

# Mental Health Toolkit

Understanding Mental Health,  
Coping Strategies, and Resources



## UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH

Mental illness is defined as a reduction in a person's ability to function effectively over a prolonged period of time due to significant levels of distress; changes in thinking, mood or behaviour; feelings of isolation, loneliness and sadness; and the feeling of being disconnected from people and activities. People affected with mental illness may struggle with aspects of everyday life.<sup>i</sup> Much like physical illness, mental illness can manifest itself in many different ways. While public knowledge around mental illness is constantly improving with the introduction of new resources and educational campaigns, it is often misunderstood. Judgment and a lack of empathy for mental illness can lead to shame and add to the existing emotional burden faced by those who suffer from it on a daily basis. Given how prevalent mental illness is (approximately 1 in 5 people will experience mental illness each year) it is important that we familiarize ourselves with the causes, signs and symptoms, and resources available to support ourselves and those around us.

In any given year, 1 in 5 Canadians experiences a mental illness or addiction problem, and by the time Canadians reach 40 years of age, 1 in 2 have – or have had – a mental illness.\*

In this toolkit, we will touch on four common conditions; stress, anxiety, depression, and substance use and addiction. We will explore the causes, signs and symptoms of each; as well as strategies and resources that will help you, a co-worker, a friend, or a loved-one, better cope with mental illness.

Information provided in this toolkit is not a substitute for professional advice. If you feel that you, or someone you know, may need medical advice, please consult a qualified health care professional.

## STRESS

Stress is something we all experience at some point in our lives. While, stress itself is not an illness, it is closely linked to mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The more we come to understand the root cause of stress, the better equipped we can be in tackling it and reducing the likelihood of related mental health conditions. It is important to note that not all stress is bad-it can help you focus, be more productive, and give you strength in times of pressure. However, too much stress can wear you down and make you sick, both mentally and physically.<sup>ii</sup>

The source or cause of stress is different for everyone. It could be your job, finances, or relationship problems. What affects you, may not affect another, but our bodies react in similar ways to stressors. Stress causes hormonal, respiratory, cardiovascular, and nervous system changes. When experiencing ongoing stress and frequent stressful situations, you may notice decreased energy levels, headaches, indigestion, aches, pains, body tension, insomnia, decreased libido, or frequent colds and infections.<sup>iii</sup> The physical effects of stress usually do not last long, however, some people find themselves in a nearly constant state of heightened alertness. This is chronic stress and it puts pressure on the body for an extended period of time. Potential causes of chronic stress include high-pressure jobs, financial difficulties, or challenging relationships. Someone who suffers from prolonged stress may experience any of the following symptoms, which can increase the risk of developing certain illnesses and diseases.<sup>iv</sup>

**Difficulty Concentrating:** rapid, disorganized thoughts.

**Digestive Problems:** changes in appetite, indigestion, bloating, gas, stomach pain and cramps.

**Frequent Illness:** recurring infections.

**Irritability:** minimal to extreme feelings of irritability.

**Nervousness:** feeling helpless, or a perceived loss of control.

We all feel nervous or worried at times. This anxiety can be a helpful feeling when it motivates us or warns us of danger. However, an anxiety disorder causes unexpected or unhelpful anxiety that seriously impacts how we think, feel, and act.<sup>v</sup> These feelings of anxiety and panic interfere with daily activities, are difficult to control, and are disproportionate to the actual danger.

Certain types of anxiety disorders can be treated and may vary to include phobias (an intense fear around a specific thing), panic disorders (repeated or unexpected panic attacks), agoraphobia (a fear of being in a situation where a person cannot escape or find help if they experience a panic attack), separation anxiety disorder (a childhood disorder related to separation from parents or others who have parental roles), or social anxiety disorder (an intense fear of being embarrassed or evaluated negatively by others).<sup>vi</sup>

Symptoms may start during childhood and continue into adulthood or may onset unexpectedly later in life.<sup>vii</sup> It is not always clear when someone is suffering from an anxiety disorder as there are many symptoms, but if any of the following symptoms are experienced on a regular basis, it may indicate an anxiety disorder and a qualified health care professional should be consulted.

**Trouble Sleeping:** trouble falling asleep or remaining asleep.

**Muscle Tensions:** constant fists, jaw clenching, or tensing muscles throughout the body.

**Chronic Indigestion:** gas, cramping, stomach aches, bloating, constipation, or diarrhea. The digestive track is extremely sensitive when it comes to any psychological stress, and dealing with persistent chronic digestion problems can amplify social discomfort and make a person feel more anxiety.<sup>viii</sup>

**Social Anxiety:** unmanageable fear related to social situations or public speaking.

**Self-Doubt:** persistent second-guessing and insecurities or worries that are important to the person's core self-concept.

