



Mental Health  
Commission  
of Canada

Commission de  
la santé mentale  
du Canada

**HEADSTRONG**



**BE BRAVE  
REACH OUT  
SPEAK UP**

THE MENTAL HEALTH COMMISSION OF CANADA'S

# Youth Anti-Stigma Initiative



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“I tell my friends, ‘Guess what? I was acting weird because I was mentally ill!’ Guess how many of my then friends talked to me after that? None... That’s the kind of stigma I was facing.” Dan, speaking about going to the hospital for help when he was a teenager. *Opening Minds video: Stigma, Mental Illness, Misconceptions and Stereotypes.*

Mental health problems and related stigma can negatively impact young people’s success at school and in all areas of their lives. Substance use and self-injury are common and harmful coping strategies for youth managing unresolved pain. Even worse, **suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people.**

**MOST ADULTS LIVING WITH** a mental health problem or illness say they experienced their first symptoms before 18 years of age. Many say living with stigma is often worse than the illness itself. We know early intervention can make a dramatic difference in someone’s life, yet too often the stigma associated with mental illness is a major barrier. Youth are the most vulnerable population in Canada. Stigma shatters their dreams and quality of life and stops them from seeking help for fear of being judged or labelled.

**Young people feel the impacts of stigma more than any other group in Canada.**

Sixty percent of youth who have sought treatment in the last year say they have been affected by stigma. This has to change. The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) is committed to reducing stigma and realizes the urgent need to reach out to youth in Canada.

### **AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH TO REDUCING STIGMA**

MHCC’s international award-winning, anti-stigma program, Opening Minds, has evaluated more than 25 youth anti-stigma programs across Canada. Through partnerships with numerous organizations, Opening Minds surveyed over 10,000 youth. Thanks to this groundbreaking research, Opening Minds identified programs which are effective at reducing stigma and the components that make the biggest difference. Its findings allowed MHCC to create an evidence-based, anti-stigma initiative for Canadian students called HEADSTRONG.

“Most teachers also believe that stigma and discrimination pose a major barrier to the provision of mental health services for students. Only a small minority of teachers could say that they had never witnessed unfair treatment of students (including bullying) because of a mental health problem.”

*Spring 2015, Canadian Teachers’ Federation presenting results from a survey of 4,000 members to a cross-partisan group of Members of Parliament.*

“Even if you have a mental illness it can make you stronger as a person” Gr 10 student at a

HEADSTRONG Summit

75%

of young Canadians with mental health problems don’t seek help.

40%

of parents say they would not admit to anyone — not even their family doctor — that they had a child with a mental health problem or illness.

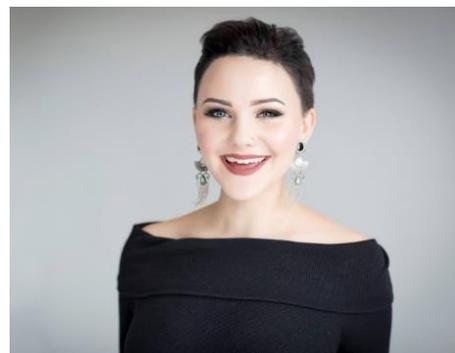


## Reaches Across Canada

HEADSTRONG was launched in November 2014, at a national weeklong summit in Ottawa. That school year MHCC expanded HEADSTRONG across the country with committed funding for half-time coordinators to organize regional summits and school activities.(see chart below.) The following year, MHCC continued to support HEADSTRONG with national and western HEADSTRONG coordinators. However, with no more Commission funding for regional coordinators and summits, the number of events and students impacted declined. In 2016/2017, the HEADSTRONG team put its focus on building new partnerships and a resurgence occurred with new communities coming onboard. Outreach to First Nations communities has been very well received. First Nations leaders supported the development of a culturally sensitive HEADSTRONG model and five Indigenous summits have happened to date. The cascading affect created by youth leading their schools in anti-stigma activities impacted 200,000 youth in Canada during 2017. The numbers will be much greater when HEADSTRONG finds sustained national funding.

## What Is a HEADSTRONG Summit?

A Summit incorporates a wide variety of activities, speaker stories, messages, questions, answers and action plans that raise awareness and encourage early help seeking. Students learn more about what help looks like from the variety of stakeholders who are part of the organizing committee. Communities and community members become stronger and more supportive of one another. Stronger partnerships form between education, health and mental health. HEADSTRONG teaches everyone to work together and not give up the fight against stigma. HEADSTRONG speakers are crucial partners in this work. Their stories of hope and recovery dispel myths and stereotypes and students feel inspired to make positive, healthy changes that will impact their whole school.



*Evangeline Zak, HEADSTRONG Lived-Experience Speaker & Make-Up Artist*



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A HEADSTRONG Summit is a daylong youth anti-stigma event where groups of student leaders and teachers from many regional schools come together. They hear inspiring testimonials from people with lived experience of mental health problems, challenge their own stereotypes and create a plan for what they can do to combat stigma in their own schools.

