perceive themselves as having more options to manage the interactions, they can provide better quality work. However, it is unclear what specific controls interpreters use while working in VRS, which supports the need for further research on the controls used by VRS interpreters to mitigate stress.

## **BURNOUT IN VRS**

Burnout can decrease an interpreter's desire to work, and if widespread, could lead to far fewer interpreters working in the field, creating larger gaps in accessibility. Therefore, VRS interpreters need to be equipped with strategic and effective controls to assist in reducing stress and burnout. Some of the factors that contribute to the stress are related to the context of working in VRS settings, the interpreters' personal situation, life experiences, current mental and physical state, fluency, and level of resilience (Bower, 2015). Humphrey (2015) stated that "interpreters who worked in VRS settings experience a significant correlation to depersonalization" (p. 61), echoing what Michal et al. (2013) stated about interpreters — that they may have "experiences of unreality, detachment, or being an outside observer with respect to one's thoughts, sensations, actions or feelings." Thus, Humphrey (2015) and Michal et al. (2013) suggested that interpreters are not immune to emotional challenges emerging from their work. Similarly, interpreters may be impacted by stressors incurred through emotional extremes during VRS calls, which may cause burnout.

In addition, the nature of the assignment, such as a 911 or emergency medical call, can have a significant influence on the interpreter and may increase the likelihood of experiencing burnout when coupled with other factors (Crezee et. al., 2015). Burnout can also impact an interpreter's quality of life. When interpreters suffer from burnout, they may experience severe problems in the workplace as well as in their private lives (Bower, 2015). Interpreters experiencing burnout may have to take time off work to recuperate, which could then add the additional stress of not having an income to support themselves or their family.

Burnout can reduce the quality of interpreters' work. Research shows that burnout can "lead to a deterioration in the quality of care or service that is provided by the staff" (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, p. 100). Schwenke (2012) surveyed 117 interpreters attending the 2009 RID national conference through a job content questionnaire, which examined the risk of burnout. Schwenke (2012) hypothesized that interpreters would experience high levels of burnout, but the results revealed that the majority (54.7 percent) of the interpreters reported that they experienced low levels of burnout in terms of emotional exhaustion. One of the limitations of this study was that interpreters who are engaged enough to attend a conference are likely in a positive mindset, which may not be representative of interpreters too stressed or burned out to attend a conference. Another factor that may have skewed the results was that the majority of participants were freelance interpreters who did not specifically work in VRS settings. Freelance interpreters have the option to choose the assignments they work. On the contrary, VRS interpreters cannot predict the type of calls they receive. If working in certain settings is triggering for the interpreter — for instance, if an interpreter is a new parent and has to interpret a call to child services, it may impact their work during the call. Another factor that could further increase stress are VRS provider policies. For example, in the United States, FCC policy requires the interpreter to stay on any VRS call for at least 10 minutes before transferring it to another interpreter (FCC, 2017). Given the

numerous intersecting factors that contribute to burnout, it becomes necessary for interpreters to understand and mitigate these factors.

### **BENEFITS OF SELF-CARE**

There are numerous ways interpreters can prevent burnout and stress. The strategies that are most effective often depend on the interpreter's personality and individual work experience (Schwenke, 2012). Furthermore, learning self-care strategies can support longevity in the interpreting field. Self-care is crucial because if interpreters are stressed, it causes them to forget they are hungry or tired (Crezee et al., 2015), thus neglecting their basic needs. Another important part of self-care is regular exercise, which allows the interpreter to rest and focus on things they enjoy (Crezee et al., 2015). With self-care as a significant key to mitigate stress in VRS settings, interpreter educators should emphasize the importance of preventative self-care to support future interpreters.

### **VIDEO RELAY SERVICE TRAINING**

The VRS Interpreting Institute (VRSII), offered through Sorenson, offers the Compass Program, specific training for VRS work that provides meaningful opportunities to hone skills related to VRS (Nelson et al., 2018). There are additional forms of VRS training available throughout the United States, but training is less readily available in Canada.

