

Barriers to Mental Health Care in Canada

Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches

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Introduction

Mental Health Research Canada's (MHRC) national polling initiative, *Understanding the Mental Health of Canadians: Throughout COVID-19 and Beyond* demonstrated that a consistent percentage of Canadians feel that they need mental health support but are not accessing it. Despite an increase in mental health support options in recent years, many Canadians face barriers when trying to access care during COVID-19 and continue to do so into the pandemic recovery period. The challenges of isolation, job loss, health anxieties and financial strain have exacerbated the need for mental health services at a time when access has become more difficult.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to provide context to quantitative data collected, and to gain greater insight into barriers faced by Canadians who need mental health care. It will examine quantitative and qualitative information related to why this group is not accessing care and provide recommendations on actionable steps forward based on discussions with Canadians with lived experience. Interviews in this qualitative analysis covered mental health indicators, factors, access and barriers to support, and insights on what needs to happen to alleviate these barriers. A total of 36 interviews were conducted with Canadians who expressed having difficulties with their mental health – with a strong focus on the COVID-19 pandemic – and who have not accessed mental health support in the past year. Context and quotes provided through MHRC's qualitative study were collected from participants across Canada who had previously responded to our national polling survey.

Summary

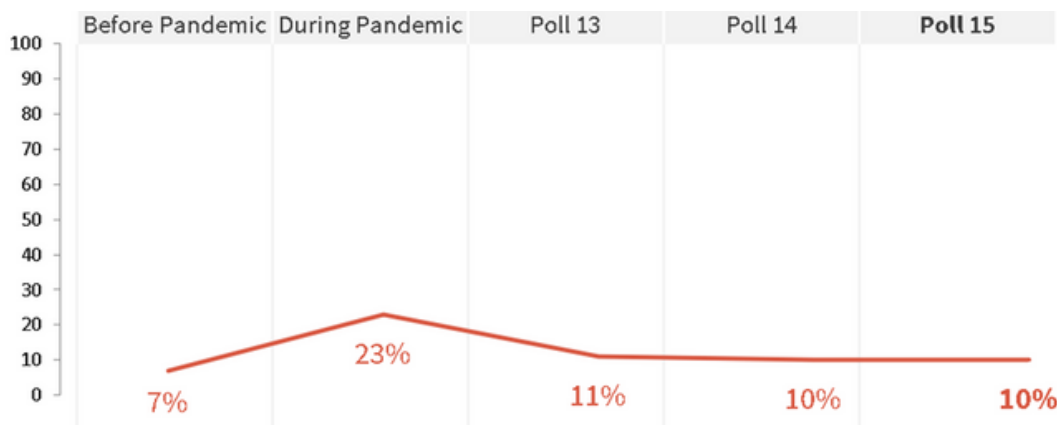
As we continue into the recovery period of the COVID-19 pandemic **an average of 5%, or over 1.5 million Canadians, have indicated that they have needed mental health support but have not accessed it.** Interviews with a sample of this group have validated several of MHRC's qualitative findings on barriers that exist to mental health care.

Many Canadians do not know where to find mental health support. This effort is exacerbated by the fact that many do not seek support until they are in the midst of a crisis and simply do not have the energy to tackle this barrier. Despite advocacy efforts resulting in an increase in mental health awareness, stigma remains a concern for many in this group who feel that they would be judged for admitting to needing help, and beyond this, feel they would not be comfortable speaking with a mental health professional. Beyond a lack of public awareness around mental health and the supports that are available, the potential costs related to professional support and wait times to access this care are major barriers that must be addressed to ensure that the well-being of Canadians is supported.

Factors of Negative Mental Health

As demonstrated in previous reports, factors that influenced mental health during the pandemic included social isolation, health fears and financial hardship. While these stressors have been alleviated for many resulting in mental health improvements, others have not returned to where they were prior to COVID-19.

FIGURE 1 – Self reported high anxiety of Canadians before and during the pandemic



While overall levels of self-rated anxiety and depression in Canada have decreased considerably since the peak of the pandemic (an average of 23% to 10% for anxiety and 15% to 8% for depression), **the Kessler 10 screener for psychological distress demonstrates that those who continue to struggle with their mental health are experiencing further heightened distress.**

FIGURE 2 – Results of Kessler 10 Scale of Psychological Distress Screener (Canadians who have rated their anxiety or depression as high)