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## What Happens after the Summit?

The ideas students came up with to take back to their schools form a plan for the rest of the academic year. The HEADSTRONG stigma-reduction and positive health messages continue to be delivered to the entire school population. Students' innovation and creativity, along with the support of a school staff member, means they have so much to share about mental health, recovery, and available resources both in the school and the wider community.

Youth love this opportunity to use and develop their leadership, communication and event delivery skills while making a meaningful difference for their peers.

The Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) states that youth are the ones to **advocate, take action and raise awareness** in order to make positive changes in their communities. Headstrong provides these youth leaders with the tools and processes to create school environments where mental health and wellness is visible.

MHCC HEADSTRONG is mobilizing youth to confront mental health stigma head-on, and increasing the number of young champions set to make a signify impact in the fight against this serious threat to the wellness of so many young Canadians.

REGIONAL HEADSTRONG SUMMIT(S) 2014-2017	SCHOOLS REPRESENTED AT SUMMIT(S)	STUDENTS IN ATTENDANCE	EST. SCHOOL TOTAL POPULATIONS IMPACTED BY HEADSTRONG
67	916	9,130	600,000

“Learning and talking about acceptance has made me more accepting of others as well as myself.” — Student who attended HEADSTRONG

#### HEADSTRONG TOOLKITS

## Make It Easy To Replicate

MHCC HEADSTRONG has created toolkits for coordinators, students and teachers. *Planning a Youth Anti-stigma Summit* provides details on what to do. *School-Based Activities* helps them take HEADSTRONG into individual schools post-summit and ensures a variety of activities continue over time. This approach is informed by evaluations which show a single or “one-off” event delivers disappointing results and that follow-up messages and activities are needed if positive change is to grow. A *Speakers Training* toolkit supports what the Opening Minds’ research shows is one of the most impactful ways to reduce stigma — hearing personal stories from people with a lived experience of mental illness. This is called contact-based education. We’ve learned that not all stories are created equal and if stigma associated with mental illness is to be reduced, speakers need training to shape their stories and include messages of hope and recovery.

All HEADSTRONG resources including Toolkits and videos are available in French and English

## Going Forward

We are currently working across Canada with inner city and rural schools, Indigenous communities, and health authorities managing enormous cultural and language diversity, all of which see the benefits of HEADSTRONG as an evidence-based student-led initiative. On Oct 4<sup>th</sup> 2017, a launch was held on Parliament Hill to connect MPs with HEADSTRONG. #338 Conversations invited all MPs from Canada's 338 ridings to learn about HEADSTRONG and take the information back to community leaders and areas. A kit was given to each MP with all the information and resources they will need to host a meeting and connect with stakeholders in their region.



Headstrong Committee  
Kainai First Nation High School

**For 2018, we have 30 HEADSTRONG Summits in planning with communities from coast to coast to coast. These include nine Summits targeted at Indigenous youth, with three being delivered on reserves in Alberta and Saskatchewan. We are seeking sustainable support to enable us to maintain HEADSTRONG as an annual event in established regions, and to reach more young people right across the country. Our goal is that youth from the largest city to the smallest community will share the message of compassion, awareness and hope, leading change for Canada.**

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*“HEADSTRONG has helped us talk at school about mental health. We are showing how smudging and our traditional ways are good for mental health, and how people can get help when they need it. If we talk, people won't be scared or feel bad.”* Grade 11 student, Kainai High School

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### HEADSTRONG FOR THE FUTURE

## Life Promotion

HEADSTRONG gives youth the tools, confidence and inspiration they need to change the way Canada thinks about mental health and mental illness forever. Without stigma, youth will feel able to speak openly to both seek help and to offer acceptance to others. They will know the resources available and how to link other youth to those supports. HEADSTRONG empowers youth to promote compassion, understanding and belief in recovery. Young people feel our trust in them, and are carrying our belief in their capability to heights we can only imagine.

*Join with us in empowering youth from Vancouver Island to Inuktitut to change, and save young lives!*



**BE BRAVE, REACH OUT, SPEAK UP!**

# Youth Say.....

“I cannot explain how much my life has changed because of this experience”

“I am going to take the information I gained with me back to my community and I’m going to change a lot of things”

“Thank you so much from the bottom of my heart for letting this amazing opportunity come into my life”

—Grade 9 Students at the MHCC HEADSTRONG National Summit

## “The smallest things you say could change a person’s life forever”

*(Grade 7 student at a HEADSTRONG Summit Nov 2017)*





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## About the Mental Health Commission of Canada

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) works to improve the lives of Canadians living with mental health problems and mental illness. The MHCC is a world leader in stigma research and developed Canada's first national Mental Health Strategy and Youth Mental Health Strategy.

<http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca>

### CHECK OUT THE HEADSTRONG VIDEOS:

<http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/content/mhcc-headstrong-youth-anti-stigma-initiative>  
(Launch video)

<http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/media/3833> (First Nations video)

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