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# Mental Health 101.

# The Journey of Mental Health

If you're new to mental health or have been on the journey for a long time, thanks for joining us to establish a shared understanding of what we mean when we say "mental health."

# What is Mental Health?

The World Health Organization defines health broadly as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”<sup>1</sup>

- Mental health, like physical health, is a key component of what makes us well.
- We can think of mental health like we think of physical health, but where physical health refers to our bodies, **mental health refers to our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.**

The term “mental health” often makes people instantly think about mental **illnesses** like depression, schizophrenia, or bipolar disorder. Mental health, however, does **not** refer to illness alone. While it is true that 1 in every 5 people will experience a mental illness,<sup>2</sup> **all** of us have mental health and can struggle with it at any point in time. Still, it’s estimated that only 25% of those who are struggling get the support that they need.

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1. Source: [World Health Organization: Constitution](#).

2. Smetanin et al. (2011). [The life and economic impact of major mental illnesses in Canada: 2011-2041](#). Prepared for the Mental Health Commission of Canada. Toronto: RiskAnalytica.

## Mental health is also an incredibly important subject for young people in particular.

Consider the following statistics:

# 24%

Suicide accounts for 24% of deaths among 15-24-year-olds.<sup>1</sup>

# #1

This makes suicide the #1 health-related cause of death among young people in Canada.<sup>1</sup>

# ↓20%

Youth reporting 'excellent or very good mental health' has decreased from 60% of youth in 2019 to only 40% in 2020.<sup>2</sup>

# 15-24 yr olds

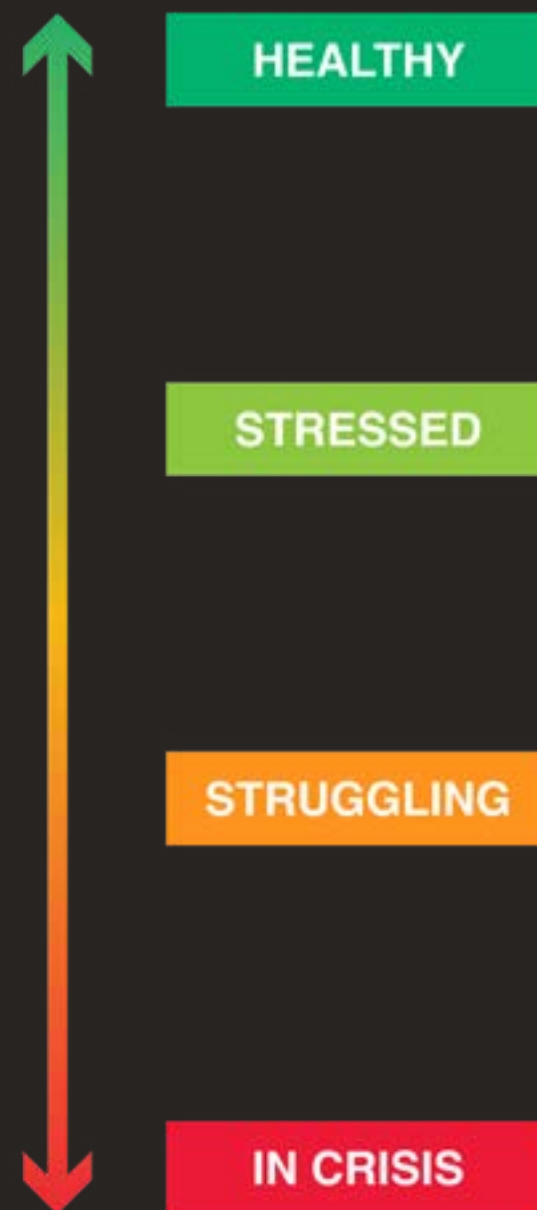
Age range most likely to experience mental illness and or substance use disorder than any other age group.<sup>3</sup>

1. Smetanin, P., Stiff, D., Briante, C., Adair, C.E., Ahmad, S. and Khan, M. The Life and Economic Impact of Major Mental Illnesses in Canada: 2011 to 2041. RiskAnalytica, on behalf of the Mental Health Commission of Canada 2011.
2. Government of Canada, Canada S. Chapter 1: Health of youth in Canada [Internet]. 2021 [cited 2023 Aug 11]. Available from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/42-28-0001/2021001/article/00001-eng.htm>
3. Pearson, Janz and Ali (2013). Health at a glance: Mental and substance use disorders in Canada. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 82-624-X.