Traditionally, students in ASL-English interpreter training programs are not taught how to interpret in VRS settings, according to Johnson (2007). The Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education (CCIE) updated its standards in 2018 to include a reference to interpreter students within the United States and Canada learning the protocols for VRS settings (CCIE, 2018). While these standards are beneficial, as of 2020, there were only 19 programs in the United States that were accredited per these standards (CCIE, 2018). Of the six Canadian ASL-English interpreter training programs, none is accredited per these standards. To be eligible for accreditation, the program must be a degree program and have at least three cohorts graduated. As of 2020, there was only one partially eligible program at George Brown College (GBC) in Toronto. They offer the only honours bachelor of interpretation (ASL-English) throughout Canada, and only two cohorts have graduated from that program. In 2022, the program will become eligible to apply for accreditation, which may require demonstration of how the program curriculum addresses VRS training.

### **IMPACT OF CANADIAN INTERPRETER EDUCATION PROGRAMS ON VRS TRAINING**

In reviewing the websites of the six Canadian interpreter programs, only one of the programs mentions specific curricula addressing VRS training. In 2019, a course, *Introduction to Technology*, was implemented at GBC to focus on VRS interpreting. Students in that course visited a local VRS call centre and had presentations by VRS interpreters. The in-class portion of training included simulated incoming calls and learning experiences with diverse signers and topics for which the student interpreter had little or no background knowledge. The rationale for adding this curriculum focus was that VRS companies were quickly becoming an employer of choice in Canada. Exposing students to the demands of this setting and the possible ways of mitigating the stress was seen as proactively preparing graduates (C. Kennedy, personal communication, May 1, 2020).

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Given the paucity of Canadian literature about the nature of VRS and its impact on interpreters along with strategies for stress prevention, the purpose of this study was to determine to what extent VRS interpreters experienced stress and their use of effective strategies to reduce stress. The following research questions framed this study:

1. In what ways do interpreters working in call centres describe their levels and sources of stress and burnout? What strategies are they using to manage their stress?
2. When working in a VRS environment, what strategies are used to help manage stressful calls?
3. In what ways do VRS call centres provide training and support for interpreters in managing the demands of working in a VRS environment?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This preliminary study drew on qualitative methodologies (Creswell, 2011). Using a maximal variation sampling strategy to narrow down specific VRS companies in Canada, participants were contacted through professional networks (Creswell, 2011). After the data collection process started, opportunistic sampling began where participants referred the researcher to someone who had worked many years in VRS. Creswell suggested that this approach allows the researcher to access those participants who have a great deal of experience and information to share. In addition, a snowball sampling strategy was used where participants were asked to refer to other potential participants who might be interested.

The data collection methods included one-on-one semi-structured interviews using an online video conference platform, Whereby, and in-person interviews. The interview participants were ASL-English interpreters and training managers who worked in VRS call centres across Canada. The interpreters were interviewed on their experiences of stress. The training managers were interviewed because they worked closely with video interpreters (VIs), and their perspectives on how their roles functioned as a control or support for VIs were relevant. All of the interviews were digitally recorded (audio and/or video) and each interview ranged from 20 minutes to 45 minutes. After each interview was conducted, interviews were transcribed into a Google document.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The transcribed interviews were then analyzed and coded in order to determine the major themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Google Documents allowed an ease of access to highlighting and colour-coding the data, organizing the findings with comments to be added on the side of entries. The open-ended questions were analyzed by coding for emerging themes and by using a frequency count to determine the most common responses for each of the findings (Creswell, 2011). Each interview was analyzed a minimum of three times until no new themes emerged.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study was reviewed and approved by the George Brown College Research Ethics Board (REB). Before the interviews were conducted, all participants were provided with an informational letter and a consent form they signed that explained the interview process and how the information would be used. Participants were not required to answer all the questions if they did not feel comfortable and were allowed to stop the interview at any time. All participants granted permission prior to the recording of the interview.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