**Excessive Worry:** persistent worried thoughts that affect the person's ability to function in daily life, for the majority of days for a period of six or more months.

**Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD):** a person's obsessive and intrusive thoughts rise to the level where they dictate behaviour, both mental and physical. Often characterized by ritualized or repetitive behaviours.

**Recurring Panic Attacks:** being consumed by a sudden and overwhelming fear and a feeling of helplessness, along with physical symptoms such as a racing heart, shortness of breath, sweating, numbing, stomach pain, and hot or cold flashes.

**Irrational Fears:** a debilitating fear of a typically non-fearful thing, such as dogs or crowds. If the level of fear reaches the point where it is out of balance with any actual risk or danger, it is likely the person is suffering from an anxiety disorder. This fear could be rooted in past trauma and sometimes a person may not know they have a fear until confronting a situation where the fear is exposed.<sup>ix</sup>

## DEPRESSION

Depression is a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think, and how you act. Fortunately, it is also treatable. Depression causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities once enjoyed. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can decrease a person's ability to function at work and at home.<sup>x</sup>

There are a number of factors that can increase the chance of suffering from depression such as, abuse, medications, conflict, death or a loss, genetics, substance use, serious illness, or other personal problems.<sup>xi</sup>

Symptoms of depression may vary from mild to severe and can include feeling sad, loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed, changes in appetite, trouble sleeping, fatigue, overwhelming feelings of guilt, difficulty concentrating or making decisions, and thoughts of death or suicide. If you think that you, or someone you know, may be experiencing signs of depression, speak with a doctor or a professional listed in the resources section below.

Depression affects an estimated one in 15 adults in any given year and one in six people will experience depression at some point in their life.\*\*

Presence of the 4 C's may indicate substance use and addiction issues:

- Craving
- Loss of control of amount or frequency of use
- Compulsion to use
- Using despite consequences

The links between mental health and substance abuse issues are complex. They might develop independently as a result of common risk factors or one might lead to the other as a result of self-medication or prolonged distress.<sup>xii</sup> The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) defines addiction as the problematic use of a substance and any behavior

that is out of control in some way. It is also used to explain the experience of withdrawal when a substance or behavior (i.e. gambling) is stopped. However, experiencing enjoyment or going through withdrawal do not in themselves mean a person has an addiction, but the presence of the 4 c's could indicate an addiction; craving, loss of control of amount or frequency of use, compulsion to use, and using despite consequences.<sup>xiii</sup>

Substance use and addiction could be caused by a variety of reasons. It could be due to family history and genetic factors or because a person is unable to properly cope with stress, mental health issues, or their environment. Substance use is often voluntary in the first occurrence and the development of a full addiction transpires through ongoing use and a variety of circumstances.

The harms of substance use can range from mild (i.e. frequently feeling hungover or being late for work) to severe (i.e. homelessness or disease). Harmful consequences can develop over time and can affect every aspect of a person's life, such as injuries while under the influence; trouble thinking clearly; blackouts; problems with relationships; spending money on substances rather than life essentials; legal problems or feelings of emptiness.<sup>xiv</sup>

## STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

### DEALING WITH STRESS

Stress and chronic stress can seem overwhelming and difficult to control, however, there are a number of strategies that can help reduce stress levels, help to regain control, and improve wellbeing.

- **Accept that there are events that are out of your control** and try to maintain a positive attitude.
- **Practice relaxation techniques** and find out what works best for you. Try meditation, yoga, tai-chi, or deep breathing exercises.
- **Prioritize your tasks** and manage your time effectively. If there is too much on your plate, learn to say no and delegate tasks when necessary.
- **Try to be assertive instead of aggressive.** Assert your feelings and opinions instead of becoming angry and defensive.
- **Spend time doing things that make you happy.** Focus on hobbies, passions, and creative outlets.
- **Avoid alcohol and drugs or compulsive behaviours** as a means for destressing.
- **Seek out social support** from friends and family or speak to a professional to learn healthy ways of dealing with stress.<sup>xv</sup>

### DEALING WITH ANXIETY

Anxiety is our body's natural response to stress, and triggers vary on an individual basis. Whether it's the first day of a new job or public speaking, try some of these simple techniques the next time you experience anxiety.