# Mental Health as a Spectrum

Many people tend to perceive our mental health as a binary—we're either totally healthy or completely unwell. But that's not the case. Our mental health lies on a spectrum, and it's normal for our feelings to fluctuate as we live our lives.

Both our physical and mental health varies along a spectrum like this. When it comes to our physical health, there are times when issues may be less critical, and we treat an ailment ourselves (e.g. a headache). If things are more dire, we know to seek help (e.g. a severe migraine that lasts for days). The same goes for our mental health; we may face stress that we can manage ourselves, but there will be times when we need outside support (e.g. severe stress that won't go away, regardless of self-care methods we try). Understanding that our health lies on a spectrum gives us a better framework for understanding what we need at a given time.



# Where Does Mental Illness Fit In?

While mental health and mental illness are not synonymous, mental illness can significantly impact our mental health and is therefore important to discuss. When we talk about mental illness, we're referring to a **cluster of symptoms** that majorly impact our lives. Specifically, these symptoms are irregular patterns in our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, and these patterns can impact how our mental health may fluctuate.

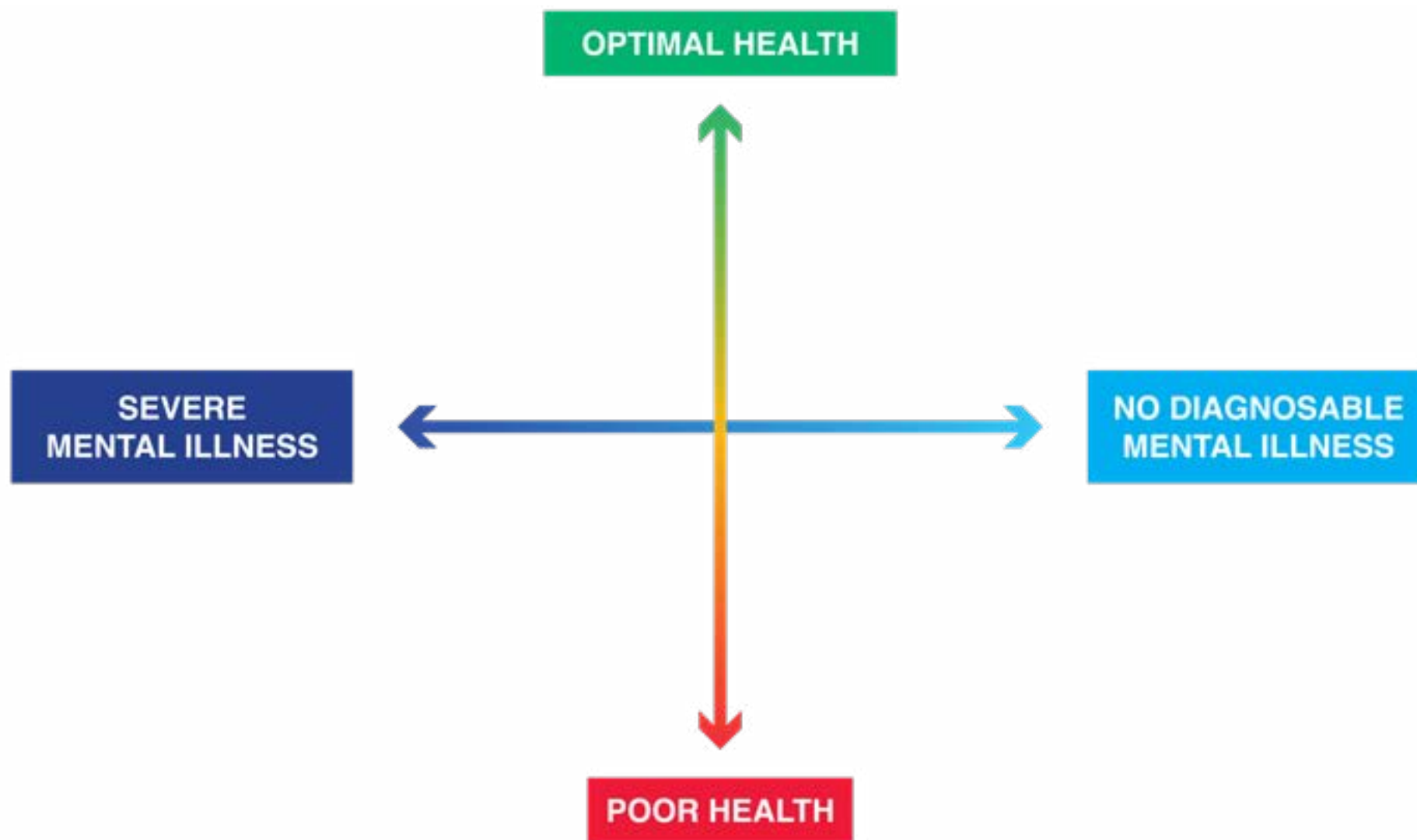
Mental illnesses that you may have heard of include: depression, anxiety disorders, mood disorders (e.g. bipolar disorder), and schizophrenia. All of these illnesses are patterns of mental health symptoms, and they need to be diagnosed by a professional. Mental health symptoms include but are not limited to: persistent low mood, severe anxiety, hearing or seeing things, and having persistent or obsessive thoughts. To be diagnosed as an illness, a doctor will assess the duration, severity, and impact of these symptoms.