There were 10 participants in the study, 2 of whom were Deaf and 8 of whom were hearing. All participants were Canadian, and the sample reflected those performing different roles in the provision of VRS. While some participants had multiple roles, eight participants indicated they were Canadian ASL-English VRS interpreters and five indicated they were Canadian training managers. In addition, the sample included diversity in the number of years the interpreters had worked in VRS, reflected in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** *Interpreters' Years of Experience Working in VRS*

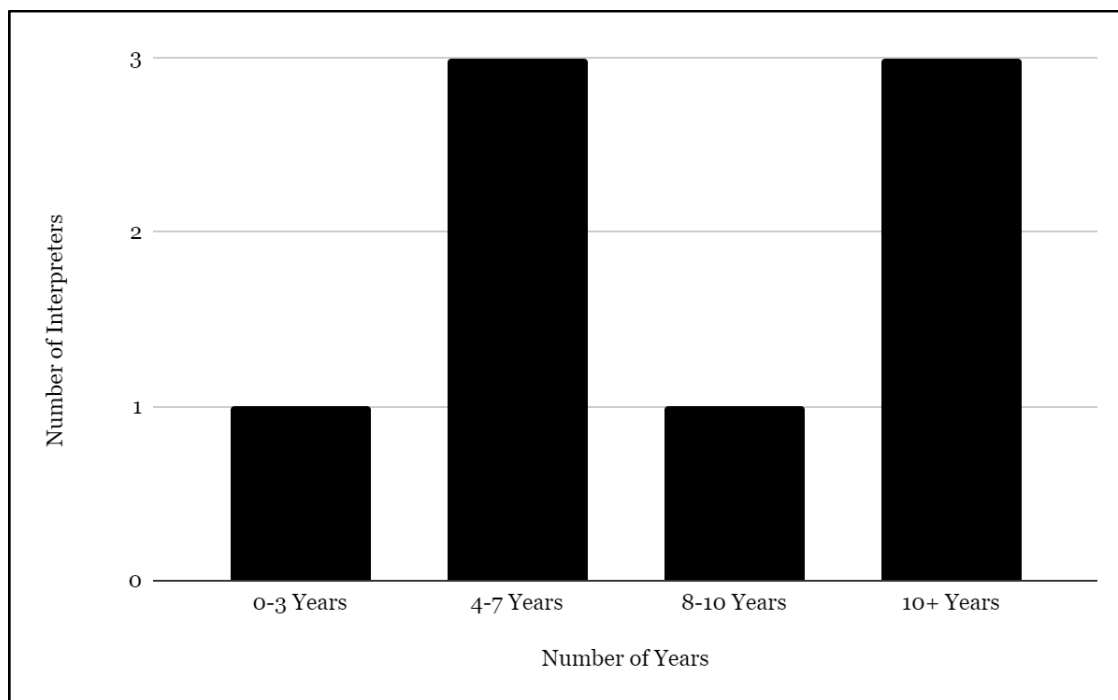
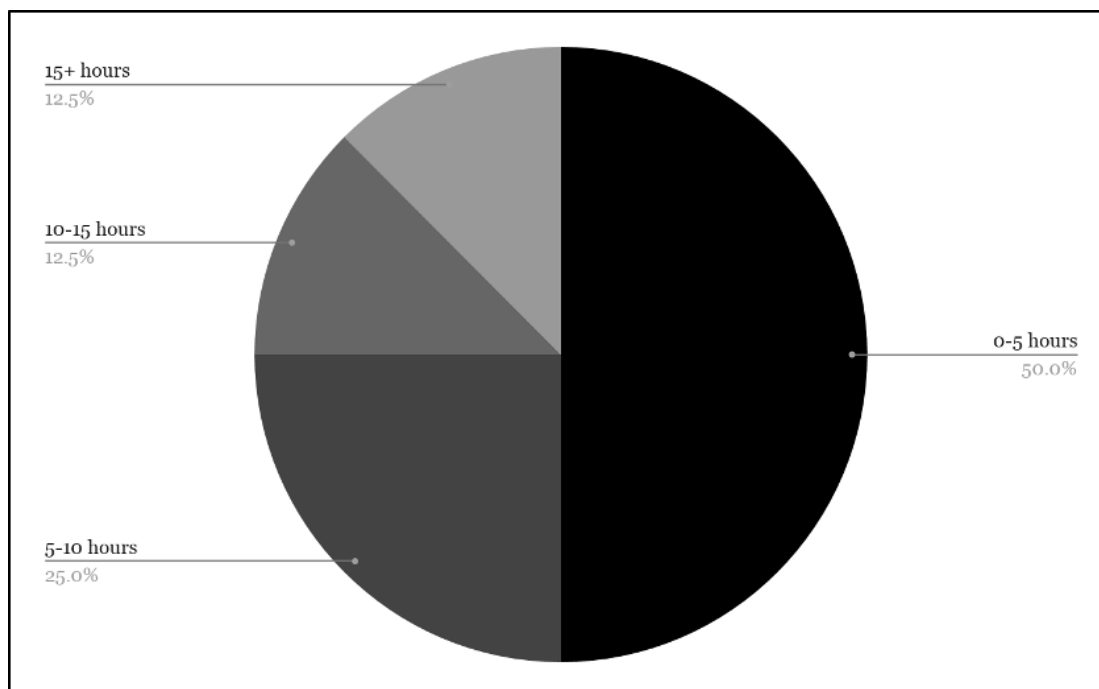


