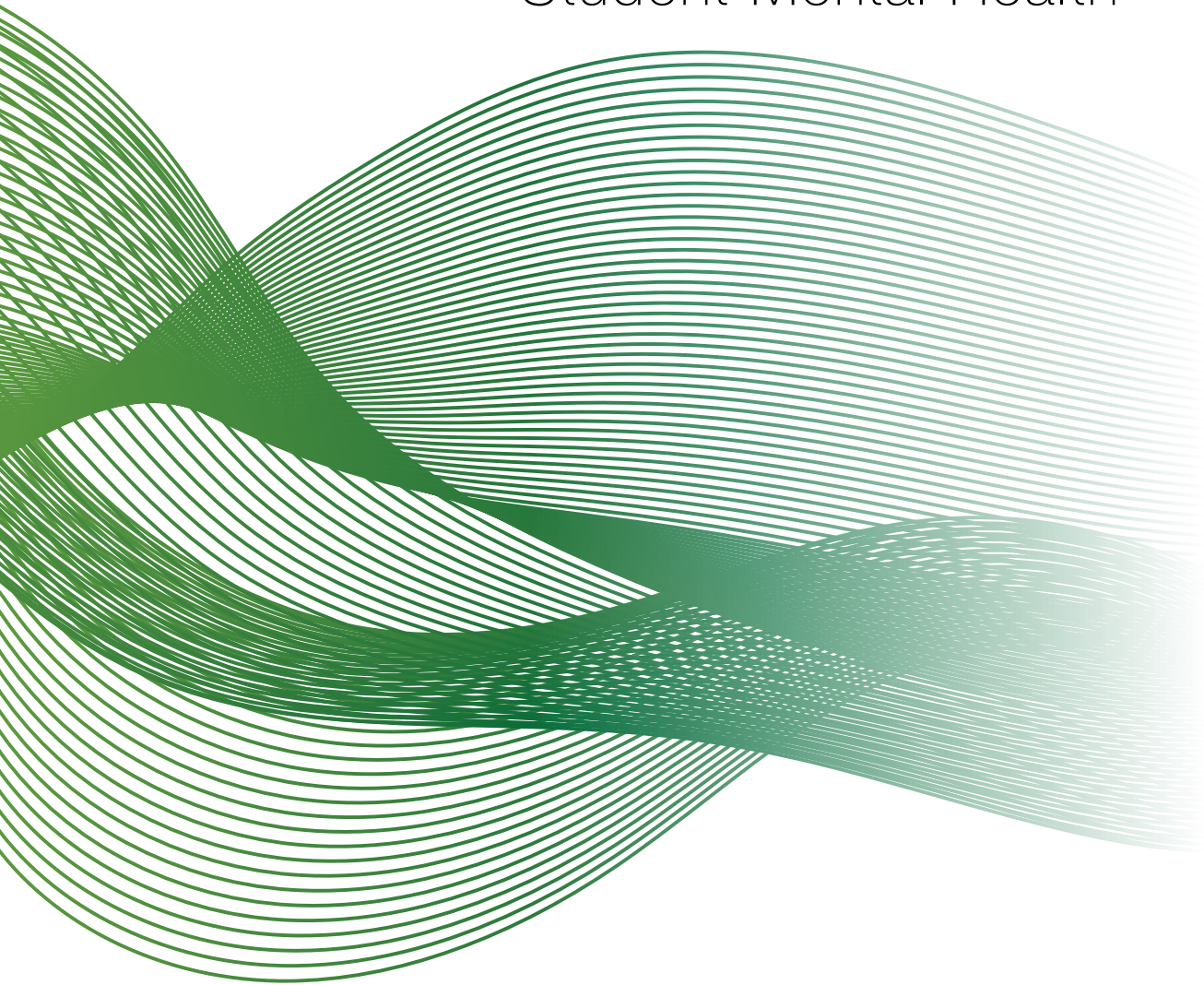


# In It Together

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Taking Action on  
Student Mental Health



November 2017

# Student mental health: We all play a role

**Providing effective support for mental health challenges is one of the most pressing issues on post-secondary campuses today.**

In many respects, this is because Ontario has made significant progress in its approach to mental health.

The stigma traditionally associated with mental health issues is finally diminishing. There is growing recognition that a diagnosis for clinical depression is no more a cause for embarrassment than the discovery of a physical, more visible illness.