Similar to how mental health is a spectrum, so too is mental illness. Illness can be experienced in varying levels of severity or not at all. This is demonstrated by the illustration below.



A person with a more severe mental illness may experience symptoms that are longer-lasting or more disruptive to their daily lives than a person with a more mild mental illness.

# Dual Spectrum of Mental Health



When we bring these two spectrums together, we get a full representation of how we can understand fluctuations in our mental state. Regardless of having a mental illness, anyone can experience a struggle and anyone can experience optimal health.

Mental illnesses may cause an individual to struggle more frequently with their mental health but, with diagnosis and treatment, **recovery is possible**. With the right treatment and support, symptoms can be relieved and all of us can experience optimal health.

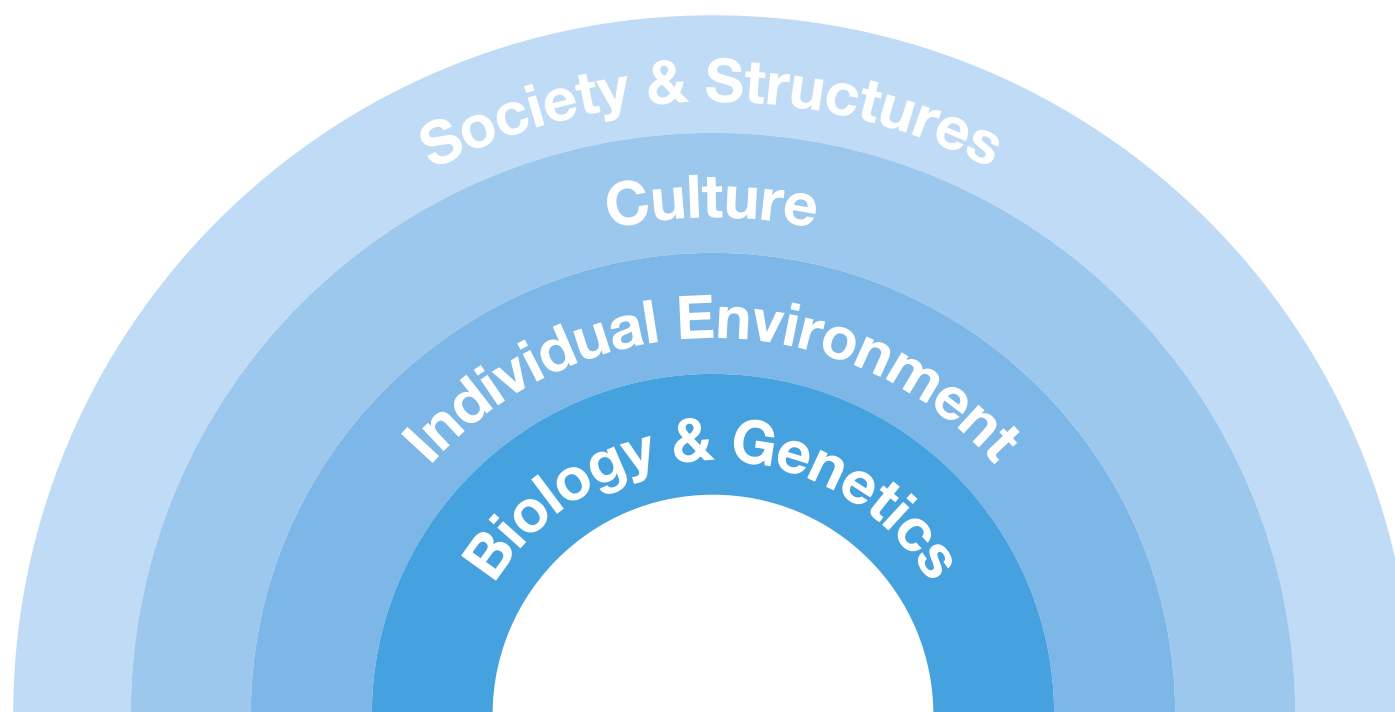
Similarly, a person with no diagnosable mental illness may struggle with their mental health in the event of a loss or other tragedy. It's possible to struggle with our mental health and not fit the criteria for diagnosis of a specific mental illness.



