



ADVERSITY INTO EVOLUTION

Adapting HEADSTRONG to a virtual delivery model during COVID-19

Evaluation report summary



Mental Health
Commission
of Canada

Commission de
la santé mentale
du Canada

HEADSTRONG



**BE BRAVE
REACH OUT
SPEAK UP**

Ce document est disponible en français.

[Citation information](#)

Suggested citation: Mental Health Commission of Canada (2023) Adversity to evolution: Adapting HEADSTRONG to a virtual delivery model during COVID-19 Evaluation report summary. Mental Health Commission of Canada. Ottawa, ON.

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ISBN: 978-1-77318-321-3

Legal deposit National Library of Canada



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“HEADSTRONG showed me, “Mental health is just as important as physical health.”

– Grade 9 student, virtual HEADSTRONG participant.

What is HEADSTRONG?

[HEADSTRONG](#) is a Mental Health Commission of Canada leadership initiative for youth ages 12-19. Since 2014, this evidence-based program has given young people across the country the tools, confidence, and inspiration to become leaders for mental health and wellness in their schools and communities.

Background

While the program was initially conducted in person, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the HEADSTRONG team developed a highly interactive virtual edition, after consulting with youth, educators, and community organizations.

The [virtual HEADSTRONG model](#) was launched in May 2021 following pilot testing with three initial communities.



The full *Adversity into evolution – Adapting HEADSTRONG to a virtual delivery model during COVID-19* report reviews evaluation results from the 20 virtual summits held between September 2021 and June 2022, the first full year of virtual operation. These evaluations were obtained using anonymous pre/post and satisfaction surveys that gave youth the chance to comment on their HEADSTRONG experience and their plans for mental health leadership at school.

Evaluation highlights



Across these virtual HEADSTRONG summits, young people provided the same kind of positive and enthusiastic feedback seen at previous in-person summits, including measurable changes in behaviours and attitudes toward mental health stigma and help seeking.

When asked what they learned from their HEADSTRONG experience, three key themes emerged:

Theme 1. Youth gained more knowledge about mental health and mental illness, a greater understanding of the lived experience of mental illness, and additional

awareness on how to support themselves and others who might be struggling (including help seeking).

“A greater awareness of how to tackle issues surrounding mental health and support others.”

– Grade 12 student

Theme 2. Youth learned about the problem of stigma, how it impacts and affects people, and ways to address or stand up against stigma when they see it.

“I learned that stigma is the biggest thing stopping people from getting help.”

– Grade 9 student

Theme 3. Youth found greater confidence and reassurance about dealing with their own mental health experiences (including help seeking) and felt that they were part of a community, less alone, and more supported.

“These HEADSTRONG sessions have allowed me to feel a bit more comfortable with my own skin and to speak my mind instead of keeping my feelings hidden. [The program] has taught me that healing does not have to be a consistent process, that it is normal to have off days, and that it is very important to reach out when we do.”