This change in attitude is especially important at Ontario's colleges and universities, as 75 per cent of mental health disorders first appear before the age of 25 (*Kessler et al., 2005*).

Suicides and attempted suicides are no longer subjects to be avoided. On today's campuses, frank discussion is encouraged and services are offered 24/7 to try to proactively prevent such tragedies.

Students who are struggling to cope with anything from anxiety to addictions are actively encouraged to seek help – and increasing numbers of students are responding.

Statistics show just how much the situation on Ontario's campuses has changed. At colleges and universities, the number of students with identified mental health disorders has more than doubled over the past five years.

Responding effectively is particularly important at Ontario's colleges and universities because many of the students with mental health issues are living on their own for the first time in their lives. The increased responsibility for making critical decisions can leave students feeling overwhelmed, isolated and helpless.

Mental illness can make it difficult for students to relate to others and increase students' loneliness and isolation. Students with mental health issues may also experience problems with their physical health, such as sleep difficulties and exhaustion (*Mayo Clinic*).

Throughout Ontario, colleges and universities have made mental wellness a priority.

But this has created escalating pressures on institutions whose core mandate is to provide higher education and training. Colleges and universities are not treatment centres.

Colleges and universities are standing with their students, but they cannot meet this challenge alone.

It's time for Ontario to pull together and adopt a comprehensive, holistic approach that includes government, educators, health-care providers and community organizations. Students must have access to a suite of supports and services that address the spectrum of student mental health needs.

If we're in it together, taking a new approach to mental health can make a difference for everyone.

The Spring 2016 National College Health Assessment (NCHA), a national online survey that collects information on students' health behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions, indicated that depression, anxiety and suicide attempts are increasing among Ontario's post-secondary students.

- 46% of students reported feeling so depressed in the previous year it was difficult to function (increased from 40% in 2013);
- 65% of students reported experiencing overwhelming anxiety in the previous year (up from 58% in 2013);
- 14% had seriously considered suicide in the previous year (up from 11% in 2013);
- 2.2% of students reported a suicide attempt within the previous year (up from 1.5% in 2013);
- 9% had indicated that they had attempted suicide, but not in the previous year.

Recognizing that Ontario must be proactive in addressing current challenges and responding to future challenges, the College Student Alliance, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, Colleges Ontario and the Council of Ontario Universities have come together to develop an action plan on post-secondary student mental health based on three key principles.

Together, we have identified priorities and recommendations to guide and strengthen the delivery of mental health services for post-secondary students across the province.

# Principles, priorities and recommendations

## PRINCIPLE 1

**Improving student mental health requires a “whole of community” approach with clearly defined roles and responsibilities of government ministries, post-secondary institutions, student associations, health-care providers and community organizations.**

To have meaningful impact, mental health services for post-secondary students must be part of a broader circle of care that is flexible, adaptable and responsive.

As the demand for mental health services on campuses continues to grow, it is essential to develop an integrated, community-based system with strong partnerships between government, post-secondary institutions, student associations, health-care providers and community organizations.

This integrated approach must address the mental health and wellness needs of students and ensure supports are available for people entering and leaving the post-secondary system.

*“My mental health has always been a hurdle that I have felt I was unable to overcome. Through the support of my peers and services at my institution, I have been able to pursue a successful leadership role in student government. My wish is for more students to be able to access the same resources I have in order to overcome their own obstacles and thrive.”*

- Ariana C.  
St. Lawrence College student

## PRIORITIES

### **Post-secondary students are a priority group**

As a first step, post-secondary students must be recognized as a distinct population cohort, separate from children and youth and adults, with unique mental health service and support needs.

Post-secondary students are at a critical point in their social and psychological development, in addition to being in a transitory stage of their lives. They require a unique approach and targeted services and investments. If these are not met, they are at risk of not living productive and fulfilling lives.

There is a role for government, educators at all levels, health-care organizations and community services in supporting post-secondary students with mental health issues and it is essential that those responsibilities are clearly defined. Working together, these groups must ensure there are no gaps in service.

While more robust mental health services for post-secondary students are required, it must be recognized that there are insufficient mental health services for the general population.

Anecdotal reports have found that some students will register for courses at colleges and universities for the primary purpose of get-

ting access to mental health care. This can often occur in communities where services are not widely available elsewhere.

There is a clear demand for more community-based mental health services that are accessible, timely and dispersed regionally across the province.

