



Mental Health
Commission
of Canada

Commission de
la santé mentale
du Canada

HEADSTRONG



**BE BRAVE
REACH OUT
SPEAK UP**

Summary Interim Report

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“Young people feel the impacts of stigma more than any other group in Canada.”
— (Stuart, Patten, Koller, Modgill, & Liinamaa, 2014)

A PROBLEM THAT HAS A SOLUTION

Engaging Youth to Reduce Stigma

The vast majority of adults living with a mental health problem or illness say their symptoms started before they were 18 years old, so early intervention can make a dramatic difference in quality of life and help ensure young people have the healthiest possible adulthoods.

Too often the stigma around mental health problems and illnesses is standing in the way. It has been described as an “impenetrable brick wall” that creates a barrier between youth and treatments, supports, and services. It prevents them from seeking help because they are afraid of being judged, dismissed, or ridiculed. It can also prevent those who love them from helping them get treatment — stigma and its negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviours are keeping parents silent, too.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) realizes the importance of breaking down that menacing wall. In 2014, it launched an important and unprecedented program to engage students, schools, governments, and other partners across Canada to make one of the biggest coordinated efforts in Canadian history to reduce stigma among youth.



ACCELERATING POSITIVE CHANGES

The MHCC HEADSTRONG Youth Anti-Stigma Program

MHCC HEADSTRONG is the youth anti-stigma program of the Mental Health Commission of Canada's anti-stigma initiative (Opening Minds). MHCC HEADSTRONG's goal is to help reduce the painful stigma experienced by young Canadians, and their families, with mental health problems and illnesses.

The program, much like MHCC itself, acts as a catalyst; it provides the momentum needed to accelerate positive changes. MHCC HEADSTRONG is prompting these changes by coordinating between, and collaborating with, community organizations, schools, and youth aged 14–18 in every region of the country to take action. It also provides these groups and individuals the tools, skills, and knowledge necessary to confront the stigma problem head-on.

Through MHCC HEADSTRONG, the Mental Health Commission of Canada is turning up the volume on the national dialogue surrounding a critically important issue for all young people in Canada. Increasing awareness around mental wellness and stigma is key to combatting the harmful negativity and discrimination experienced by too many youth today.

TAKING AN EVIDENCE-INFORMED APPROACH

MHCC HEADSTRONG'S Strategy for Reducing Stigma

In order to effectively reduce stigma among youth, the MHCC engaged in years of research to determine the most promising practices in this area. The MHCC HEADSTRONG program was created based on the results of this research and it follows an evidence-informed approach that includes:

Contact-based education - giving youth opportunities to interact with trained speakers who have lived experience of mental health problems and illnesses and who are either in a strong place of recovery or are successfully managing their illness.

Regional summits - creating a call-to-action among students representing many schools, who hear stories from speakers, explore how stigma hurts, and strategize together how to take an anti-stigma message back to their schools.

School-based activities - conceptualizing and completing creative student-led anti-stigma projects, with their teachers' support, to inform their peers about the negative impacts of stigma.

A whole-school approach - encouraging entire schools to create greater awareness and more supportive environments.



COLLABORATING TO BRING CHANGE

MHCC HEADSTRONG Draws on Partnerships across Canada

Nineteen community organizations have hired regional coordinators, through financial support from the MHCC, to work directly with youth and their schools to deliver the program.

We are also providing these key community organizations with the training and support they need to embed contact-based, anti-stigma education within schools. When young people hear stories of recovery and hope directly from people living with a mental health problem or illness, it breaks down barriers. When mental health and anti-stigma messages are part of all learning, change happens.

Our most crucial partners are the same people we're trying to reach – Canadian teens and adolescents. Youth are a major influence among their peers and within their families, schools, and communities, so MHCC HEADSTRONG is empowering them to confront stigma. By providing youth with the tools to recognize stigmatizing attitudes and behaviours, we're giving them the opportunity to create positive change in the places where they study, work, play, and live.

BRINGING YOUNG CANADIANS TOGETHER

The National Youth Anti-stigma Summit

November 17, 2014 was a historic day for youth anti-stigma in our country. In the nation's capital, in a room teeming with young people from every province and territory of Canada, we officially launched the MHCC HEADSTRONG program and its first official event, the National Youth Anti-stigma Summit. The week-long gathering was at times intense and always inspiring. There were emotional presentations, exciting breakout sessions, and plenty of other eye-opening activities, all with a focus on breaking down barriers and helping these youth become champions for change.

And that was only the beginning.



EXPANDING OUR REACH

Taking MHCC HEADSTRONG to Communities across Canada

The National Youth Anti-stigma Summit was always intended to be the spark for change that MHCC HEADSTRONG is orchestrating. The summit identified, prepared and equipped students and regional coordinators to take action to reduce stigma where they live. One of the most important ways to do this is by planning and delivering regional summits across Canada.

Students and school staff who attend a regional summit receive information and motivation to go back to their schools and carry out activities to raise awareness around mental wellness, mental illness and stigma.

They will carry the message to other youth in their schools, encouraging them to take care of their mental health in the same way they take care of their physical health. They will spread the message that stigma is never OK; that they should speak up if they are experiencing a mental health problem or illness, and that they can be a source of help to others.

To help maximize the success of regional summits and school-based activities, the MHCC has created a series of toolkits in both French and English to assist the regional coordinators and summit speakers.

MHCC HEADSTRONG'S national coordinator is also consulting with these regional resources, helping them tailor their summits and activities to the needs of their particular audience and assisting with the delivery of speaker training to see the greatest possible success of the crucial contact-based education component.



MHCC HEADSTRONG GETS RESULTS

Our Cascading Approach to Reach Students is Working

MHCC HEADSTRONG is proving to be successful at reaching out exponentially to youth across Canada. We started with 132 students attending the National Summit. These youth have actively participated with regional coordinators to organize 28 regional summits. Over 5,000 student champions from across the country are attending these regional summits. Only three or four students from each local high school are invited to attend the regional summits to allow for the inclusion of as many schools as possible. These student champions, along with their supporting teachers, will take HEADSTRONG anti-stigma messages and activities back to their individual school populations. Conservatively, we estimate the cascading number of youth who will receive the HEADSTRONG message at school to be 100,000. The actual numbers are being tracked and will be shared at the end of the school year.

As well, the survey used by Opening Minds to research youth anti-stigma programs over the last five years continues to be used to evaluate regional summits. We know most students who attend HEADSTRONG summits already have more positive attitudes about mental health problems and illnesses than youth in general and yet the surveys completed at the end of the summits show an even greater decrease in stigma. The survey will likely show more changes at the individual school level, where these committed student champions spread the HEADSTRONG message to entire schools.

LOOKING AHEAD

MHCC HEADSTRONG is Gaining Momentum

Reducing stigma among youth is going to take time. Negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviours are deeply entrenched in Canada, but our young people are realizing how important it is to break down the stigma barrier and are now actively helping us to do that.

MHCC HEADSTRONG has developed tools to create change and we're partnering with youth and community groups eager to put them to use. The anti-stigma movement is growing -- it is gathering momentum and with continued support, we believe it will soon be unstoppable.

By reducing stigma, MHCC HEADSTRONG and our partners are helping to ensure youth feel safe enough to seek help if they are experiencing a mental health problem or illness. Given the alarming statistics around youth suicide and mental distress, we believe reducing youth stigma truly is a matter of life and death. Canada's young people and their families are depending on all of us to succeed.