- **Practice focused, deep breathing.** Try breathing in for four counts and out for four counts for five minutes total. By evening out your breath, you'll slow your heart rate, which should help calm you down.<sup>xvi</sup>
- **Take a time-out.** Go for a walk, listen to music, or meditate. Stepping back from the problem may help to clear your mind.

- **Write down your thoughts or journal your emotions.** Learn what triggers your anxiety. Track these feelings in a journal and look for a pattern.
- **Try exercising** in a way that is fun and enjoyable for you.
- **Limit alcohol and caffeine.** These can often aggravate anxiety and trigger panic attacks.
- **Talk to someone.** Speak to friends, family, or loved ones. Sometimes opening up and saying it out loud can be therapeutic. If you would like to speak to a professional, reference the resources section below.<sup>xvii</sup>

## DEALING WITH DEPRESSION

When dealing with depression, often the things that will help are the most difficult to do, but not impossible. Start with small acts and efforts and build on those.

- **Reach out and stay connected.** Support from friends, family, or professionals is key to lifting depression. When suffering from depression, it can be difficult to maintain a healthy perspective and you may not feel like talking, but connecting with others can help your mood and outlook. Look for support from people who make you feel safe, who listen attentively and compassionately. Try scheduling a weekly date with a friend and make face-time a priority.
- **Find ways to support others.** Whether it's volunteering or caring for a friend's pet, your mood may brighten, knowing you are helping someone, and give you a sense of feeling needed.
- **Join a support group.** Surrounding yourself with other like-minded individuals that are experiencing something similar to yourself can reduce the sense of isolation. Their experiences may provide a new perspective on what is happening in your life and their advice may prove to be helpful. Reference the resources section below for local Toronto associations.
- **Make time for your hobbies and interests.** Spend time doing activities that you enjoy or used to enjoy.
- **Support your health** and better manage stress by getting good quality sleep and aim for eight hours a night.<sup>xviii</sup> Eat a nourishing and healthful diet, filled with whole foods, and stay hydrated by drinking at least two liters of water a day.<sup>xix</sup> Minimize sugar and refined carbs, because while these foods will boost your mood temporarily, they quickly lead to a crash in blood sugar, mood and energy.<sup>xx</sup>
- **Exercise is a powerful tool.** It can seem daunting to get out of bed, let alone work out, but research shows that regular exercise can be as effective as prescribed medication for relieving depression symptoms and improving fatigue. Aim for at least thirty minutes of exercise, five times a week.<sup>xxi</sup>
- **Get outside and soak up the sun.** Vitamin D has been proven to boost serotonin levels and improve mood.<sup>xxii</sup> This can be difficult to do during the winter months, and many people suffer from a form of depression known as Seasonal Affective Disorder, that can make you feel hopeless, sad, tense, or stressed, with no interest or motivation to do those activities you normally love.<sup>xxiii</sup>
- **Challenge negative thoughts,** by identifying those that are fueling your depression and replacing them with a more balanced way of thinking. Ask yourself questions like "what would I tell a friend who had this thought?". By cross-examining the negative thoughts, you may develop a more balanced perspective that will help relieve your depression.<sup>xxiv</sup>

## DEALING WITH SUBSTANCE USE & ADDICTION

Developing a substance abuse problem is not a character flaw or a sign of weakness, and it takes more than willpower to overcome the problem. The continued use of certain alcohol or drugs can create changes in the brain, causing powerful cravings. What you need to remember is that recovery is possible, no matter how many times you have tried and failed, with the right treatment and support, change is possible.<sup>xxv</sup>

- **Recognize that you have a problem.** This is often the most difficult step toward recovery. If you are abusing a prescription drug, you may be concerned about how you will find an alternate way to treat a medical condition. It is okay to feel conflicted, even when you know it is causing problems in your life.
- **Think about change.** Track your drug use, including when and how much you use. This will give you a better sense of the role it is playing in your life. Consider the things that are important to you in your life and how the substance use is affecting those things, like a relationship or your career.
- **Explore your treatment options and find support.** Once you are committed to recovery, next you should seek help and support to find the best treatment for you.<sup>xxvi</sup> Reference the resources section below to connect with a qualified professional.

## RESOURCES

While mental illness accounts for about 10% of the burden of disease in Ontario, it receives just 7% of health care dollars. Only about half of Canadians experiencing a major depressive episode receive “potentially adequate care.”<sup>xxx</sup>

If you or someone you know is in crisis and requires emergency assistance, visit your local emergency department or call 911. Alternatively, you can contact one of the Crisis Response Programs serving Toronto found on the [Canadian Mental Health Association website](#).