Figure 1 includes only participants' years of experience as VRS interpreters, not as managers. This diversity in the sample allowed for multiple perspectives to emerge and offered a rich data set. Figure 2 represents the number of hours per week that the participants reported working for a VRS provider.

**Figure 2.** *VRS Interpreting Hours per Week*





Four participants (50 percent) worked up to five hours per week, and the other four participants worked more than five hours per week. The interpreters who worked more than five hours a week reported experiencing more burnout compared to those who worked fewer than five hours a week. Also, two Deaf Call Centre Managers (CCM) were not included in Figure 2 because they worked 40 hours a week with various responsibilities.

### FINDINGS

The results of this study provided a snapshot of Canadian interpreters and their experiences in a VRS environment. All participants reported that they did not receive training in working in VRS during their interpreting preparation programs. Participants also all reported that VRS was stressful and that there were different factors that cause stress. For example, Participant G stated, "Stressful calls are very subjective, right? What a stressful call is to someone isn't stressful to the next person."

The degree of stress that people experience is highly dependent on individual factors; some may report that 911 calls are more stressful than conference calls with multiple parties, while others may report the opposite. Other stressful situations that were identified were calls with an emotional overlay embedded in the content, calls amongst family members, calls involving a personal situation, or specific content unfamiliar to the interpreter.

### CAUSES OF STRESS

VRS technology within the field of ASL-English interpreting is fairly new in Canada, and therefore is still somewhat new to interpreters in the field. Participant B said, "Technology encompasses various components of interpreting in a VRS setting: signing into the platform, navigating through the platform, adjusting the camera, sound testing, multitasking while interpreting [such as]

attending to an internal staff messaging system, calling for a team for support, [and] transferring the call.” Technology can also exacerbate stress if there is a bad internet connection and/or the interpreter cannot clearly see the Deaf caller or clearly hear the hearing caller. There are other factors that create a stressful call, such as background noise or distractions in the caller’s home or dealing with participants unfamiliar with VRS.

The top five most common sources of stress in order, as shown in Table 1, show that the increased technological demands is the main reason that causes stress while working in VRS.

**Table 1.** *Five Most Common Sources of Stress*

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<b>Causes of stress (in order)</b>
Increased technological demands
Work culture expectations
Decontextualized information
Emotional calls — specifically angry
Interpreting as conduits: Machine or human?

