

JANUARY 2019

# MDABC- MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE ANTI- STIGMA CAMPAIGN FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Summer/Fall 2018 focus group report for Artist  
workshop



MOOD DISORDERS ASSOCIATION  
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

A BRANCH OF  **Lookout**  
Housing • Health Society



**heretohelp**

Mental health and substance use  
information you can trust

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# WHO WE ARE

The MDABC is a nonprofit organization that provides treatment, support, education, and hope of recovery for people living with a mood disorder. We serve to build awareness and understanding in communities throughout the province, reaching out to as many people as possible.

## Our Goals:

- Reduce the stigma of mood disorders
- Cultivate an inclusive community that promotes wellbeing
- Provide rapid access to mental health services
- Encourage the development of effective self-help models
- Encourage research into mood disorders and self-help models

# MDABC



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# HERETOHELP

HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information.



## heretohelp

Mental health and substance use  
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We are a group of seven leading mental health and addictions non-profit agencies. Since 2003, we've been working together to help people live well and better prevent and manage mental health and substance use problems. You can learn more about our vision here.

BC Partners work is funded by BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority. We also receive some additional support from the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Thanks also to our corporate sponsors for helping to fund our translated resources.

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PROJECT:

For this project we chose to examine the impacts of stigma related to mental health challenges and substance use on young adults and to capture the voices which are often underrepresented, such as youth aging out of care.

We hoped to reach into places like young adult's shelters, drop ins and organizations that serve marginalized young adults as well as other young adults community groups, in order to hear from the voices which have often not been well represented. Community based organizations serving the more marginalized of this population tell us that as many as 80% of the young adults they serve from care are experiencing mental health and substance use concerns. They have indicated that it is of major concern. As well, the self-stigma that these young adults experience creates significant barriers to accessing help. While this anti stigma campaign will encompass all young adults between the ages of 18-24, we particularly want to have an impact on the more marginalized young adults that are coming in and from foster care.

Also of note, in a report that the BC Federation of Young adults in Care and McCreary Centre Society produced (\*based on surveys and community focus groups) it was indicated that "43% of youth reported that they did not get the help they needed. Youth were more likely to have missed out on needed mental health services because they did not think they could afford it and because they were unaware of services available to them."

The 2015 report from the British Columbia Integrated Youth Services initiative (<http://bcyysica/assets/downloads/bc-iyis-background-document.pdf>) states that "Despite compelling evidence that the age of onset for MHSU disorders is between 12 and 24 years, and that nearly 75% of these conditions begin by the age of 24, children and YYA struggle to access MHSU services. In Canada, an estimated 70% of mental health problems in Canada have an onset occurring during childhood or adolescence and 1 in 5 (or 18%) of young people aged 15-24 report experiencing mental illness or substance use problems. However, the literature suggests that less than 25% of young adults with MHSU disorders actually receive MHSU services."

Whereas other anti-stigma initiatives for youth have often conducted their research by reaching out to youth in schools, we aimed to engage young adults that can be found in shelters, drop ins and community centers. We believe that it is these more marginalized young adults that have not been adequately consulted nor represented. We feel that it's important to include this population given their incredible vulnerability and need for help.

# THE PROJECT

Throughout the Fall and winter of 2018-2019 we have been working on a mental health and substance use anti-stigma campaign for young adults. We are committed to creating a campaign that accurately reflects the experiences of all young adults, and for that to happen we have tried to hear from as many young adults as possible.

We wanted to ensure that this project included the voices of youth from many walks of life – including those with lived experience in B.C.'s care system, and those that identify as belonging to marginalized groups.

Based on the feedback we received in our initial focus groups, we have connected with young artists with similar experiences to help us share these stories. We are excited to be able to offer this opportunity to 23 talented and insightful artists to contribute artwork to this campaign.

Each artist will create a unique piece of art inspired by key messages, personal stories and direct quotes from the youth we have interviewed. These works of art will be used to create posters, postcards, and a book sharing stories from youth about their real lived experience with the goal of raising awareness about the impact of stigma, dispelling misconceptions, and promoting self-acceptance.

