Healthy Minds **Start Here**

Boys & Girls Clubs of Canada

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MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION DURING OUT-OF-SCHOOL HOURS

Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada is a leading provider of quality out-of-school programs that support the healthy physical, mental, educational, and social development of young people. The largest youth-serving agency in Canada, we reach children, youth and their families in 700 community service locations across the country.

Young people's mental health is an issue of great concern to Clubs. We believe all youth deserve a state of well-being that allows them to realise their own abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and make a contribution to their community.[1]

It is our hope that this paper and the efforts of Clubs across the country will help make this dream a reality. In what follows, we describe key mental health issues facing youth, identify opportunities for effecting change, and describe what Boys and Girls Clubs are doing to promote positive mental health and well-being in Canada's young population.

Key issues on youth mental health

Early adolescence is when 75% of mental health issues first appear for young adults, beginning with mild symptoms and increasing in severity towards adulthood.[2] This increasing severity can include "the onset of psychosis" which typically manifests between the ages of 15 and 25.[3] Because mental health disorders appear early on, most youth begin to first experience symptoms when "their knowledge and experiences are underdeveloped."[4] This means that many young people suffer from poor mental health without knowing why or what help they need.

In Canada, "as many as 14-25% of children and youth experience significant mental health issues."[5] Too often, these children and youth lack adequate support and suffer from social and academic disruptions.[6] Even more concerning is that most children will not receive any treatment for their mental health issues because of stigma, inadequate access, and too few resources.[7]

- It is estimated that 800,000 to 1 million children and youth in Canada experience significant mental health issues[8] [9]

- 50% of mental health issues can be detected before the age of 14[10]

- Despite evidence supporting early intervention, only one-fifth of children and youth experiencing mental health issues will receive care[11]

- 63% of youth cite stigma, fear, embarrassment, or peer pressure as the main reasons for not seeking help[12]

- Worse still, "more than one third of Canadians would be embarrassed to admit that their children suffer from anxiety or depression"[13]

FACTORS AFFECTING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

VIOLENCE:
Adolescent mental health is affected by exposure to violence

- Young people who have experienced abuse or neglect are at higher risk of suffering from depression, anxiety and substance abuse.[14,15]

- They "rank among our most vulnerable citizens when it comes to mental health."[16]

- Experiences of neglect and abuse compress childhoods, forcing children and youth to "take on adults responsibilities at a young age."[17]

- These accelerated transitions dramatically increase stress and deprive youth of essential development support.

- Children and youth who have experienced violence before the age of 15 are also more likely to experience homelessness, further compounding related issues of mental health, substance use, criminalization, and exploitation.[18]

- Young people from violent homes are six times more likely to commit suicide than their peers who grew up in non-violent homes.[19,20]

- Youth who have experienced violence or danger sometimes continue to feel related anxiety long after the danger has passed.[21]

- Youth involved in the justice system are disproportionately affected by mental health issues; it is estimated that 70% of justice-involved youth have mental health issues.[22]

- Addressing family violence, abuse, and bullying can prevent mental health issues.[23]

VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION: Indigenous communities

- Historical and ongoing discrimination against First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples for instance, significantly impacts the mental health of people in those communities.[24]

- Young people who face discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are at greater risk of dying by suicide.[25,26]

- Poverty, racism, and discrimination are important causes of violence in Indigenous communities and women are disproportionately impacted by this violence.[27]

- Though less than 5% of children in Canada are Indigenous, they represent 40% of children in out of home care.[28]

POVERTY:
Economic marginalization takes a toll on mental health

- Mental health issues can affect anyone, regardless of social class or income level.

- Financial marginalization and exclusion from essential services, housing, safe neighbourhoods and supportive social networks can place young people, especially those who are street-involved, at increased risk of mental distress. [29,30]

- Poor housing conditions affect the overall quality of health and well-being of young people across Canada, but First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities are especially affected.[31]

- Inadequate and unstable housing not only worsens mental health, it also slows recovery.[32]

- In Canada, about 20% of the homeless population in Canada are youth.[33] Many more youth fall into the category of hidden homelessness, relying on informal housing arrangements such as staying with friends, other family members, or couch surfing.[34]

GENDER AND MENTAL HEALTH:
Differing needs in gendered societies

- "While emotional health tends to be similar for both boys and girls in Grade 6, by Grade 10, girls ... are experiencing poorer mental health than boys. The critical period for girls appears to be between Grades 6 and 7, when their emotional health becomes markedly poorer."[35]

- This transition is also a time when they are at increased risk of eating disorders, an illness with a very high mortality rate that affects 1.5% of young women aged 15 to 24 in Canada.[36]

- Boys and young men are not only less likely to seek mental health services than girls and young women, they "are also less knowledgeable about mental health issues than girls and face higher rates of mental health stigma than girls."[37]

- Without gender affirming support, transgender and nonbinary youth are more likely than their peers to suffer from depression, suicidality, self-harm, and eating disorders.

QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS: Fewer meaningful relationships with peers and adults puts youth at risk

- An increasingly peer-oriented culture means that many young people lack a strong attachment with an adult. Yet studies have shown unequivocally that "the most important factor keeping children from being overwhelmed by stress was 'the presence in their lives of a charismatic adult – a person with whom they identify and from whom they gather strength'."[38]

- Young people's interactions are increasingly taking place over the Internet and on cell phones.

- These powerful tools create many opportunities for communication and learning, but unhealthy and overuse of social media can be socially isolating.[39,40]

CYBERBULLYING:
Unseen violence

- "Most bullying occurs between the ages of 13 and 14" when young people's mental health is particularly vulnerable, leading to greater levels of depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and low self-esteem.[41]

- Canadians "spend more time online than any other country," and almost 100% of children and youth ages 4 to 11 use the internet outside of school.[42] [43]

- 1.1 million youth and young adults between the ages of 15 and 29 experienced cyberbullying and cyberstalking between 2009 and 2014.[44] Of these 1.1 million, 36% experienced cyberbulling, 33% cyberstalking, and 31% experienced both.[45]

- Cyberstalking and cyberbullying are associated with low-self esteem and depression[46] and youth between 15 and 19, non-heterosexual youth, women, and youth with mental health issues are disproportionately targeted by these crimes.[47]

YOUTH TRANSITIONS: Emerging adulthood

- Youth transitions have been identified by the Mental Health Commission of Canada as a key mental health policy concern.[48]

- 52% of youth in transition disengage from supportive services, "a time when serious mental health problems or illnesses are most likely to occur."[49]

- Key aspects of emerging adulthood, such as leaving school and employment, and dealing with issues such as bullying, are "amplified" for youth with mental health issues.[50]

IMPACTS OF POOR MENTAL HEALTH

RISKY BEHAVIOURS:
Mental health issues can lead to increased risk-taking and negative behaviour

- Young people who suffer from one or more mental health issues have been found to engage in a higher number of risk behaviours.[51]

- These can include drug and alcohol abuse and unprotected sex, with potentially lifelong health and well-being consequences.

- "The number of adolescents with undiagnosed mental health disorders committed to the juvenile justice system has exploded, with estimates of between 50% and 75%."[52]

- When young people lack a sense of belonging and self-efficacy, and the necessary social support networks, they are more likely to engage in negative behaviour.[53]

SUICIDE:
Too many youth consider taking their own life

- Suicide follows motor vehicle accidents as the leading cause of death among Canadian youth. It is the leading cause of death for those who are very marginalized such as street-involved youth and First Nations youth, the latter being five to seven times more likely than their non Aboriginal peers to die of suicide.[54,55,56] Suicide rates for Inuit youth are even higher.[57]

- While more young men die by suicide, young women have nearly three times the rate of hospitalization for suicide attempts.[58]

- Approximately 90% of suicide cases are preceded by a previously noted mental illness.[59]

- Stigma is one of the greatest obstacles in the prevention of suicide, along with a "lack of knowledge" about mental health issues, suicidal communication and risk, and prevention and treatment.[60]

- Adolescents are the only age group in which suicide is on the rise,[61] although Quebec's suicide rate is declining and 41% of British Columbia's First Nations bands experienced zero suicides in a 14-year period.[62,63]

Promising strategies to address youth mental health

Accessible and supportive environments make a world of difference to young people. Certain strategies have shown great promise in helping youth manage stress and life changes and in addressing the factors that influence mental health.

ADDRESS STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

Youth improve their mental health and emotional well-being when they experience a sense of belonging. Discrimination in all its forms, whether it is related to a person's weight, their age, their racial/ethnic background, their ability or their sexual orientation, can negatively affect mental health.