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Participants also reported stress surrounding the expectations and policies of U.S.-based VRS companies, policies that appear to focus more on the statistics of the calls each interpreter processes versus the quality of service. Participant D emphasized, “It is a numbers game, [which is when] the company monitors the speed of the answer and you can’t let the call ring more than once before you answer.” Participant G said, “They’re always watching you, how many times you call for a team, which in turn makes you not want to call for a team.” The participants stated that the pressure of policies about rapidly processing calls and the constant feeling of being watched did not create a supportive work environment and increased stress levels.

According to Janzen and Shaffer (2008), an important communication skill is to understand the role of contextualization between interlocutors: “As each participant makes contributions to the discourse, they evaluate the status of the information they are attempting to contribute against their beliefs about the other person’s knowledge store, etc., adding (or not adding) contextualizing information to it. . .” (p. 66). The inability to understand unfamiliar information during VRS calls, especially when interpreters lack context, can cause stress because, as Patrie (2007) stated, “The source language must be understood before it can be interpreted into the target language” (p. 5). VRS work generates a high number of calls at any given time, and does not allow interpreters to know what the next call will concern. Participant C reported, “As soon as the phone rings I feel just a little bit of a micro-stress because I don’t know in essence who’s calling and the reason behind their call.” VRS interpreters are expected to be prepared to interpret anything, even in contexts where they normally would not accept an assignment in real life. Participant G shared, “I think for me the most stressful calls are when I have very little knowledge on the topic or [is] an assignment that I would never take in real life.” This aligns with Bower (2015)’s study that listed various stress factors for VIs, with the fifth most significant stress factor being interpreting calls with limited contextual information. Many of Bower’s additional significant stress factors aligned with the responses received from participants of this study.

Emotional calls, specifically those where callers demonstrated anger, were a common stressor for interpreters in this study. Participant A reported surprise that it was these types of calls that caused greater stress compared to 911 calls: “It turned out that the calls that bother me the most are when people are angry at customer service. I find those the most stressful.”

Other participants reported feeling like they were reverting to using the conduit-model, in which an interpreter strictly “acts as a communication link between people, serving only in that capacity. No ‘helping’” (Wilcox & Shaffer, 2005, p. 29). “You’re basically a conduit or an operator,” Participant E said about VRS work, while Participant B described it as being “...like factory work.” Minimizing the humanity of the interpreter in the conduit model decreases their controls and increases stress. There were more reported factors that cause stress; however, these were the most commonly reported within this data set.

## BURNOUT SYMPTOMS

Table 2 shows the five common symptoms of burnout in VRS interpreting.

**Table 2.** *Five Common Symptoms of Burnout in VRS Interpreting*

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### Signs of burnout

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Feeling constantly fatigued  
 Physical injuries  
 Repetitive Strain Injuries (Woodcock & Fischer, 2008)  
 Lack of motivation to go to work  
 Lack of patience with callers, family, friends, and others

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Four of eight participants reported having experienced burnout. Fatigue and physical injuries, such as repetitive strain injuries, were the most prevalent signs of burnout reported. Participant F identified a lack of motivation to work as a sign of burnout and how it could impact one’s work beyond VRS settings: “I mean I think anything with interpreting takes a physical, emotional and mental toll on you and if you don’t have healthy ways to deal with that when you go home, it doesn’t matter if it’s VRS or another assignment, you’re not going to want to go the next day.”

Other interpreters reported that when experiencing burnout, they noticed mental or emotional effects such as a lack of motivation for going to work as Participant A said: “I didn’t want to get out of bed. I would dread getting out of bed and going into work...”

Participant F continued, “Sometimes I find myself exhausted afterwards which is why I try to limit my time in the centre.” Physical injuries can emerge from poor environmental settings (Woodcock & Fischer, 2008).