# Social Determinants of Mental Health

Many factors shape our mental health. These factors can include our individual biology/genetics, individual environment and behaviours, as well as cultural norms and societal structures/barriers. Different factors combine in unique ways to impact a person's mental health, and some people can be more affected by certain factors than others.

This model helps to demonstrate the different types of factors that can impact our mental health.

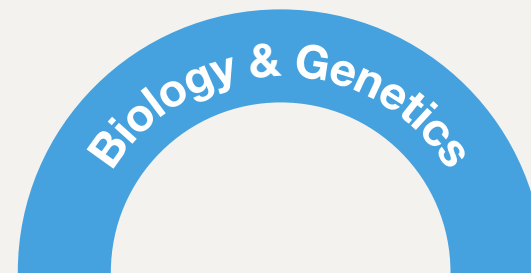


Let's take a moment to explore each of these categories.

# Biology & Genetics

These are the characteristics that make up who you are. These can include factors like age, gender, race, sexual orientation, genetics, etc. These factors are largely outside of our control. Some biological factors – in addition to mental illnesses – that may contribute to mental distress include:

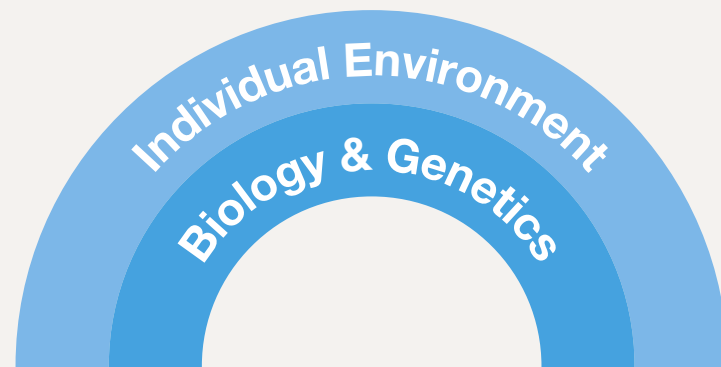
- Family genetics
- Misuse of drugs or alcohol
- Physical trauma/brain injury
- Chemical imbalances



