



Mental Health

SCOPE OF THE ISSUE

Our mental health is affected by many factors including where we live, the state of our environment, genetics, our income and education level, and our relationships with friends and family. Positive mental health is a cornerstone of our overall well-being. Mentally healthy people are able to cope with the inevitable stress and strain of daily life and have the resilience to rebound from life-changing events such as loss of a loved one, loss of a job, or marriage breakdown.

However, some leading health indicators show Canadians as a whole, and some groups in particular, are experiencing mental health problems in their lives. These problems exact a significant toll on individuals, their families, and society at large.

- Suicide accounts for 24% of all deaths among 15-24 year olds, and 16% among those from 25 to 44.
- More than half a million persons aged 15 and over (2.2%) reported having activity limitations due to emotional, psychological or psychiatric conditions. An additional 1.8% had activity limitations due to frequent memory problems or periods of confusion.
- Stress and mental health-related problems currently represent 40-50% of the short-term disability claims among employees of some of Canada's largest corporations.
- The Canadian economy loses an estimated \$30 billion a year in productivity due to mental illness and addiction problems.
- Social conditions such as poverty, income disparities, homelessness and housing instability, income insecurity, racism, sexism, homophobia negatively impact mental health.

FEDERAL ACTION

Health promotion seeks to develop strategies that increase individual and community control over the determinants of health to improve overall health and promote social justice and equity. Mental health promotion builds on the above principles. It entails enhancing people's resiliency and coping skills, and above all, their capacity to take control over their lives, thereby improving their mental health. Mental health promotion is targeted at the population as a whole, including people with mental illness. Policies and programs to promote mental health are pursued at every level of society, including the federal government.

The Mental Health Promotion Unit (MHPU) was created in 1995 as the focal point of Health Canada's efforts to maintain and improve positive mental health and well being for the Canadian population. The new MHPU addresses mental health promotion from a population health perspective that takes into account the broad range of determinants of mental health. Its mandate is to promote and support mental health and reduce the burden of mental health problems and disorders by contributing to: the development, synthesis, dissemination and application of knowledge and the development, implementation and evaluation of policies, programs and activities designed to promote mental health and address the needs of people with mental health problems or disorders.

In addition, Health Canada's **First Nations and Inuit Health Branch** supports the delivery of public health and health promotion services on-reserve and in Inuit communities. It provides drug, dental and ancillary health services to First Nations and Inuit people regardless of residence. The Branch also provides primary care services on-reserve in remote and isolated areas, where there are no provincial services readily available.

Health Canada publications deal with issues such as helping children live with separation and divorce, coping with the stress of terrorism, and promoting mental health in First Nations and Inuit communities. Other federal departments also offer programs which promote mental health. Federal programs related to, for example, income, employment, education, housing, or human rights all play a part in helping to promote the mental health of Canadians (see other "Citizens for Mental Health" Backgrounders).

COMMUNITY RESPONSE

Healthy public policy and, in particular, mentally healthy public policy is a responsibility of all levels of government across a wide range of departments. Policies in a range of areas from income security to reducing stress in the workplace or programs such as suicide prevention or youth counselling all constitute health promoting initiatives. The following example related to health in the workplace could serve as a template for the development of mentally healthy policy in many areas of activity.

Acting on the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion's call for "putting health on the agenda of policy-makers in all sectors and at all levels" the authors of a recent report prepared for the Institute for Work and Health looked at the impact of information about the health consequences of unemployment and job insecurity. They evaluated the influence and potential of such information, and analysed barriers to utilizing it in employment policy-making.

The authors conclude with three recommendations aimed at combining greater awareness of employment-related health consequences with traditional employment policy-making:

- health policy-makers must act as the intellectual leaders in rephrasing health information in terms meaningful to employment policy-makers;
- both health and employment policy-makers must work toward an increase in cross-departmental and cross-governmental initiatives as well as toward greater awareness of and accountability for the health consequences of employment policy; and
- these policy-makers should monitor support for initiatives that are proposed on the basis of health information and be prepared to offer this information when they encounter resistance from stakeholders, bureaucrats, the media, and the general public.

Sources

- CMHA Ontario Division (www.ontario.cmha.ca/content/information_and_links/statistics.asp?CID=3296)
- First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, Health Canada (www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnihb/index.htm)
- Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health – see CMHA Ontario (www.ontario.cmha.ca/content/information_and_links/statistics.asp?CID=3296)
- Mental Health Promotion Unit, Health Canada (www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/mentalhealth/mhp)
- Statistics Canada - Cat 89-577-XIE, *A Profile of Disability in Canada, 2001*.