Woodcock & Fischer (2008) also discussed biomechanical hazards, such as physical movements that force stress on the body, and how sitting for prolonged periods can be a hazard. They stressed that the chair being used should be adjustable to accommodate the individual’s

height and most importantly contains back support. This is concerning, given that interpreters typically sit at a desk during VRS calls. Participant F further shared, “I think ergonomics is really important; sometimes I have noticed repetitive strain.” As numerous interpreters mentioned, physical injuries are signs of burnout, but they can also be increased in part by poor ergonomics in the VRS setting; together the combination can be dire.

Others reported being impatient with callers, family, and friends. Participant B said, “I just start to feel less patient with callers and that may not be because of the Deaf person on the line, but it could be the hearing person on the line. It’s also like, oh my gosh, another person that doesn’t understand my role within this technological platform.”

Additional stressors included some interpreters not recognizing when they are experiencing burnout. Participant E expressed concern about other interpreters by saying, “I don’t think some people realize that... like if they’re burnt out. Some people are constantly taking hours.” Other participants reported a decreasing ability to remain impartial, being filled with dread, and a declining quality of work while they experienced burnout symptoms.

### **STRATEGIES TO REDUCE STRESSORS WHILE WORKING**

The top four strategies to manage stressors while working in VRS, as shown in Table 3, include seeking assistance from a colleague and/or the centre manager for support during or after the call, transferring the call, and practicing breathing techniques.

**Table 3.** *Four Most Common Strategies to Reduce Stressors while Working in VRS*

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#### **Strategies to reduce stressors while working in VRS**

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Call an interpreter colleague for support  
 Transfer the call to another interpreter  
 Call a Deaf Call Centre Manager (CCM) for support  
 Conscious breathing during and in between calls

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In contrast to the comments regarding companies prioritizing statistics over interpreters’ well-being, participants reported that there are companies that encourage supportive measures. Participant B stated:

We highly encourage interpreters to call a team if they need, call a manager if they need extra support or another set of eyes and then that gives them the opportunity to have someone that also had a sense of what that call was and have a chance to debrief and figure out was that a good approach in that situation, is there something that you could have done differently and just giving that opportunity for that dialogue to happen and if you feel like you need a team, call a team. It doesn’t have to be because of reason a, b, c, d maybe you’re just having a tough day receptively and you’re like, “You know what, it would just really great if I could get an extra set of eyes for this specific call because I’m struggling.”

When interpreters are faced with a call that requires support, VRS companies typically have systems in place for interpreters to request an interpreter; however, there can be challenges with the effectiveness of this control. For example, the interpreter may be the only person in the call centre during a given shift, making it impossible to call a team and receive the necessary support. Some interpreters instead take the initiative to ensure that this does not happen. Participant A explained, “I know that a team will be there to support me if I need it, I always make sure to request that I’m not alone in the call centre/building.”

Another strategy is to transfer the call to another interpreter (as opposed to working with another interpreter on the same call) to mitigate the stressors of a call. If the interpreter does not feel that they are a good fit for the context of the call and believe it would be better suited for another interpreter, they can transfer the call to another interpreter either at the same or a different call centre, but it is not always a smooth transition, as Participant F described:

Sometimes I'm really struggling, and I'll say something like “I really feel like I'm not understanding, do you want me to transfer you to another interpreter, maybe it'll be easier?” Sometimes the consumer says yes and if they say no, you are kind of screwed.

Many cited the importance of having colleagues at the centre, especially a Deaf call centre manager. Participant E, who worked at a company that did not have a Deaf employee reported, “I think not having a Deaf person available, it’s an additional stressor for sure.” Participant C reported, “... if there is language disfluency and a Deaf CCM is not in the centre to debrief the call afterwards, it causes more stress.” This underscores the importance of having a qualified Deaf individual, such as a call centre manager, on site to provide support to interpreters.

#### **SELF-CARE STRATEGIES USED OUTSIDE OF THE OFFICE**

Another approach is to utilize self-care strategies outside of the office — that is, outside of the VRS environment. All participants practiced more than one type of self-care strategies, such as physical activities. As Participant D said, “This is the only body I have. No spare parts. I need to take care of it as much as possible. Taking care of everything. Even the stuff you can’t see, is imperative.”