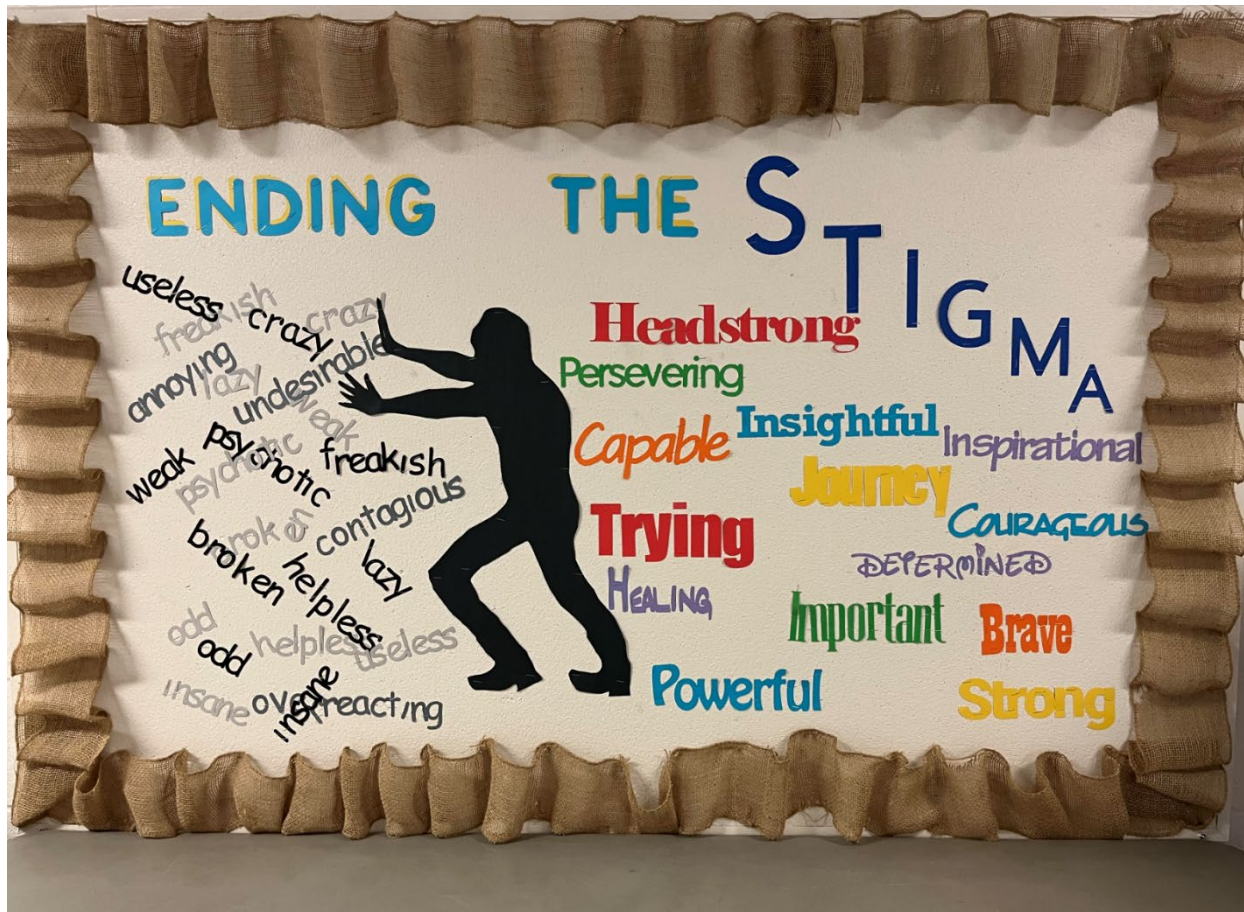
– Anonymous student

Post-summit youth action

Following each HEADSTRONG summit, youth use their creativity to design and deliver local mental health awareness activities throughout the school year. In 2021-22, the virtual summits inspired youth in several ways. These included:

- Building wellness spaces
- Establishing Indigenous healing spaces
- Planting wellness gardens
- Holding Mental Health Week daily events
- Providing exam stress-care packages
- Crafting and delivering holiday cards to seniors
- Highlighting mental health resources
- Engaging elementary students in wellness activities





Creating anti-stigma wall displays

What HEADSTRONG delivered during the 2021-22 school year:

- 20 virtual summits
- in 6 provinces
- Directly impacting over 1,800 youth participants
- Total reach of 50,000+ individuals impacted by youth-led projects

The future of HEADSTRONG

Now that the virtual model has shown itself to be effective at combating stigma and inspiring youth leadership, HEADSTRONG will continue to be offered in-person and virtually to give communities greater choice. In fact, the success of the virtual model confirms its potential for additional adaptations in the future – including HEADSTRONG for different age groups and remote communities. The program's successful evidence-based approach and the recognition that prevention and promotion in mental health is a

valuable tool for youth wellness make HEADSTRONG the ideal option for continued national growth and investment.



The HEADSTRONG team looks forward to continuing to inspire youth across Canada to Be Brave, Reach Out, and Speak Up!

“Brightened my days, helped me have a positive outlook on life, and made me motivated to wake up for each day. Before starting, I never wanted to wake up in the morning, but now I feel excited to wake up (and I get up early to start my day), and at the end of the day I feel better about myself. Thank you for turning my life around HEADSTRONG!”

- Grade 10 student

The full *Adversity into evolution – Adapting HEADSTRONG to a virtual delivery model during COVID-19* report is available upon request (English only).

Contact: headstrong@mentalhealthcommission.ca
<https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/training/headstrong/>

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