The stigmatization that surrounds mental health issues is itself a form of discrimination. Stigma describes the processes of labelling and separating a person by subjecting them to stereotyped ideas, prejudice and discrimination, particularly when these stereotypes are held against someone who is seen as being part of a social group that does not benefit equally from the exercise of "social, economic and political power" in their society.[64] Because stigma against people with mental illness is compounded by other stereotypes that might be applied to a person, certain people are disproportionately affected by stigma.[65] Minorities, young people, men and people working in the military or in health occupations rarely seek help for their mental health issues because of stigma.[66] Stigma "perpetuates social injustices, diminishes life chances, jeopardizes recovery and impinges on self-esteem."[67]

Increased awareness and understanding of mental health would help reduce the stigma that young people face when they or someone in their family has lived mental health experiences.[68] Studies of mental health awareness show that many people in Canada "are unable to correctly recognize mental disorders."[69]

Education is essential to breaking down stigma and helping young people get the support they need.[70] Improving people's understanding of mental health can help people recognize early symptoms in themselves and others, and this is particularly important for youth and the "people like teachers, coaches, and community workers" who young people "turn to first."

Improving young people's understanding of mental health is critical as studies show that the longer mental health issues go untreated, the harder it is for them to recover once they get help.[71] Unfortunately, more education is always needed. Despite increased mental health awareness, people's attitudes towards mental health are slow to change and "have even deteriorated" in recent years.[72] Increasing young people's knowledge of mental health issues can help empower them and their families to speak more openly and seek the support they need.

RECOGNIZE EARLY SIGNS OF DISTRESS & SUPPORT YOUTH IN OBTAINING THE CARE THEY NEED

Youth benefit from caring relationships with adults and peers, especially if those close to them are able to recognize their distress and accompany them in obtaining help. These life-saving relationships can be developed where youth are best reached: at home, at school, in community centres and where youth work.[73]

Teen suicide for instance, is closely linked to both anxiety and depression. Early identification and intervention to address mental health issues are the most established approach to suicide prevention for young people.[74] One of the best ways to do this is to ensure those who are in regular contact with youth are knowledgeable about mental health issues and can identify mental distress early on.[75]

When staff members and young people who work or volunteer in community-based organizations are trained to recognize early signs of distress, and when they know where to find the needed resources, they are better able to support youth who are experiencing difficulties. Early diagnosis and intervention can help solve an estimated 70% of childhood cases of mental health issues. [76]

A lot can be achieved when those who work with youth are trained "to implement mental health interventions consistent with their current and ongoing roles."[77] Essential competencies include a sound understanding of youth development and knowledge about identifying mental distress, intervening, and supporting youth in regaining their mental health.[78]

Young people sometimes find it difficult to navigate their way to getting help. Crucial to their recovery is the availability of a supportive adult or experienced peer with whom they can talk openly. Having someone who believes and understands them can have a positive effect on a young person's life. Sometimes that person is a staff member of a program they attend,[79] but it can also be a peer who is well trained to reach out to other youth.[80]

HELP YOUTH DEAL WITH TRANSITIONS

Young people may find it difficult to reintegrate into school and community organizations after a mental health-related absence. In such cases, community-based recreation programs can play a beneficial role. Taking part in extracurricular activities and fun, 'kid' things are a welcome distraction for youth who have to deal with difficult realities.[81] Physical activity alone has been demonstrated to have broad effects including reduced depression, anxiety and stress, loneliness, and self-destructive behaviour.[82]

Youth dealing with mental health issues may avoid situations that would otherwise contribute to their healthy development. It is all the more important therefore to reach out and help break their social isolation. Because most mental health issues manifest when youth are making significant transitions in their life, unaddressed mental health issues can lead to serious long term

consequences.[83] Young people who are making the transition to adulthood from service systems such as "child welfare, juvenile justice ... and mental health systems" are at most risk during this time.[84] Having other people to speak to and accompany them during transitions can be beneficial, especially when this support is from other youth who have had similar experiences.[85]

STRENGTHEN YOUTH & COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Youth who are at increased risk of developing mental health issues do not always know how to "negotiate and navigate supports and resources that foster resilience," but positive outcomes can be achieved when youth have access to services that make sense to them. [86] Because youth face many obstacles getting help, including limited and inaccessible services,[87] programs that build resilience are an important bridge to recovery.

Programs that build resilience, tackle social determinants of health, and encourage social emotional learning have shown promise in preventing poor mental health in adolescence and in adulthood. Quality programs ensure young people can experience the positive effects of being connected to friends, adults, school and community. They help youth gain important life skills that will enable them to seek advice and support, and make sound decisions. Strong connections, personal strength, and a solid network of support are all factors in positive mental health.[88]

Strengthening resilience can also mean working to value the culture, collective history, language, and traditions of young people and their communities.[89,90] Recognition and respect goes a long way toward ensuring resilience and positive mental health for young people whose communities have been marginalized. Because resilience is shaped by the whole environment young people live in, their ability to overcome challenges "depends on the resources around them" as much as it does on the choices they make.[91]

