As health professionals who provide long- or short-term care, personal support workers (or PSWs) make a huge impact on their clients: often acting as companions or personal aides, PSWs provide customized comfort and everyday assistance to people with non-life threatening but often chronic conditions, most often in their home.

It’s a demanding job, one that needs candidates who are ethical, well-trained and above all compassionate. It’s an in-demand job, too: it’s expected that by 2056, the population of Canadians 65 years and older will double to 1 in 4. As the baby boomers retire, getting the right people into this essential job—and helping them stay there— has become more vital than ever.

VHA Home Healthcare, a not-for-profit homecare organization, is in the business of making sure these crucial healthcare roles are filled by happy, healthy professionals. VHA provides nursing, rehabilitation and personal support services, and their goal is to provide accessible, quality care for anyone in need.

VHA noticed that gaps in how prepared its Personal Support Workers (PSWs) were to deal with the hidden “costs of caring”—namely, communication problems, burnout and compassion fatigue. So they came to George Brown College to see how these workers could be better prepared for what they’ll encounter in the field every day.

Given its accessibility, ease of use and promise as a teaching tool, researchers hoped that e-Learning could bridge the gap between the classroom and the field. Given its accessibility and ease of use, researchers hoped that e-Learning could be an effective way to bridge the gap between the lessons taught in the classroom and the reality of the field. Together, VHA and George Brown College (GBC) set out to develop and validate two interactive e-learning modules specifically designed for healthcare providers. The e-Learning modules were designed to teach learners about things like self-care strategies, in the hopes of preventing burnout and compassion fatigue.

PSW students were recruited to review the modules and respond to usability and pre-post knowledge assessment surveys. Based on this feedback, changes were made in terms of user experience, design and visual graphics, as well as language and vocabulary.

The findings suggested that done right, e-Learning could be an effective strategy to teach students not only what to expect when they graduate, but also how to stay happy and healthy on the job. VHA plans to implement the modules in its orientation process for new hires, and the lessons will also be incorporated into the PSW curriculum at GBC, helping students prepare for a career of compassion.