**With youth feedback and participation driving this process, we have been working to create an effective campaign that will:**

- **Increase awareness about mental health and substance use.**
- **Dispel the myths about mental health and substance use.**
- **Increase self-acceptance and encourage seeking help when it's needed.**
- **Promote awareness of organizations around BC supporting young adults.**
- **Provide opportunities for artists with lived experience to share their work.**

# QUESTION:

**“WHAT DO YOU THINK OF WHEN YOU HEAR OR READ THE WORD “STIGMA”?”**

*“Stigma is delaying the progress for the younger generations to change themselves and the world for the better.”*

*“The stigma around mental health is lessening little by little (Still awful though), but the stigma surrounding drug abuse is still harsh. “Just stopping” can kill you. Not everyone can go cold turkey nor should we be expected to.”*

*“For me, dealing with depression, PTSD, autism, borderline personality, people don’t know how to react”*

*“People like to group things together, so I think it will always exist”*

*“Form of judgement society uses a lot”*

The response to this question was not surprising. Participants shared words such as “shame”, “shunned”, “Putting people down”. Youth interviewed shared experiences of stigma creating a feeling alienation from their peers because of preconceived notions about people with mental health challenges, or people who use substances.

Stigma seemed to be something ingrained in our society, stating that “people like to group things together, so I think it will always exist”. While often unacknowledged, stigma was seen as something that everyone deals with on some level, but that “people don’t want to talk about it”.

It’s also worth noting that the word stigma itself was seen as being somewhat academic and inaccessible. While many of the participants understood the term itself many shared that it was not a part of their regular vocabulary and did not resonate for them. As one youth put it, the term felt like something “old white people” would say.

# QUESTION:

**“What do you think of when you hear or read the term “mental health”?”**

*“It’s talked about a lot, but is it being talked about in the right way?”*

*“People write you off when they hear “mentally ill”*

*“There can be big cultural differences... Some cultures see it as powerful, and resilient.”*

*Often told “Oh, just get over it”, which can be very harmful.*

*There can be a sense of having to/ wanting to hide your diagnosis*

Participants shared feelings of frustration at the frequent requirement of having a mental health diagnosis in order to services. “When you do seek help it’s impossible to get it. In therapy they tell you not to think black & white, but when they assess you if you don’t fit “black or white” criteria they turn you away”

While seen as being useful at times for creating a better understanding of their struggles and creating clearer pathways to treatment, the term mental health was also seen as often being too broad and often being accompanied with judgement.

Many people shared experiences that “people write you off when they hear that you are mentally ill”, stating that it can be a highly stigmatized term. Responses from people was often very polarized, varying from judgement and feeling shamed to having their struggles dismissed altogether with people telling you to “just get over it”. Worth noting however was a hopeful attitude towards the current discussions happening in mainstream society about mental health, but concerns were also raised about the lack of diverse representation in the voices we are listening to.

# QUESTION:

**“How do you think our society treats talking about or seeking help with mental health or substance use?”**

*“There’s such a focus on recovery, and just getting over it.” Sometimes finding ways to live with and manage your mental health is better than focusing on trying to get rid of it. For some people it doesn’t just go away.”*

*“There can be judgement from other people who use different kinds of drugs, or people who don’t use anymore.”*

*“Guilt, fear, shame to talk about asking for help.”*

There is a clear need to change the conversation about seeking support. Folks shared experiences of friends and family not wanting them to seek help “because then you have to admit somethings wrong”, or feeling misunderstood by experiences like “you’re either looked at as really weak or really strong.”