The Ontario government’s recent announcement that it will expand psychotherapy programs is a positive step forward and will alleviate some of the pressures on current services. The challenge is to build on that commitment to develop a comprehensive mental health care system across the province.

### **Recommendation**

The partnering organizations recommend that:

- The provincial government update Ontario’s Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy to formally recognize post-secondary students as a distinct population cohort.

### **Role for government**

A “whole of community” approach to mental health starts with government clearly defining its roles and responsibilities.

Each ministry involved in this issue must have clear direction for structuring and delivering services and supports for post-secondary students. Given the number of ministries involved – Health and Long-Term Care, Community and Social Services, Child and Youth Services, Education, and Advanced Education and Skills Development – it is easy to lose sight of which government ministry has oversight responsibility for specific services and supports for students.

### **Recommendation**

The partnering organizations recommend that:

- The provincial government communicate the respective responsibilities of each ministry that has a role in meeting the mental health needs of post-secondary students, ensuring there are no service gaps.

### **Roles of health and community agencies and post-secondary institutions**

Over the past several years, the increase in mental health issues among students has put increasing pressure on post-secondary institutions to move beyond their academic counselling role to providing ongoing mental health treatment.

Acute and long-term support of this nature rightfully falls within the mandate of health-care providers and community agencies. A distinction must be made between the triage role of post-secondary institutions to direct students with serious or complex needs to appropriate care and the acute and long-term service provision role of health and community service agencies.

Clear boundaries for each institution, coupled with an integrated approach to service delivery, mean students will obtain faster access to mental health and social services.

### **Recommendations**

The partnering organizations recommend that:

- The provincial government clearly define the roles and responsibilities of health-care and community agencies and post-secondary education for student mental health.
- All organizations with a role in mental health, including government, recognize that post-secondary institutions provide student wellness programming and triage students to mental health providers.
- All organizations with a role in mental health, including government, recognize that the responsibility for acute and long-term mental health support rests with health and community agencies.
- Each post-secondary institution, together with local health-care and community agencies, develop and implement a plan to assist students with mental health concerns.

### **Students transitioning to post-secondary education**

Students with identified mental health needs who are going directly from secondary to post-secondary education no longer have automatic access to the types of supports and services that were provided to them in high school.

In cases where they are no longer living at home, students often do not have access to the types of primary health-care models that would best address their issues. Often, they have to seek help from fee-for-service physicians on or off campus.

*“Students are living in a social environment where they are encouraged to talk about their mental health, but lack the institutional support to assist them following their disclosures. Institutions don’t have the infrastructure, capacity, or funding to allow for specialized support services.”*

- Carolyn T.  
Queen’s University student

As well, students who were rostered for mental health services in their home communities are not permitted to be rostered with a second health service team.

Post-secondary institutions do not have the resources to provide students with the same services they received in high school or to fill some of the gaps in the broader health-care system.

Colleges and universities are trying to fill the gaps by diverting revenues from general education – which is inefficient – or by adding ancillary fees to students’ costs. However, the models for providing supports and services need to change if post-secondary students are to get access to the same resources available to the general population.

### **Recommendations**

The partnering organizations recommend that:

- The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care provide assurances that post-secondary students living away from home will have the same access to the broader circle of care practitioners they would have in their home communities.
- The province ensure students entering post-secondary education have access to the same level and types of resources that are available in high school.

## PRINCIPLE 2

**All post-secondary students, regardless of geographic location, should be able to access gender and culturally sensitive mental health services and supports that are timely, effective and flexible, and provided in a safe and comfortable environment.**

Mental health services can dramatically impact the course of an individual's mental well-being by providing support and preventing issues from intensifying.

To ensure all students have access to supports as early as possible, services must be provided in a safe and comfortable environment, while being effective, timely and flexible. As more students pursue online programs, co-op placements and other work-integrated learning opportunities, it's essential that services are accessible to all students, regardless of how far they may be located from their home campus.

### PRIORITIES

#### **Integration of health-care services**

Methods in coping with mental health concerns differ across cultures and families. Fear of being misunderstood or not finding relevant support are among the barriers students of varying backgrounds face when seeking services.

It is imperative for post-secondary institutions and health-care providers to be cognizant of any limitations restricting students from accessing specialized supports for mental health.

Counsellors competent in a range of specializations may not be available on campus or in the community at large. Increasing mental health providers specializing in service provision to underserved groups, for example Indigenous populations, LGBTQ+ populations, and those with gender and minority challenges, is vital.