Poll 15	Poll 14	Poll 13	Poll 12	Poll 11	Poll 10	Poll 9	Poll 8	Poll 7	Poll 6	
11%	12%	12%	23%	19%	19%	20%	21%	20%	23%	Likely to have no mental disorder symptoms (<20)
14%	13%	13%	16%	17%	19%	19%	20%	19%	18%	symptoms of a mild mental disorder (20-24)
24%	17%	21%	18%	19%	18%	22%	22%	21%	21%	Likely to have symptoms of moderate mental health disorder (25-29)
52%	58%	54%	42%	45%	44%	38%	38%	40%	37%	Likely to have symptoms of severe mental health disorder (30-50)

As reported by many of those who have felt the need for mental health support but have not accessed it, considerable improvements in mental health have been achieved through increased social interaction, an easing of pandemic-related health concerns, and reduced isolation but those suffering from pre-existing conditions or those facing sustained hardship have seen little meaningful change. Vulnerable groups disproportionately affected by the mental health impacts of the pandemic continue to require targeted support and resources in order to recover from its lasting psychological impacts.

Feelings of fear of the unknown and uncertainty for the future have persisted due to impacts of the pandemic which include economic concerns, education disruptions, and increased substance use. Furthermore, a lack of available healthcare services throughout COVID-19 seems, for some, to have continued into the recovery period causing additional anxiety and a lack of confidence in the healthcare system.

“The hard thing about COVID is the lack of information that we get. We are not sure about tomorrow, next month or next year. I don't think we have lot of confidence in our healthcare system and governments to provide all the information and answers to our questions. The most alarming for us is the indirect consequences of COVID, with the lack of services, lack of products, hospital closing... And the concern I have with that is, that's going to be a new normal in the future, even after COVID we are so used to having not good service anymore or no services, people are going to accept it.

-Male, 54, British Columbia

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On the flip side, those working within the healthcare system experienced, and continue to experience, incredibly heightened levels of burn out leading to increasingly negative mental health which, to some, manifest through physical symptoms. Another employment group that is still experiencing the effects of mental health struggles disproportionate to others is the education sector. Feelings of inadequacy during a time when virtual services were mandated were often followed by being overwhelmed by the increased needs of students when in-class sessions returned.

“Work-wise it became horrible. And it manifested physically. I would wake up in the middle of the night and be fighting bouts of nausea. I would throw up in the shower in the morning. I had to take stress leave... I couldn't do it.

-Female, 43, Ontario (Healthcare Provider)

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Barriers to Mental Health Support

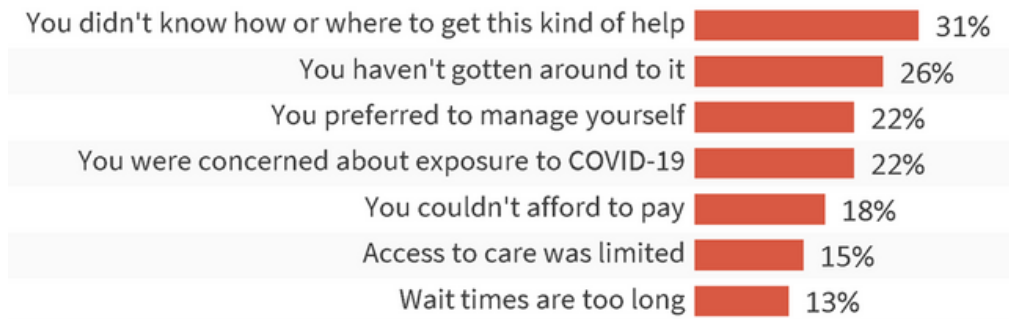
Through qualitative and quantitative methods we have found that, while there are a host of barriers faced by Canadians who need mental health care, four of the most cited fall under a need for education which should be targeted to physicians, employers, and the public. These barriers are complex and intertwined. Issues around cost of mental health care and wait times are overwhelming obstacles for many which may be worsened by inadequate education on available alternatives.

“There is a huge barrier: Many people can't afford it, or know how to go about to access it, or when is the time to look for help. So much education needs to be given to people regarding when to look for help, where to look for and what incentives are there, what support is there.

-Male, 52, Ontario

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FIGURE 3 - Reasons for not accessing mental health support - Poll 14



Accessibility is seen as a major issue. The most frequently reported reason for not accessing care in both our national polling initiative and our recent interviews is a lack of knowledge about where to get help. Lack of knowledge about mental health resources and how to access them, as well as perceived or real barriers to care, are significant factors that prevent many people from seeking help for mental health issues.

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Just being informed as to what different options are available would probably be a good start, because I honestly have no idea where to go if I really need it. I have an employee benefit programs which covers all of this, but I have no idea what services are available if people don't have resources to pay or cover for it.

