



# Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

## 360 DEGREES OF MENTAL HEALTH: A BROAD VIEW OF ITS IMPACT AND LAYING A FOUNDATION FOR BETTER MENTAL HEALTH HYGIENE



In today's world, especially during a time where the COVID-19 pandemic has created new realities for many, few things have a greater impact on one's life than their mental health. According to a 2015 study by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, at least 1 in 5 Canadians experience a mental health disorder in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Adding to the complexity and prevalence of mental health disorders, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought forward new challenges as individuals from all walks of life have been impacted in unprecedented ways, leaving some in a state of uneasiness, with increased feelings of anxiety and/or, depression among several classes of disorders. Individuals across Canada have reported lower self-perceived mental well-being than the previous year.<sup>1</sup>

Yet there remains a commonality: mental health impacts how you feel and function in some of the most significant areas of your life.

### **Impact on home and family**

Precisely where and who one considers "home" and "family" varies widely. At the heart of both is a comforting place to land, decompress and bond with those dearest to you - all

aspects that can boost your mental health but just as easily suffer when anxiety, depression or other mental health disorders come into play. At home, common responsibilities and chores like doing the dishes or laundry, caring for children, checking the mail, balancing a cheque book or preparing meals may become overwhelming or difficult to complete when facing a mental health disorder. These responsibilities have become especially overwhelming during the COVID-19 pandemic as many now face challenges with disruptions to our regular routines. New complications and considerations have arisen, including the management of a remote workspace, or the safety protocols applied when physically present at work during the pandemic.



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There are a large number of employees who now have expanded roles within the home, like assuming the role of educational provider or caregiver, these added stressors can become extremely daunting, leading to unwanted dysfunction such as, the inability to complete tasks, resentments, broken relationships or experiencing feelings such as inadequacy, sadness or hopelessness.

***Approximately 11 million Canadians aged 15 and older report having a family member with a mental health disorder. Over one-third of them feel their time, energy, emotions, finances or daily activities have been affected by their family member(s) disorder.<sup>2</sup>***

Similarly, interactions with family - perhaps already fraught with sensitivities or a delicate history while dealing with mental health concerns may cause anxiety, anger, despondency or extreme discomfort in both the person dealing with the illness itself, and spouses, partners, children or other family members. These factors can be especially difficult in times of required quarantine, isolation or where limitations and guidelines have impacted the ability to interact with familiar persons in comfortable settings. The possible friction, arguments, or concerns that may ensue can further irritate, alienate and isolate all parties involved. Sometimes breaking a family unit irrevocably or negatively impacting the emotional development of children - precisely when everyone needs the most support.

### **Impact on friends and relationships**

Meaningful connections with friends, significant others and acquaintances can be invaluable to positive mental health; nurturing self-esteem and individuality, encouraging new, positive experiences - even the mental and physical benefits of sharing a good laugh together are well documented. These connections can be difficult to make under the circumstances of a global pandemic. Mental health disorders can interfere with creating these precious connections or damage the ones you already have. For some, the increased use of virtual and telephonic modalities has been had a positive impact, while other may experience additional strain and growing feelings of isolation and loneliness when managing new or existing disorders. Many of the most common mood and personality disorders manifest themselves in behaviours and symptoms that can be unpredictable, create misunderstandings and changes in personality or hinder relationship building. Strong

feelings such as worry, lack of control, sadness, shame or fear can make it difficult to relax, develop social bonds, engage in conversation, or step into new environments. These same feelings can make the prospect of interacting with others, even close friends, loved ones or members of the community, seem almost impossible. In turn, one may isolate themselves by opting out of gatherings, phone calls, hobbies, spiritual services or everyday social situations. Mental health disorders and symptoms can also make it more difficult for others to gauge interactions and nurture connections with a person affected by mental health, playing further into insecurities and a lack of self-worth which may tell them, "no one will care if I'm there" or "I'm not really wanted."

### **Impact on work and school**

As technology and personal interconnectedness have evolved, so too has the pace and nature of both school and work life. Days tend to extend beyond traditional business hours, with tasks, conversations and interpersonal communications continuing through emails, text messages and cell phone calls. COVID-19 has increased our reliance upon technologies that offer alternative solutions to face to face exchanges.

While this makes staying in touch easier, being constantly "plugged in" also constantly exposes employees and students to reminders and expectations that may be stressful (i.e.: reports, assignments, high-stakes social scenarios). Indeed, a lack of work-life balance costs Canadian businesses a combined 20 billion dollars a year in health claims, lost productivity and absenteeism.<sup>3</sup> In today's fast-paced, results-driven arenas mental health disorders can easily be exacerbated while also impacting school and/or work performance.

Symptoms and struggles common in mental health disorders can impede one's ability to effectively manage time, concentrate, absorb information or cope with the pressures and deadlines inherent to learning and working. The majority of mental health symptoms appear and are diagnosed between the ages of twelve to twenty-five<sup>4</sup>, leaving students particularly vulnerable to mental health challenges, seriously impacting the outcome of their academic careers, and by extension, possibly the quality of jobs and post-academic opportunities available to them.