*“depends on which community you’re in” Often rural communities have more of a “just get over it” attitude, whereas it’s easier to find supportive communities in a city.”*

*“People dont like talking about it if you got mental issues people assume u a junkie and if you use substances they assume u come from welfare drugie parents or thats cause of being in care and they think your a thief ..”*

# QUESTION:

**“How do you think stigma might relate to self-esteem and/or self-worth?”**

*“One of the ways we get self-worth is by how people think of us. Especially when you’re a youth”*

*“The stigma can rip apart someone’s self-worth.”*

*“Stigma crushes and takes away any self-esteem”*

*“Being with like-minded people can help your sense of self-worth a lot”*

Stigma was seen as a self-perpetuating cycle, oppressing people who struggle with mental health or substance use while also creating new mental health challenges and often leading to problematic substance use as an escape.

Participants expressed that “a lot of people may start using because of other issues” and that “getting mad at people because of their mental health or substance use might cause them to self-harm or overdose.” Stigma created isolation which could in turn have a further negative impact on your mental health.

Participants consistently shared their own stories of how the judgement felt because of stigma had harmed their sense of self-worth. It was seen as having a crushing effect on their self-esteem, and people shared that “telling the wrong person can end up with you being ostracized from friends or family, or even losing your job.”



# QUESTION:

**“What do you think is the biggest misunderstanding people have about people who struggle with mental health or people who use substances?”**

*“I’m not faking it!!  
Who has the energy  
to fake a mental  
illness??”*

*“Sometimes the people in your own life can be a part of the problem, and navigating those relationships can be very complicated.”*

*“High Functioning doesn’t mean I’m always ok. I’m resilient but having a hard time and still need support.”*

*“They think we choose it. Like we made the choice to go down the path that is so hard. They think its we can snap out out of it and be magically better. It’s not like that”*

Experiences of not being believed about their mental health struggles were nearly universal with the youth we spoke with. People shared statements such as “I’m not lazy, I’m just depressed” and “That it’s real, and not just in our heads”. Being believed was seen as a crucial part of being able to work on one’s wellness and overcome their struggles. “Sometimes the people in your own life can be a part of the problem, and navigating those relationships can be very complicated.”

There was also a considerable amount of discussion about the lack of understanding people felt around self-medicating. While folks acknowledged the problems which could be associated with substance use as a way to deal with stigma, there is a need for more nuanced discussion about why people use, and what treatment looks like. The youth we spoke with felt that while it can be problematic to equate mental health and substance use, it can be just as dangerous not consider how the two might be connected when working with people who are struggling with either issue.

# QUESTION:

**“If a friend of yours was struggling with their mental health, substance use, or judgement about their situation, what might you say or do to help them?”**

*“If you ever need to talk there’s a hot cup of tea waiting for you at my place”*

*“I always welcome them to talk, vent. I won’t tell anyone. I’m judgement free”*

*“I love you- You are loved”*

*“You are not alone”*

*It’s not fake. It’s not your imagination. You’re not “overreacting”.*

*“I am proud of you!”*

*“I would do everything I could to help them. Help them to appointments or even just being there for them”*

People need to be able to tell their stories and be believed. There was an innate understanding of this in the ways youth discussed how they would help someone else who was struggling with their mental health or substance use. Listening, believing and not judging were all basic starting points in discussions about how we can better support each other and was seen as a way to create space and hold space for each other.

Participants wanted people who are struggling to know they are loved, and worthy. “Your voice MATTERS. Your feelings MATTER” was a consistent theme in conversation. Other themes were offering to help look for support or come to appointments with people to help make those first steps easier.

# QUESTION:

**“Tell us about your experience looking services or finding information: If you have successfully found support, what do you feel was helpful from the process, and what was a challenge?”**

*“it’s hard when you don’t want to tell your parents”*

*“some people treat seeing a counsellor as a waste of time.” “Sometimes I feel like it’s a waste of time, even when it’s helping me”*

*“Sometimes parent’s just blame things on being a moody teenager as if it’s just normal. I don’t think 15 year olds should be feeling like worthless pieces of garbage all of the time. That doesn’t feel like it should normal”*

*“On the reservation there is only one counsellor, so if you don’t get along with them there’s no one else to go to.”*

*“My first psychologist was an old white cis man who didn’t understand feminism or racism.”*

*“Where you live can be a challenge”*

*“It can be really discouraging after you try out a few and it doesn’t work out.”*