An integrated, accessible community-based system supporting mental health and well-being is critical to providing adequate services to post-secondary students.

Integrated health-care services between post-secondary institutions and health and community organizations will provide more access to a diverse range of services for students seeking mental health support, as well as alleviate the unsustainable demand for mental health services currently on campuses.

As well, allowing students to easily access on-campus and off-campus care during their post-secondary studies will make the transition to community-based services much easier when the student leaves the post-secondary system.

A way to support the integration of health-care services is through a "whole of community" approach that allows students to access treatment on and off campus without any cost barriers.

This would be especially helpful for students transitioning into post-secondary education, either from high school or from the workforce.

To help with the transition students face, provincially funded psychological assessments to diagnose students with mental health concerns before they start their studies could be used to prepare relevant aid and give an insight into better data.

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care should also examine new measures to allow on-campus professionals to identify and treat students with less complex issues without certain restrictions. More freedom for on-campus professionals would allow more students access to the health services they require and reduce delays.

Other reforms to improve access to care might include having community mental health agencies establish satellite offices on college and university campuses.

#### **Recommendations**

The partnering organizations recommend that:

- The provincial government provide free mental health care to students – on and off campus – through increased services not currently funded by OHIP.
- The government provide dedicated funding for community-based mental health providers to supply culturally relevant and diverse counselling on campuses.

*"While the obvious gap exists in the capacity of front-line mental health care services, there are other pieces to the puzzle. Initiatives can and should include information to increase awareness and reduce stigma, develop tools and resources for best and enhanced practice, teach positive coping skills, focus on recovery, and provide comprehensive training for faculty, staff and student leaders."*

- Danny C.  
Western University student



- The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care review the ability of on-campus professionals to identify and treat students without certain restrictions.
- The government provide funding for psychology assessments to (re)diagnose students with mental health concerns prior to their arrival at their post-secondary institution.
- The province invest in an online referral system containing a comprehensive and updated list of community mental health resources and their specializations for students seeking support.

### 24/7 service

Mental health wellness is not a 9-to-5 issue.

In a more connected world, and by extension a more connected classroom, students are finding the pressures of education more and more burdensome.

Today's student population has a diverse background. Students may be coming from across the world, looking for a second career, or completing programs they started years ago. Students must balance their academics, work, extracurricular activities and social life.

Ensuring mental health services are available around the clock – through community partnerships and innovative approaches – is the most complete way to guarantee new and evolving needs are met.

Post-secondary institutions have a role to play by ensuring the timing for delivering services aligns with the times in the school year when students are most susceptible to mental health issues.

For example, students may not need or seek help during orientation week or exam season, but there may be an increase in requests before and after those times. Collaboration among students, faculty, and mental health care providers is the best way to maximize face-to-face opportunities during the semester.

Part of the strategy to alleviate pressure on the system is to explore and incorporate technology, like digital applications, wherever possible. Whether that is a smartphone application or online program, using technology to recognize emotional or mental concerns can also help find quicker solutions. A “whole of community” approach and innovative mental health strategies will provide more access points for students, allowing them to get mental health support when they need it.

### Recommendations

The partnering organizations recommend that:

- The government expand the Good2Talk help line to include electronic communication, such as an online messaging platform and text-messaging capabilities.
- The province provide funding for post-secondary and community-based pilots of innovative mental health strategies - for example, mental health apps for post-secondary education students to determine their viability and accessibility.

### Funding and support for peer-to-peer counselling

Community organizations have proven that peer-to-peer counselling and support helps build resiliency in students, providing them with emotional, social, or practical help with the support of others who have faced similar challenges (*Stella's Place*).

In some instances, students who are dealing with mental health challenges will struggle to discuss the issues with people they see as strangers.

They are more likely to develop a connection with peers who they feel have a better understanding of the barriers facing students. This level of personal connection can lead to a stronger support system and allow the student with mental health issues to develop greater resiliency.

At the University of Ottawa, students of various backgrounds and disciplines provide peer-to-peer counselling through a work-study program. Peer counsellors have prior experience using counselling and coaching services at the university, acting as ambassadors for mental health resources on campus.