As with friends, family and other relationships, mental health disorders can also make interactions with peers, bosses, colleagues or teachers a source of stress or triggers. In these instances, feelings of disconnection, loneliness, inadequacy or embarrassment may result. This is doubly unfortunate as these people may be in the best positions to offer - or provide guidance toward - very effective tools, strategies and services available to help.

### **Basic mental health hygiene: A strong foundation for positive impact**

With the effects of mental health stretching into so many key areas of our lives, common sense and science fully endorse the importance of making positive mental health a priority. Good news: consistently employing a handful of proven strategies in mental health hygiene can make a huge difference, and provide a sturdy, reliable platform on which to further build resiliency and more customized coping strategies. Each of these coping methods can lessen the negative impacts and symptoms of mental health disorders on relationships, home and family life, work and school, while simultaneously improving overall well-being and coping abilities.

### **Sleep**

The body and mind need to recharge and recuperate daily in order to serve us best, and sleep is the most effective way to do so. We quickly feel the effects of a lack of sleep with a decrease in stamina, the ability to learn, focus, make logical fact-based deductions and often realize an overall decline in performance and productivity.

***Canada loses about 600,000 working hours every year to lack of sleep.<sup>5</sup>***

Quality sleep leaves us rested, clear-headed and able to keep up with the demands of our routine. It also directly impacts our mental health, influencing behaviours, body sensations, concentration, emotions, even our thoughts<sup>5</sup> which means sleep, or lack of it plays a significant role in how we feel and how well we communicate and nurture relationships.

Developing a consistent sleep schedule sets the stage for the best zzzz's we can get: cuing our brains with a nighttime ritual. Make rooms dark, quiet and cool and skip caffeine when possible. Unplug all devices at least an hour before your head hits the pillow.

### **Physical activity**

Getting in regular physical activity - be it brisk walking, yoga, an at-home workout or some zumba - is key to maintaining a balanced mental and physical state. When we exercise, our muscle tone and overall physical health is enhanced, but our body also gets busy creating endorphins, the brain's natural stress reducers, improving mood and disposition while lessening fatigue<sup>6</sup> and improving sleep quality. The good effects last: findings suggest getting twenty to forty minutes of aerobic activity can result in anxiety reduction for several hours.<sup>7</sup>

### **Diet**

Food fuels our bodies and how we feel. What we eat can help or hurt our body's capacity to cope with your emotions, people or symptoms of a mental health disorder. Protein-rich foods (eggs, nuts, fish, beans and lentils) contribute to improved well-being and cognitive functioning.<sup>7</sup> Dark leafy greens and citrus fruits are rich in Folate, a B-vitamin often deficient in those with depressive symptoms<sup>7</sup> while other deficiencies in B vitamins like folic acid and B-12 may trigger or contribute to depression.<sup>8</sup> What our bodies need really isn't complicated: stick to a well-balanced diet, heavy in fruits, veggies and lean proteins and steer clear of caffeine, sugar, and processed foods that can actually trigger heart palpitations, inflammation, panic and anxiety attacks.<sup>8</sup> Build your mental health boosting food choices into your home life by shopping mindfully and keeping your fridge stocked with healthy choices you and your family can prepare and enjoy together. Bring leftovers to work or suggest heading to healthier lunch spots to colleagues who are also interested in keeping things less processed. Remember, food is there to nourish, replenish and promote the healing of your body and mind, but eating can also become a bonding experience that can help forge better relationships, both personal and professional.

### Reaching out

Whether introverted or extroverted, people are social creatures by nature, and genuine connection can be a uniquely enriching and effective ingredient in boosting our mental health. For some, these connections may be difficult to replicate during times where face-to-face connectivity has been we restricted or impeded. Personality type, shyness and even some of the symptoms associated with common mental health disorders, can make it challenging for some to reach out to others. Do what feels right. Some of us may be most comfortable with a very small circle of family. Others may prefer a larger network with friends and colleagues, whereas some individuals like to interact in a meaningful way with others by volunteering in their communities.

Communicating with others can also facilitate reaching out for help when needed. Those with mental health disorders are often hesitant to tell their family, friends or employers of their struggles for fear of being labelled or facing prejudices<sup>1</sup> but talking to others can make those individuals feel less alone - and may help those supporting the individual better equipped to understand and relate to what they're going through. It's important to remember, effective communications can extend beyond face-to-face interactions. When you need to connect, a simple phone call or online video exchange can satisfy the need to connect with those you feel comfortable reaching out to. Communication can open the door for support.

Mental health affects every aspect of our lives and in order to be at our best, we need to nurture our mental health daily. Prioritize yourself. If you're facing ongoing mental health challenges or are struggling with your overall well-being, be conscious of the impact your mental state has on your life.

Cultivating good mental health hygiene can be instrumental in turning the corner toward better days.

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