A role for community-based out-of-school programs

Adolescents too often face life transitions with fewer developmental supports than when they were younger. This is especially true for older teens and young adults. "Age-appropriate programs that empower and enable young people to be socially active and integrated participants in civil society" are needed.[92]

Community-based out-of-school programs that focus on positive youth development help young people make successful transitions into adulthood. They play a significant role in implementing promising mental health strategies. "High levels of participation in organized activities, especially in early to mid adolescence is significant to youth's positive development in late adolescence."[93] They promote mental health by building social skills, fostering peer and mentoring relationships, and by encouraging youth to be active in their communities.[94]

The impacts of out-of-school programs include improved interpersonal skills and academic achievement, as well as increased positive social behaviours. Participants show better self-control and self-efficacy, they are more committed to school and academic achievement and are less likely to engage in problem behaviours such as aggression, truancy, and high-risk sexual activity and substance use.[95,96,97]

Quite simply, young people who participate in out-of-school programs learn to function better in their social environment.[98] Evidence is mounting that structured community programs and opportunities for positive activities are critical for healthy development and provide powerful benefits to youth and their communities.[99] Out-of-school programs act "as an independent context for healthy exploration and interactions."[100] The right program at the right time can make a real difference in a young person's life.

The right approach at the right time

Boys and Girls Clubs are well positioned to support youth in achieving positive mental health outcomes. We know from experience that programs aiming to nurture adolescent mental health and emotional well-being must be based on what works for teens. Three key features of Boys and Girls Clubs programming are known to be successful.

RESPECTFUL, INCLUSIVE & ENGAGING ENVIRONMENTS

Boys and Girls Clubs create respectful, inclusive, and engaging environments that are well-suited to promoting positive mental health and addressing the stigma associated with mental health issues.

Every young person should have a place to belong, where they are respected and supported to be their best. For many youth, Boys and Girls Clubs are like a second home. Clubs provide a safe, supportive place where they are listened to, respected, and valued in an environment of inclusion and acceptance.

Engaging youth can be somewhat of a challenge given that they have more choice regarding their participation. Youth seek programs that have flexible attendance policies, leadership opportunities, a variety of activities to choose from, and a space for them to interact with their peers.[101,102] Many Boys and Girls Clubs reserve a space where youth can socialize with friends. They also offer a range of programmed and un-programmed activities, a mix shown to increase participation.[103] Adolescents engaged in Clubs say it is a place "where they can comfortably hang out and stay away from unhealthy choices and negative peer pressure."[104,105]

As they get older, youth become more focused in their interests and seek support in achieving concrete goals.[106] Adolescents who participate in developmentally appropriate programs such as job-like activities,

CARE
RESPECT
ALLIES
MENTORS
SUPPORT
PERSEVERANCE
MENTAL
RELATIONSHIPS
HEALING
UND
RESILIENCE
FAMILY
SHARING
QUIET

COMMUNITY

ADVOCACY

INCLUSION

HELP

EMOTIONS

POWER

HEALTH

ERSTANDING

PEERS

RECOVERY

RECOVERY

STRENGTH

volunteering, apprenticeships, and mentoring gain new skills and take on more responsibilities.[107]

Clubs build on a logic of development that parallels the "growing recognition" that mental health is "linked to the capacity to flourish as opposed to languish."[108] Clubs, like effective mental health support strategies, offer young people opportunity to connect and build strong relationships at crucial times in their lives.

Boys and Girls Clubs also recognize the complexities of poverty, social exclusion and diverse experiences of discrimination in Canada. These experiences of marginalization and oppression also lead to the internalization of stigma and stereotypes that are perpetuated in the "larger social environment."[109] Therefore, Clubs can play a role in helping youth confront self-stigma, through much needed peer support modeled programs that increase inclusiveness and make information more accessible and relevant.[110]

Respectful, inclusive, and engaging environments matter because feeling engaged and connected to a community are factors in maintaining positive mental health. Such environments nurture a sense of belonging. Regular participation in a respectful and engaging environment can strengthen well-being and reduce emotional distress.[111,112]

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS AND MENTORS

Boys and Girls Clubs invest in the kinds of peer and adult relationships known to help young people be resilient to life's challenges.

Young people have many opportunities to exchange with their peers using social media and cell phones, but face-to-face contact is what enables them to develop relationships that will help them through difficult times. Clubs encourage healthy, respectful relationships among peers. Programs give youth a chance to work collaboratively, overcome obstacles, and learn new skills. They also offer youth a space to share a bit of themselves, building both trust in others and self-confidence.