*“As someone who has coped with chronic depression and generalized anxiety disorder since I was young, my mental health played a large part in why I chose not to attend any post-secondary institution until I was older. High school was exceedingly difficult to finish, and I was concerned that the added stressors of college would stop me from being successful. As a mature college student, I think mental health needs to be the focus at all levels of education, but especially at college and university; there needs to be dedicated support staff and resources to help ensure any student who needs help will have access to it.”*

- Aimee C.  
Conestoga College graduate

Similar programs should be made available all across post-secondary institutions to increase supports while reducing the feeling of intimidation students might experience with a designated professional.

To develop peer-to-peer counselling, it will be essential to provide funding for initiatives to train students to provide counselling. Ensuring peers are prepared, equipped, and capable to support others and address crisis situations is important in mitigating risks and supporting students.

Humber College's Mental Health First-Aid program is an example of a large-scale training program that had positive results. The three-year initiative, funded through the provincial Mental Health Innovation Fund in 2013, provided mental health first-aid training to more than 2,700 faculty and staff in Ontario (*Arujo 2015*). Continuing and expanding such programs to include peer counsellors would help strengthen the mental health supports available to students.

### Recommendation

The partnering organizations recommend that:

- The province provide funding to strengthen peer-to-peer counselling on campuses.

## PRINCIPLE 3

### Prevention and harm reduction are important elements of mental health priorities

Post-secondary institutions focus substantial resources to crisis-management services. However, prevention and harm reduction are also critical components to student mental health and well-being.

Mental health awareness, mental illness prevention, and suicide prevention achieve the best results when targeted to specific groups and settings (*Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012*).

Post-secondary institutions are ideal locations for these types of interventions, but only when there are sufficient resources for the services and the services are integrated with complementary community resources.

### PRIORITIES

#### **Education and awareness**

In recent years, the government and post-secondary institutions have taken steps to ensure the post-secondary community is aware of the barriers and challenges present for people with mental health issues.

While these initiatives have improved awareness, more needs to be done.

Currently, much of the effort to raise awareness is left to student associations. For example, the Wilfrid Laurier University Students' Union has created programs such as "Peer Connect" to break the stigma around mental illness. The union is currently using on-campus promotions and targeted programming to teach students about mental health issues.

As the number of students dealing with mental health issues continues to rise, it is essential that funding is provided to ensure students, faculty, staff, and the broader post-secondary community learn about the services and supports available on campuses and in the communities.

This is important both for treating illnesses and for promoting mental wellness.

Improved training on the campuses is also essential. The students' key points of contact – such as faculty or academic advisers – should be effectively trained to recognize signs of mental health struggles and should know what resources are available to provide help.

The Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health has already taken steps to support the post-secondary community by providing resources to share, learn and collaborate on best practices

across the province. The government should help these efforts, developing resources such as policies and protocols to assist staff and faculty in addressing and responding to students with mental health issues.

The post-secondary sector is struggling to keep up with the increase in students seeking mental health services.

To effectively address this issue, research needs to be done to learn how to properly deal with the influx of students seeking support. Government support and funding would be necessary for the sector to develop an effective strategy to combat and deal with mental health issues on our campuses.

#### **Recommendations**

The partnering organizations recommend that:

- Government, health and community organizations, and other community stakeholders, work in partnership with institutions to provide resources and support to educate their student bodies, and broader institutional communities, on the services and supports that exist on their campuses.
- The provincial government provide funding to support research on effective mental health strategies.
- The province provide funding to maintain the Centre for Innovation and Campus Mental Health and to develop resources to help faculty and staff of post-secondary institutions support students who are dealing with mental health issues.
- Post-secondary institutions and student leaders continue to raise awareness of the mental health struggles that students attending post-secondary institutions in Ontario face, in an effort to develop a broader understanding of the barriers facing students.

## **Resiliency**

With the prominence of mental health issues in children and youth, it is imperative that Ontario's education systems foster resilience in its students.

According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), students who are resilient are more likely to effectively cope with the stresses and challenges that accompany post-secondary education. Programming, curriculum and services must provide the lessons necessary to nurture resilience in the student community.

To effectively nurture resilience in Ontario's students, efforts must begin during K-12 studies and continue throughout post-secondary education.

The K-12 health curriculum must equip students with the basic understanding around mental wellness. Early education on mental health and wellness strategies will allow students to develop resilience through the developmental stages of their lives and develop a reduced need for mental health supports as they grow older (CAMH).

Transition programming must also be developed for students who are finishing their secondary school studies and preparing to enter post-secondary programs.

For many students, this transition period can be a stressful time.

To mitigate the possibility of a student feeling overwhelmed, transition programming that helps students learn ways to cope with anxiety, depression and other mental illnesses must be developed.