Interpreters reported engaging in a variety of physical activities, the most common being going for walks, running, and practicing yoga. Woodcock & Fischer (2008) explained, “Interpreters who are in good general health will be in a better position to manage stress of all kinds. Good health includes good nutrition, healthy exercise, not smoking, driving safely, and managing occupational hazard exposure” (p. 60). Varying kinds of physical activity can benefit interpreters’ overall health and response to stress they encounter in the workplace.

Another aspect of self-care participants reported was knowing how many hours they were capable of working in VRS, since VRS work is vastly different from community interpreting. Participant D noted this distinction saying, “I know my level and I know what I can and can’t do.” Other interpreters did not realize they were experiencing burnout at first, but once they realized it, they decided to reduce their hours. Awareness of one’s limits can help interpreters reduce the chances of burnout.

Another way interpreters practiced self-care was by watching movies or tv shows. No one mentioned it as the only self-care they practiced; it was always in addition to other aspects of self-care. Finally, the last reported self-care strategy was to spend time with family and friends. Quality time can be very cathartic and has an important influence on a person's overall well-being (Thomas, Liu, & Umberson, 2017), which contributes to the overall capability to deal with stress in a VRS setting.

### **TRAINING AND SUPPORT**

All five interpreters reported they did not receive stress management training at work, which was confirmed by the participating training managers. Only one of five managers reported that they provided stress management training. The one training coordinator was not explicit about the nature of the stress management training, but reported that different strategies are discussed to make interpreters feel more at ease and less stressed knowing they have various options.

In this study, there was an interesting contradiction between the training managers and the interpreters regarding how they perceived the support available to interpreters. When interpreters were asked if their VRS company provided any support when they were feeling stressed or burnt out, all five reported there was no support. Participant D said,

You are the gateway. So, you have a lot of control and knowing how to manage that control, knowing how to use that control effectively and not to abuse it. That is a live-and-learn type of thing. Just comes with experience. You're not going to know... unless you've worked in high stakes situations where there's lots happening in previous careers or jobs, that's something that you cannot learn unless you're in it.

Participant D indicated that though supports were not available, handling that kind of stress was also not something that can be taught nor really managed by anyone other than the interpreter. In contrast, when the training managers were asked if there were resources available, the majority indicated that support was available and emphasized that there was an open-door policy and if interpreters were to experience a stressful call, they had the option to debrief with a manager. The available resources, however, puts the onus on the interpreters to request support themselves.

### **TRAINING MANAGERS: A VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DESK**

The training managers reported two major challenges in supervising and supporting interpreters: The interpreter's ability to process information and interpret between two languages (interpreting processes), and managing the technology while also interpreting calls between Deaf and non-deaf callers. The training managers reported that process management—the interpreting process—was an area that interpreters were constantly receiving feedback about, as it critically impacted the quality of the interpreting. One training coordinator said, “The process management is a huge piece as well, because you have to remember that these two people can't see each other.” Since the two callers can't see each other, training around process management should be emphasized to ensure a natural-flowing conversation with minimal interruptions. Additionally, interpreters should use strategies to let either caller know that the other is still talking, be aware of cultural and linguistic differences, and so forth.

Technology, as mentioned in earlier findings, serves a huge role in VRS interpreting, and was echoed by the training emphasizing that newer VRS interpreters are not as savvy with the technology but even experienced VRS interpreters encounter technological challenges that increases the stress of each call.