# Individual Environment

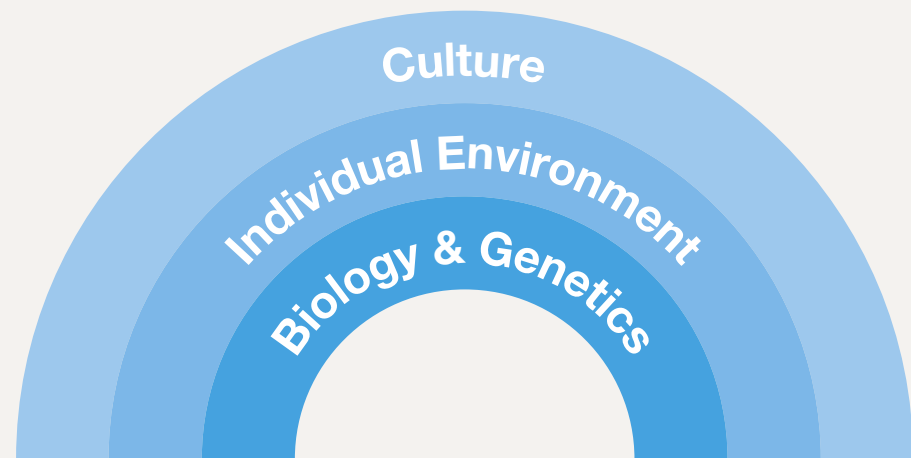
The environment we live in and our individual behaviours can also affect our mental health. Where we live, our social support, work environment, and degree of access to health services all play a part in shaping whether or not we will struggle with our mental health and to what extent. These include, but aren't limited to:

- Experiencing trauma
- Family dysfunction, neglect, or abuse
- Loss of a loved one
- Stressful work environment
- Experiencing violence
- Severe/significant long term stresses
- Social isolation or loneliness
- Poor nutrition



# Culture

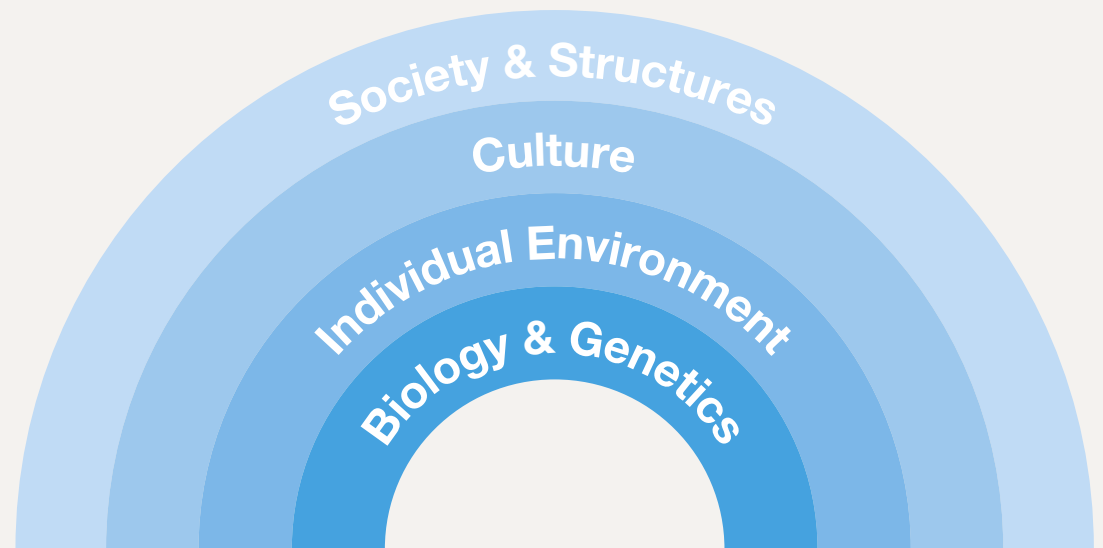
Struggling with mental health can be extremely challenging, but those who experience mental illness/struggles often say that the way they are treated by others is actually more important than the symptoms themselves. This phenomenon can be explained by the presence of stigma – the collection of negative beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, and stereotypes about mental health illness and struggle. Stigma can be ingrained in a culture and can be a significant contributor to distress. Importantly though, **we can change stigma** and culture. When we're looking to take action for mental health in our communities, addressing the ways stigma presents in our culture are areas we may look to focus on.



