



It's Mental Health Week!

This year, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) presents Mental Health Week from May 4th to May 10th. This year, Mental Health Week focuses on the mental health and well-being of men and boys and, as always, encourages people from all walks of life to learn, talk, reflect and engage others on issues related to mental health and mental illness.

To support the CMHA's initiatives we need to do more than build awareness around mental health issues. We need to encourage the conversation.

In May, let's talk about men, boys and mental health. Let's talk about mental illness and learn more about body image—what it is and steps on how we can improve how we view ourselves and our bodies.



Talking About Mental Illness

We don't often talk about mental illness—especially as it relates to men and boys. Let's change that.

Mental illness is the leading cause of disability in Canada surpassing cancer and heart disease.

No matter what our age, cultural background or income bracket, at least one in five of us will experience a mental illness in our lifetime. If mental illness is so prevalent, then why do so many people suffer in silence? It's time to start talking.

According to the World Health Organization, health is "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Yet so many people just define good health as being physically well. Our mental health is equally important but often does not get the attention it should. And that's costing us all. Mental health problems cost Canada at least \$50 billion a year, or 2.8 per cent of gross domestic product, not including the costs to the criminal justice system or the child welfare system. In 2011, about \$42.3 billion was spent on treatment, care and support for people with mental health problems.

Quite aside from the economic costs, mental illness prevents millions of North Americans from living life to its fullest and reaching their full potential.

What is mental illness?

Our psychological health has a profound effect on how we feel, perceive, think, communicate and understand the world around us. When we

are mentally unwell, we experience alterations in thinking, mood or behaviour that cause us distress and impair how we function in life."

There are many types of mental illness, but the most common include:

- Anxiety disorders are the most prevalent of all mental illnesses. They differ from normal stress and anxiety by being more severe and long-lasting and interfere with work and relationships. Panic disorder, phobias, social anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and general anxiety disorder fall under this category.
- Mood disorders involve changes and disruptions in mood and emotions. Feeling extremely sad or extremely happy from time to time is part of being human. But people with a mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder experience these feelings with greater intensity and for longer periods of time.
- Eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia involve a distorted body image along with extreme behaviours to manage food intake and weight. Some people believe that eating disorders and body image challenges are only related to women, though this is not the case.
- Schizophrenia makes it difficult for people to think, speak and interact in an organized way. It also involves psychosis or losing the ability to know what's real and what isn't. Psychosis

is not just a part of schizophrenia, but may also be seen on its own or with other disorders.

- Personality disorders affect the way a person acts, feels and gets along with other people. They can also cause people to be more impulsive. Borderline personality disorder and antisocial personality disorder are two examples.
- Substance use disorders (commonly called addictions) occur when a person becomes dependent on a substance such as alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.

Warning signs of mental illness

Each mental illness has its own characteristic symptoms. However, there are some general warning signs that might alert you that someone may need professional help. Some of these include:

- marked personality change;
- extreme mood swings;
- excessive anxieties or prolonged depression;
- inability to cope with minor problems and daily activities;
- loss of interest in hobbies and social activities;
- strange or grandiose ideas, delusions or hallucinations;
- problems thinking clearly;
- significant changes in eating or sleeping patterns;
- thinking or talking about suicide;
- abuse of alcohol or drugs; and
- excessive anger, hostility, or violent behaviour.

Supporting someone with a mental illness

For someone dealing with a mental illness, family and social support is vital to their recovery. You can help by:

- **Becoming informed.** To better understand what your friend or family member is dealing with, you need as much information as possible. Contact your Employee and Family Assistance program.
- **Asking what you can do.** Don't guess or assume, ask the person what you can do to help. Mental illness sometimes makes it difficult for people to communicate.
- **Listening.** It takes courage for someone to open up about their mental health challenges. Perhaps the most important thing you can do is listen.
- **Not blaming or judging.** Judgement can be the one thing someone with a mental health issue fears the most.
- **Guiding the person to appropriate support(s).** Your Employee and Family Assistance program can provide you with a number of options in your area. Offer to make calls, find information or drive the individual to appointments. But ask first.
- **Being optimistic.** Reassure the person that this is a medical issue and will respond with the time, treatment and support.
- **Taking care of yourself.** Supporting anyone with a physical or mental illness can be an emotionally draining situation. Protect your own physical and emotional health.



Body Image and Loving How You Look

Contrary to what some may believe, body image challenges are not strictly associated with women—men may also deal with them. For some, body image is directly tied to self-esteem, so it's important to have a positive body image. But how can we feel good about ourselves and love how we look?

Are you happy with how you look? Have you ever looked in the mirror, or seen a photo of yourself and immediately focused on the negatives? Better yet, do you constantly want to look 'better' or more appealing? When we evaluate ourselves, we are forming our own body image, or how we feel about our body's aesthetics.

Body image is the mental picture you have of your body as well as your feelings about it. This picture may have little to do with how you actually look or how other people see you. A person's body image is a product of his or her personal experiences, personality, and various social and cultural forces. Specifically, a person's sense of his or her own physical appearance, usually in relation to others or in relation to some cultural "ideal," can shape his or her body image.

A person can have a negative or positive body image. A number of factors influence whether someone feels good or bad about how they look—the media and advertising can play a prominent role. Sometimes when we do not look like people we see in print or television, we form unreal expectations of ourselves. Our body image is then affected, and so is our confidence and overall happiness. It's important to accept how we look individually, and important to stay away from comparing ourselves to others. It's crucial to know what a positive body image is, and some characteristics of a person with positive body image are described below.

What does it mean to have a positive body image?

- Understanding that physical appearance says little about your character and value as a person. What you look like does not define who you are, and your physical appearance should not define you to others, nor define your self-worth.
- Feeling comfortable and confident in your body. Loving yourself and truly appreciating your body will help you feel generally more comfortable. This comfort increases confidence and encourages a more positive outlook on life. This will help in social situations and general day-to-day interactions.
- Speaking positively about yourself and your body. You like how you look, so tell people about it! Try to stay away from saying things like 'I look fat' or 'I wish I looked bigger or stronger so I could wear that'.

Five steps to improving body image

1. Forget dieting. Dieting can bring temporary weight loss, but the weight is often gained back quickly. The cycle of losing and gaining can be harmful to your health and can lead to frustration, anger and an even poorer body image.
2. Focus on your health, not your weight. A healthy lifestyle and healthy weight go hand-in-hand. Aim to be healthier with each passing day.
3. Experience the pleasure of eating well. Celebrate the pleasure of healthy eating. By eating a balanced diet of delicious nourishing foods you will be able to enjoy your favourite indulgences occasionally with no worries. Your weight will result from what you do most of the time, not what you do once in a while.
4. Enjoy being active. How about a noon-time walk, a family hike or a swim with friends? Physical activity lets you enjoy the outdoors and helps you deal with stress while making you feel more energetic. All this helps you feel good about yourself.
5. Accept yourself. Feeling good about yourself starts with accepting who you are and how you look. Healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes. Focus on all your good qualities instead of perceived negative qualities. Feel what it's like to love your body unconditionally.



One common misconception about body image is that only women are concerned with it. And contrary to popular belief, improving on someone's body image doesn't always mean losing weight. Current research indicates many men wish to become more muscular, often desiring an additional 15 to 26 pounds of additional muscle mass.

Loving how you look

We all have days when we feel awkward or uncomfortable in our bodies. The key to developing positive body image is to recognize and respect our natural shape and learn to overpower negative thoughts and feelings, replacing them with positive, affirming, and accepting ones. Doing so will improve our lives in multiple areas and improve our general wellness.



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