## DISCUSSION

The findings that emerged from this Canadian study align with findings of previous research in the United States (Bower, 2015). There are a number of stressors that come with working in VRS: increased technological demands, work culture, nature of the calls, the lack of context, and the physical and mental demands, which can eventually lead to burnout. There were strategies discussed for during and after the call and outside the work environment to try and reduce their stress. While working, interpreters can ask a colleague for support, transfer the call, call a centre manager for support, and/or apply breathing techniques. After work hours, interpreters can spend time with friends and family, watch movies or television, partake in physical activity, and limit the number of hours they work in VRS. It is imperative that interpreters starting to experience burnout do not ignore them to the point where the interpreter is at risk of leaving the field, or, in some cases, not want to return to work. The Canadian ASL-English interpreting community is already so small that the community cannot afford to lose any interpreters. The demand for interpreters in VRS settings continues to grow in Canada and retaining a well-qualified workforce is crucial.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the participants' responses, the following recommendations emerged:

1. Review training and/or mentoring opportunities within the interpreting education programs. Ensure students are receiving adequate training about VRS settings as they would with other common settings such as medical, employment, and education. This may allow recent graduates to be better prepared to work in VRS settings.
2. Interpreters currently working or interested in working in VRS need to be very aware of how many hours that they can work while effectively managing their stress. Interpreters may want to consider working the minimum number of hours allowed by a centre and slowly add hours so they have control and can monitor their stress levels while learning strategies to cope with the multiples demands in VRS.
3. Ideally, interpreters should limit VRS work to part-time status, which could reduce the amount of stress they experience and minimize potential career burnout.
4. VRS companies should educate the public about VRS. An idea that was piloted and well received was a Canadian television commercial showing a Deaf doctor using VRS<sup>2</sup>. Such campaigns can go a long way in educating the public in positive ways and may contribute to reducing the stress for interpreters because non-Deaf callers may then be more familiar with VRS calls.
5. Given the perspectives of interpreters in this study, having a Deaf centre manager was perceived as beneficial on many levels, and should become a best practice for all VRS call

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<sup>2</sup> For the video of the commercial, see <https://youtu.be/gcP23Y5q89c>.

centres in Canada. The Deaf individual's very presence can reduce stress by providing support to the interpreters, especially in linguistic and cultural areas.

6. VRS companies should review the training and/or support for VRS interpreters, particularly for stress management, and ensure the resources are supportive.
7. To assist with interpreters' well-being, VRS companies should make certain that interpreters have ergonomic assessments by a qualified professional and design workstations to meet the interpreters' individual needs, including the option of standing workstations. VRS companies should also hire a professional ergonomist to visit the call centre and regularly ensure proper workplace ergonomics are in place.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study was conducted with a small purposeful sample of a variety of interpreters who worked in Canadian VRS contexts, which allowed for richer data from smaller groups of people. A limitation of the study was that the participants reflected the experiences of those in two provinces only; a larger geographical study would yield greater results. Another limitation was that the study only included interpreters who used ASL and English with no LSQ-French interpreters involved. It would be beneficial to include the perspectives of LSQ-French interpreters to determine if LSQ-French interpreters working at VRS call centres experience the same stressors. It would also be interesting to examine the experiences of full-time VRS interpreters to determine any long-term effects on skill development, and if there is a higher chance of burnout. This study will hopefully lead to more future Canadian studies of VRS work environments as the service proliferates in Canada.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings from this study allowed Canadian ASL-English interpreters to share their experiences of working in VRS settings, and their concerns about stressors while working in VRS and how these factors could lead to burnout. In compiling the types of stressors that interpreters experience, it is evident that working in VRS is uniquely stressful and is an area of specialized interpreting practice.. This should not be a deterrent from working in VRS settings, however; rather, VRS companies have an opportunity to continue examining the strategies and tools available to ensure interpreters are not experiencing significant stress or burnout. VRS is crucial for the Deaf community in terms of equity and access to the vast number of services available to all citizens. Whether booking a doctor's appointment, conducting a phone interview, or connecting with a family member, VRS is a necessity and a human right. This is all the more reason for interpreters to maintain a good quality of life in order to provide high quality service to the Deaf community. The overall goal should be to preserve the well-being of ASL-English interpreters in Canada to maintain sufficient numbers of interpreters to work in the challenging and in-demand field of VRS.



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