-Male, 35, Ontario

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Furthermore, the effort it takes to find and access mental health support is often too much for those who are already struggling. Additional education is needed to encourage Canadians to not wait until a mental health crisis occurs to seek out mental health care as many feel that their problems would not be deemed “bad enough” for professional support. Normalizing mental health care as a regular part of maintaining overall health and well-being, rather than an emergency response, will make it easier for people to access the support they need. Providing mental health education and support in schools, workplaces and communities helps build understanding and resilience, enabling people to better recognize and respond to mental health issues in themselves and others.

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First you have to know where to go... and the place you go after your doctor's referral and then you go through lot of other procedures that can be huge for a person who actually is struggling and needs help immediately. These hurdles should be removed.

-Female, 33, Manitoba

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Perceived stigmatization of mental health challenges is a major barrier to support. Public education to fight stigma and increase mental health literacy is key to addressing barriers related to lack of understanding about mental health issues and available resources. Additional anti-stigma campaigns, as well as promotion of mental health resources and support services, may empower the public to recognize mental health issues, seek help when needed and support others in their communities living with mental illness. Overall, education and resources should aim to create a culture in which mental health issues are understood, accepted, and supported.

“ I would say the problem was I was nervous to go in [for support]. The first time is difficult. You're always convincing yourself that it was not actually bad enough, but when I look back it definitely was. So not recognizing when I need it, that is a problem.

-Female, 24, British Columbia

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Looking Forward

To address this ongoing issue, increased promotion and education about available mental health resources and how to access them is urgently needed. Educating primary care physicians, employers, and the general public on how to identify and direct individuals to appropriate mental health resources would help to increase access and utilization. Establishing a single, well-known point of access for mental health services in each region could also help to simplify the process of finding support for those in crisis or distress. Simplifying access to mental health resources and support will be key to helping Canadians access the care they need during this difficult time.

“ You have to beat the stigma and have the resources very easily accessible. People shouldn't have to go hunt for services. It should be easy to find and access and having programs which people can access available.

-Female, 28, Alberta

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Additional Insights

“I don't know where to reach out to. I don't have health insurance to cover it after retirement. It's hard... where does somebody go to who feels like me? I know there is telephone help, but I don't think it is very clear. It is so generic...what you are looking for is situational – it can be a psychologist or psychiatrist that you need... I can't knock on a door and go in when I don't understand that is the door I need to go to.” Male, 66, Ontario

“As a teacher, I know that there are significant number of students and families who don't have a family physician and so they are unable to access a referral. They would need to use walk-in clinic or emergency room and we know that the wait time for them is horrendous.” Male, 54, Ontario

“A barrier is accessing it. You are already depressed, have low energy but somehow you are supposed to do a bunch of paperwork to get help. It could be set up like a profile – you get everything ready when you're feeling good. Then if you ever get to a point where you need therapy, you just hit 'go'.” Female, 28, British Columbia

“I am deterred by the overwhelmed system. The wait times. I know what I want out of a therapist or psychologist. But the process of finding the right person is so exhausting. Don't like the techniques they use – you have to go through the whole story each time.” Female, 24, British Columbia

“The process is very time consuming. I have not seen a psychiatrist for number of years, so it is treated as fresh referral and a fresh referral could take up to 6 months. There are times when you get home and you are so tired... to go through the process, its so time consuming, that you think will try and get through it myself rather than going through the process. Also, part of the issue is when you have depression everything is a task, and you just want to be in your comfort zone and don't want to talk to anyone.” Male, 54, Ontario

“Knowing where to go, and financially if it is covered under mental health or is it out of pocket. Most of our health benefits are pretty obvious, like dental and vision, but when it comes to mental health is not clear, what's covered and what isn't. Cost transparency is important.” Female, 33, Manitoba

Additional Insights

“I think most individual could go to therapy probably be a good thing for them, but there is a social stigma around being male and going to therapy. Or rather men don't talk to men about their issues or anything like that.” Male, 35, Ontario

“You don't prioritize it maybe... For me, I just know what the issue is, and I am not sure anyone could help me, and I have to work through it myself.” Female, 49, Saskatchewan

“Getting the message across as many people as possible. There must be services out there, but people don't know where to go. Being more present in promoting that there are services available for people. And when they reach out, giving more in-person options.” Male, 24, Manitoba

“Investing more in federal and provincial level mental health care and extending it. Not making mental health an extended coverage thing. Mental health is at the core of your health, it should be covered by government health care. I wish we could see more from the government or governing bodies like the College of Psychologist – even to see that they're trying to fix it. But there is silence from the government.” Female, 24, British Columbia

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For more information on MHRC's national polling project "Understanding the Mental Health of Canadians through COVID-19 and Beyond" or our qualitative initiative contact Brittany Saab at bsaab@mhrc.ca

Full reports of our findings can be found at www.mhrc.ca