Download or print their Quick Guide for a more comprehensive list of [Mental Health Resources serving Toronto](#).

Drop-in counselling is offered at walk-in clinics where patients can get help without having to make an appointment ahead of time. Most drop-in clinics are free of charge. However, those run by private practices have fees and deposits. Many topics can be discussed, including health and mental health issues, workplace challenges, relationships, family dynamics, bullying, or thoughts of suicide or self-harm. Anyone can seek help at a drop-in counselling service, though some counselling clinics cater to specific needs of the client. Please visit this [link for community clinics and corresponding eligibility criteria](#).<sup>xxvii</sup>

Additionally, employers are increasingly aware of mental health issues that may affect their employees and likely offer and encourage employees to seek out services and additional support through the company’s benefits provider. If you are unsure of what services are available, speak with your company’s human resources department for more information.

| In-Person Services   | Phone Services  |
|--|---|
| <p>CAMH and <a href="#">YouthCan IMPACT</a> operate three walk-in clinics around the city that provide mental health care for young people.</p> <p><a href="#">East Metro Youth Services</a><br/>(Scarborough and Danforth locations)</p> <p><a href="#">Skylark Children, Youth and Families</a><br/>(Yonge and Eglinton)</p> <p>The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (<a href="#">CAMH</a>) also operates the Gerald Sheff &amp; Shanitha Kachan Emergency Department, the only 24/7 psychiatric emergency department in Ontario, located at 250 College Street.</p> <p><a href="#">Hard Feelings Toronto</a> is a community of professional counsellors who provide low-cost services and support in Toronto.</p> | <p><a href="#">Toronto Distress Centres</a>: 416-408-4537</p> <p><a href="#">Gerstein Centre</a>: 416-929-5200</p> <p><a href="#">Assaulted Women’s Helpline</a>: 416-863-0511 or Toll-free: 1-866-863-0511</p> <p><a href="#">Progress Place Warm Line</a>: 416-960-WARM (9276), every day from 8:00 p.m. to midnight.</p> <p>Spectra Helpline: 416-920-0497 or 905-459-7777 for Brampton and Mississauga residents.</p> <p><i>Languages: English, Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Spanish, Portuguese</i></p> <p>Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868</p> <p>Toronto Seniors Helpline: 416-217-2077</p> <p><a href="#">Victim Services Toronto</a>: 416-808-7066</p> |

## Online Resources

[Big White Wall](#): An Online Mental Health Service with 24/7 clinical moderation, self-guided courses, and anonymous peer support.

[The Jack Project](#): The Jack Project unites young people by focusing on ending the stigma attached to mental health issues. They have local Toronto chapters, as well as online resources and recommended support networks.

[Be There](#): Do You know someone who might be struggling with their mental health? Check out [Be There](#), a free mental health resource that teaches you how to support loved ones struggling with their mental health.

### Applications

There are many user-friendly apps available, both free and reasonably-priced options, that incorporate proven techniques such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Acceptance Commitment Therapy, and address many mental health issues.



[Happify](#): A free app that is a psychologist-approved, mood-training program. With various activity suggestions, games, and gratitude prompts to train your brain to overcome negative thoughts.



[Mind Shift](#): A free app designed for teens and young adults with anxiety that stresses the importance of changing how you think about anxiety.



[MoodKit](#): An app developed by two clinical psychologists designed to help you apply effective strategies of professional psychology to your everyday life. It helps you take action to improve your life; feel better by changing how you think; rate and chart your mood to monitor progress; and develop self-awareness and healthy attitudes. Cost: \$4.99.



[notOK](#): A free app developed for teenagers that allows users to add trusted contacts as part of their support group. When the digital panic button is hit, a message along with their current GPS location is sent to those trusted contacts.



[Quit That!](#): A free app that helps users beat habits and addictions.



[Self-Help for Anxiety Management \(SAM\)](#): A free app that prompts users to build their own 24-hour anxiety toolkit that allows users to track anxious thoughts and behaviour over time, with over 20 self-help techniques. You can also use the Social Cloud to confidentially connect with other users in an online social community.



[Talkspace Online Therapy](#): This app is free to download and matches you with a licensed therapist in your area that you can text message as often as you need and receive responses daily. They offer services for individuals and couples. Plan costs vary depending on the type of subscription service you choose.



[What's Up](#): A free app that helps you cope with depression, anxiety, stress, and more. Using the positive and negative habit tracker to maintain your good habits, and break those that are counterproductive.

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