Community support in the form of caring interactions between adults and youth is also a highly recognized protective factor, one that may be more amenable to intervention than other types of protective factors.[113] Caring adults provide young people with a sense of belonging, acceptance, empowerment, and connection,[114] factors that are known to foster mental health and emotional well-being. This has long been the hallmark of Boys and Girls Clubs across Canada.

Boys and Girls Clubs provide the kinds of relationships that young people can count on. Club staff develop mentoring relationships with youth and create a positive environment for peer interactions.[115] Ninety-six percent of Club participants reported the presence of at least one supportive adult at the Club and "that at least one adult there was setting high expectations for them."[116] The majority of Boys and Girls Clubs alumni (93%) credit a particular staff member for developing, helping, and supporting them.[117]

A caring adult or experienced peer who is able to listen, believe, and support a young person who speaks about mental distress is absolutely invaluable.[118] The opportunity to build long-term and dependable mentoring relationships is central to the Boys and Girls Clubs model because studies show that children and youth who are mentored for more than 12 months benefit most from mentoring, while those who are mentored for less than 3 months fare worse than those who aren't mentored.[119]

Positive relationships with peers and mentors matter because they have particularly positive effects on young people's healthy development and because they help them cope more effectively with life's difficulties.[120,121] The presence of positive relationships with adults has been correlated with lower rates of substance use and exposure to violence, stronger connections to school and increased academic performance[122] – all protective factors against poor mental health. And for young people dealing with mental health issues, positive relationships with peers and adults play a key role in reducing their social isolation.

LINKS TO COMMUNITY AND FAMILY

Boys and Girls Clubs have strong links to families and communities, factors known to help youth become more resilient.

Resilience is fostered by working with youth, their families, and the communities in which they live. "People's mental health is inextricably linked to their relationship with others, environment and lifestyle factors, and the degree of power that they have over their lives."[123]

The best out-of-school programs for youth are community-based, offer a variety of specialized activities, provide leadership and volunteer opportunities to youth, and have staff members that are connected to young people's community outside of program hours.[124] The bond that young people feel for their Club and for Club staff makes it more likely that they will continue to participate in programs during their adolescence.[125]

Boys and Girls Clubs are active in and connected to the communities they serve. Clubs are leaders and role models in the community and are critical catalysts that enable schools, local businesses, community volunteers and leaders to work collaboratively in the best interest of youth and their families. Working together in this way improves program quality. "Programs are more likely to exhibit high quality when they effectively develop, utilize, and leverage partnerships with a variety of stakeholders, especially families, schools, and communities."[126]

Links to community and family matter because youth benefit most from programs that factor in all aspects of their lives.[127] Strong collaborative efforts have the power to better support young people's mental health and emotional well-being. They pull the community together in support of adolescents, which can have a positive impact on their development by nurturing collective efficacy – "an active sense of engagement among residents" and "a willingness to intervene for the common good."[128] They strengthen young people's resilience and that of communities.

Boys and Girls Clubs are part of the solution

Promoting mental health and emotional well-being in Canada's young people requires collective effort. Positive mental health programs, those that support social and emotional learning and those that are based on prevention and early intervention, have been shown to be sound investments.[129]

Quality out-of-school programs are a cost effective way to contribute to positive youth development.[130] Community programs that provide the right conditions at the right time are critical for healthy development and result in powerful benefits to youth and their communities.[131]

Through its Young Health Programme, AstraZeneca has partnered with Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada to improve young people's mental health and emotional well-being. Flex Your Head was developed to help youth think about, talk about, and understand issues of mental health and wellness within a safe, fun, and welcoming environment. In an active, peer-based format, youth are given the knowledge, skills, and strategies to cope with stress and distress and promote positive mental health and wellness.

The promotion of mental health and emotional well-being is at the heart of Boys and Girls Clubs programs. Clubs are present in all stages of a child's life and provide critical support to families in communities across Canada. For more than 100 years, Clubs have helped young people develop healthy minds and bodies, and achieve their best potential, offering programs that encourage physical activity, healthy living, social skills, and school success.

Community-based out-of-school programs, like Boys and Girls Clubs, have a largely untapped potential to support young people's mental health.[132] Enhancing program quality and capacity would enable them to reach more youth, identify those with the greatest mental health needs, and facilitate additional interventions where required. An investment in community-based programs would also complement and support "school-based social emotional learning goals and initiatives."[133]

In short, Clubs provide a non-stigmatizing environment in which to promote mental health and emotional well-being and intervene early when issues arise.

A HEALTHY MIND FOR EVERY YOUTH

Our dream is for every young person to have access to programs and supports that promote physical health, mental health, and emotional well-being. Community-based out-of-school programs are crucial in reaching young people and their families when they need it most. Together we can make sure all young people are putting their best mind forward.

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