

Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health (CAMIMH)

The Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health (CAMIMH) was created in 1998. CAMIMH includes partners from the following organizations:

- Autism Society of Canada
- Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention
- Canadian Coalition for Seniors Mental Health
- Canadian Medical Association
- Canadian Association for Occupational Therapists
- Canadian Association of Social Workers
- Canadian National Committee for Police Mental Health Liaison
- Canadian Healthcare Association
- Canadian Psychosocial Rehabilitation Association
- Canadian Mental Health Association
- Canadian Psychiatric Association
- Canadian Psychiatric Research Foundation
- Canadian Psychological Association
- Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Canada
- National Network for Mental Health,
- Native Mental Health Association of Canada
- Mood Disorders Society of Canada
- Schizophrenia Society of Canada.

The main goal of CAMIMH is to work with the Canadian government and other partners on the development of a national plan for mental illness and mental health.

Mental Health Literacy Project

In the fall of 2005, CAMIMH received funding from Health Canada for a three-year project to study mental health literacy. Mental health problems are common, and many Canadians have struggled with a mental health problem or know someone who has. Mental health literacy has been defined as what people know and believe about mental illness and mental health. When mental health literacy increases, people have a better understanding of mental illness and mental health, and they are less likely to hold negative beliefs about mental illness. They are also better able to recognize, manage or prevent mental health problems.

Until now, we have not had a national plan to improve knowledge and understanding of mental health problems in Canada. A national plan will involve a number of different strategies, including research and information sharing. It will raise awareness so that people are able to recognize, prevent and manage mental health problems. Most of all, it will help to reduce the stigma of mental health problems. This is important because people need to feel comfortable seeking help and reaching out to others who need help. CAMIMH believes that a national strategy for mental health literacy would make a real difference in the lives of Canadians.

The mental health literacy project is the first of its kind in Canada. Until now, no one knew for certain what Canadians know, what they believe, and how they think about mental illness and mental health. To get some background information, CAMIMH looked first at other studies of mental health literacy. Then, CAMIMH did a national survey and

held group discussions across Canada. The results show how the mental health literacy of Canadians compares with people in other countries and they offer valuable information about how to improve mental health literacy in Canada. This work is an important resource in the development of a national plan for mental illness and mental health in Canada.

KEY FINDINGS

Do Canadians recognize mental health problems?

Most Canadians know that mental health problems are common. They can recognize a mental health problem when they see one and they know the warning signs. However there is room for improvement: some people still think that mental health problems are rare and some do not clearly understand what a mental health problem is.

What do Canadians think about the causes of mental health problems?

Like people in other countries, most Canadians believe that people develop common mental health problems such as depression because of outside events. For example, many people believe that stress can lead to depression. When it comes to serious mental health problems like schizophrenia, Canadians are more likely to think that the cause is inside the individual. For example, many people believe that schizophrenia runs in families or that a person with schizophrenia has a chemical imbalance in the brain.

How do people feel about treatment and recovery?

Compared to people studied in other research Canadians are more likely to recommend medical help for mental health problems. However, they are more supportive of medical care for serious mental health problems than for common mental health problems like depression or anxiety. Many have a negative view of medication, especially for common mental health problems.

Most Canadians think that people can recover from mental health problems, but they are more likely to think this about common mental health problems than about serious disorders.

Is there stigma and discrimination toward mental health problems in Canada?

Stigma and discrimination still exist in Canada, especially toward serious mental health problems. Canadians know that mental health problems carry stigma. Because of this they may not feel comfortable revealing a mental health problem to others. For example, they may be afraid that revealing a mental health problem at work could threaten their job security or opportunities for advancement.

Can we prevent mental health problems, and how?

Canadians have a fairly good understanding of how to prevent mental health problems. They recommend good relationships with friends and family, physical exercise and stress management to protect mental health, for example, and all of these do in fact

protect mental health. People who think that mental health problems are inherited are less likely to believe that we can do anything to protect our mental health.

Is there a link between mental and physical health?

In recent years, there has been a lot of research exploring the connections between mental health and physical health and how these work. There are connections between stress, depression and chronic physical diseases, like heart disease, for example. Many Canadians seem to understand intuitively that there is a connection between the mind and the body, and between mental health and physical health.

TOWARDS A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY

CAMIMH took on this project in order to assess mental health literacy among Canadians, with the goal of developing a plan to improve mental health literacy in Canada. The project findings show that there is room for improvement in the mental health literacy of Canadians – too many still underestimate how common mental health problems are, do not understand the differences between the different mental health problems, do not believe in prevention, do not know enough about different treatment options, and do not know enough about the important linkages between mental health and physical health. People continue to fear stigma and discrimination if they reveal a mental health problem.

As we move forward, the major challenge we face is the development of effective strategies to improve mental health literacy. Some of the strategies that have been used have shown limited success. Attempts have been made to educate the public to think of mental health problems as medical illnesses, for example, in the hope that this would normalize mental illness, reduce stigma, and improve help-seeking. However, most people continue to resist labeling common mental health problems like depression and anxiety as medical illnesses, and research shows this approach can actually increase stigma.

Because there are many factors that affect mental health and many different ways people can influence or control these factors, it may be more useful to take a broader view of mental health literacy, and to develop a variety of strategies for improving it. For example, genetic inheritance, early childhood experience, life stress, relationships with friends and family, physical health and personal coping skills, all combine to affect mental health. Some of these factors can be influenced or controlled, and some cannot. Some people have more knowledge and skills than others. Some factors can be changed at the individual level, while others call for broader social, environmental or economic changes.

When we support people in gaining the knowledge and skills they need to prevent and manage mental health problems, we are building mental health literacy. When people have good mental health literacy, they are able to access useful information and they are empowered to put that information to work to protect and maintain their own mental health. This includes people working together to change the conditions that contribute to mental health problems.

Empowerment and a sense of control are hugely important influences on mental health and well-being. They give people the strength they need to step forward, to advocate for

change, and to fight stigma and discrimination. This is the approach that brought health issues like cancer and HIV/AIDS out of the shadows, and it will do the same for mental health issues.

Because of the many influences on mental health, and the fact that Canadians are at different starting places in terms of knowledge and skill development, we can and should develop a number of strategies to improve mental health literacy. The CAMIMH *Mental Health Literacy in Canada Report* describes a variety of approaches that could be included in the national plan.