# Society & Structure

There are also factors within our social environment and structures that target and unfairly impact whole groups of people – also known as discrimination. Some examples include:

- Homo/bi/transphobia
- Racism
- Gender-based discrimination
- Ableism (discrimination towards those with a disability)
- Islamophobia



# The Role of Discrimination

Discrimination creates a power imbalance, and the repercussions can range from exclusion and name calling to denial of resources (education, jobs, medical care, etc.) and threats to our physical health. It is a cause of distress for those who experience it regularly and repeatedly and also is something that we have **the power to change**.

Furthermore, structural barriers are created when this inequality becomes rooted in the normal operations of institutions, such as schools, hospitals, or government, causing certain groups to have more limited access to resources and supports.

Examples include:

- The concentration of healthcare resources in large urban centers causing those in rural communities to have fewer resources when seeking care.
- Many Indigenous communities lack sufficient culturally appropriate resources.e.

## Consider the facts below and how they relate to mental distress on a structural level in Canada:

# 62%

62% of youth in Canada identifying as 2SLGBTQ feel unsafe at school, compared to 11% of cisgender heterosexual students.<sup>1</sup>

# ↑80%

Between 2019 and 2020, the number of police-reported crimes motivated by hatred of a race or ethnicity increased by 80%. Black populations were the most commonly targeted group, representing 26% of these crimes.<sup>3</sup>

# 5x – 7x ↑

Suicide rates are estimated to be 5 to 7 times higher for Indigenous youth and 11 times higher for Inuit youth when compared to non-Indigenous youth.<sup>2</sup>

1. Peter, T., Campbell, C.P., & Taylor, C. (2021). Still every class in every school: Final report on the second climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools. Toronto, ON: Egale Canada Human Rights Trust.
2. Ansloos J. Rethinking indigenous suicide. *International Journal of Indigenous Health*. 2018 Dec 19;13(2):8-28.
3. Government of Canada, Canada S. Police-reported hate crime in Canada, 2020 [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Aug 10]. Available from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2022001/article/00005-eng.htm>

**5x**

Transgender youth are 5 times more likely to experience suicidal ideation and over 7 times more likely to attempt suicide.<sup>2</sup>

**1/5**

1 in 5 people live below the poverty line.<sup>3,4</sup>

## Main ideas:

- Mental health is complex and there are many interacting factors that impact our mental health outcomes.
- We have different levels of control or influence on each of these factors and being familiar with them can help us target certain areas to drive change to improve mental health for ourselves, our friends and family, our schools or workplaces, and our community as a whole.

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1. Kingsbury M, Hammond NG, Johnstone F, Colman I. Suicidality among sexual minority and transgender adolescents: a nationally representative population-based study of youth in Canada. *CMAJ*. 2022 Jun 6;194(22):E767-74.
  2. Statistics Canada (March 2022) The Daily - Canadian Income Survey, 2020 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220323/dq220323a-eng.htm?CMP=mstatcan>
  3. Community Food Centres Canada. Sounding the Alarm: The Need to Invest in Working-Age Single Adults. [Internet]. Community Food Centres Canada; 2023 [cited 2023 Aug 11]. Available from: <https://cfccanada.ca/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=c5dc39cf-fd3f-4de0-8ced-16ba5b26060e>



# Identifying a Mental Health Struggle

With or without a mental illness, it can be difficult to recognize when mental distress has become too severe for us to look after on our own. Mental distress can be recognized as a “struggle” whenever we or someone we know experiences negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that are **intense**, **long-lasting**, and have a **big impact** on our lives. This framework is a helpful tool to use when we’re trying to assess the severity of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours we might be experiencing:

## Are they intense?

These aren’t mild, every-day fluctuations in feelings. They’re stronger and more persistent thoughts, feelings, and behaviours than the usual ups and downs of life.

## Are they long-lasting?

They’re having a consistent or lingering presence over weeks, months, or longer. Many professionals suggest that anything that’s lasted two weeks or longer can be cause for concern.

## Are they having a big impact?

They’re beginning to cause negative consequences in our life, possibly interfering with our ability to function and/or meet our everyday goals.

# Noticeable Signs

In addition to assessing if thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are intense, long-lasting, and/ or having a big impact, there are other ways to recognize these struggles in ourselves or someone else. The next few pages outline some concrete signs we can look out for when trying to gauge if we or someone we care about might be struggling with their mental health:

## Noticeable Thoughts:

Thoughts that express intense hopelessness, worthlessness, or things that aren't there:

- “What’s the point?” “Nothing matters.” “They’d be better off if I was gone.”
- “Everything sucks.” “I hate myself.” “I can’t do anything.” “No one cares.”
- Talking about seeing or hearing things that (to everyone else) aren't there (hallucinations)
- Expressing thoughts and beliefs that don't make sense (possibly delusions)

## Noticeable Feelings:

Feelings that are intense and long-lasting:

- Feelings of intense anger, worthlessness, sadness, or other distress
- Showing loss of interest in things that used to be important or feeling “numb”
- A very high or “manic” mood that is extreme — beyond regular “happiness”
- Rapid mood swings where we cycle through many different intense emotions

## Noticeable Behaviour:

Behaviours that are having a big impact in our life:

- Withdrawing from activities e.g. dropping out of extra-curriculars
- Changes in school performance
- Quitting jobs, avoiding social situations
- Impulsive behaviours (aggression, recklessness)
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Not taking care of personal hygiene
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol
- Repetitive/anxious behaviours that seem out of control (e.g. counting)
- Self-harming behaviours

These are signs that we or someone else may be really struggling but are not necessarily signs of mental illness. Either way, a person showing these signs may need support and outside help in order to feel better. If we notice signs of distressing thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviours, remember to consider if they're intense, long-lasting, and/ or having a big impact. If we think something might be becoming a struggle – for either ourselves or for someone we know – it's important to say something.

# Identifying a Crisis

Until now, we've described how to recognize the difference between everyday fluctuations and more serious struggles — but how do we know when it's a crisis that requires immediate action? The signs above help us understand when someone might need outside help. A crisis is when these symptoms become so severe that someone is at **risk of causing harm to themselves or someone else**.

Red flags that indicate that someone may be in a crisis include threatening or talking about suicide or self-harm, a sudden calmness after a period of struggle, and making preparations such as creating a plan for self-harm or giving away personal possessions.

# Main ideas:

- Mental health is just like physical health — but with thoughts, feelings, and behaviours
- Mental illnesses (e.g. depression, schizophrenia) are an important part of the discussion and are defined as a cluster of symptoms in our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours
- Our mental health is experienced along a spectrum — from optimal to crisis. Mental illness is also experienced along a spectrum
- Regardless of having a severe mental illness or no diagnosed mental illness, anyone can struggle or end up in crisis
- Someone might be experiencing a mental health struggle when changes in their thoughts, feelings, or behaviours are intense, long-lasting, and having a big impact
- Someone might be experiencing a crisis if there is a risk of harm to the person or those around them