### **Recommendations**

The partnering organizations recommend that:

- The Ministry of Education develop mandatory curriculum that emphasizes resiliency and coping skills in K-12, ensuring that students will have an understanding of mental health concerns and the resources to effectively deal with them.
- The province develop and mandate transition programming for students as they finish their high school education and prepare to enter post-secondary education.
- The government invest in early-warning systems for both the primary and secondary school systems and the post-secondary education system.

## **Measuring results**

Innovative strategies for mental health supports and programming provide a wide variety of services, while increasing access points for students seeking support.

Over the past few years, a variety of new initiatives have been developed to improve mental health support, such as the introduction of reading breaks in the fall and the integration of physical and mental health services.

While the efforts to date to address student mental health should be applauded, there has been a lack of reporting on the successes or failures of initiatives.

The strategies' results should be measured and trends and patterns should be tracked. This will lead to an improved understanding about which measures are most successful and where resources should be directed.

One of the biggest challenges in accessing services is the lengthy wait times facing students – both on and off campus. As part of an ongoing review of mental health programming, targets should be set for reducing wait times. The whole community should work to meet the targets to ensure there is annual improvement.

### **Recommendations**

The partnering organizations recommend that:

- Post-secondary institutions, health agencies, and community agencies explore the feasibility of establishing common indicators to track student mental health issues and use of services, including setting targets for wait times.
- Post-secondary institutions, health agencies, and community agencies report the progress of any initiatives developed to improve mental well-being for post-secondary students.
- The government engage leading experts to collect and measure data on the successes and failures of all initiatives developed to improve mental well-being on Ontario's campuses, including fall reading breaks, integration of physical and mental health services, and orientation programming.



# Conclusion: In It Together

**More than ever, students who are struggling to cope with mental health issues recognize the importance of seeking help. Suffering in silence is not the solution.**

The challenge now is to ensure effective services are in place to respond to the broad and complex range of issues. Despite Ontario's best efforts, there are many gaps in primary mental health care – for the population at large, and particularly for the province's post-secondary students.

There is much that must be done to fill the gaps.

No-cost care for students, the integration of campus services with community health care, additional resources, and reporting on various strategies are among the recommendations in this report to develop quality mental health care throughout the province.

Through true collaboration and cooperation, the government, post-secondary institutions, student associations, health-care providers and community organizations can ensure that every student who needs help has access to high-quality supports and services.

Ontario can become a leader in developing effective care for the health and well-being of its students. It is time to act together.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

**PRINCIPLE 1: Improving student mental health requires a 'whole of community' approach with clearly defined roles and responsibilities of government ministries, post-secondary institutions, student associations, health-care providers and community organizations.**

The partnering organizations recommend that:

- The provincial government update Ontario's Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy to formally recognize post-secondary students as a distinct population cohort.
- The provincial government communicate the respective responsibilities of each ministry that has a role in meeting the mental health needs of post-secondary students, ensuring there are no service gaps.
- The provincial government clearly define the roles and responsibilities of health-care and community agencies and post-secondary education for student mental health.
- All organizations with a role in mental health, including government, recognize that the post-secondary institutions provide student wellness programming and triage students to mental health providers.
- All organizations with a role in mental health, including government, recognize that the responsibility for providing acute and long-term mental health support rests with health and community agencies.
- Each post-secondary institution, together with local health-care and community agencies, develop and implement a plan to assist students with mental health concerns.
- The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care provide assurances that post-secondary students living away from home will have the same access to the broader circle of care practitioners they would have in their home communities.
- The province ensure students entering post-secondary education have access to the same level and types of resources that are available in high school.

**PRINCIPLE 2: All post-secondary students, regardless of geographic location, should be able to access gender and culturally sensitive mental health services and supports that are timely, effective and flexible, and provided in a safe and comfortable environment.**

The partnering organizations recommend that:

- The provincial government provide free mental health care to students – on and off campus – through increased services not currently funded by OHIP.
- The government provide dedicated funding for community-based mental health providers to supply culturally relevant and diverse counselling on campuses.
- The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care review the ability of on-campus professionals to identify and treat students without certain restrictions.
- The government provide funding for psychology assessments to (re)diagnose students with mental health concerns prior to their arrival at their post-secondary institution.
- The province invest in an online referral system containing a comprehensive and updated list of community mental health resources and their specializations for students seeking support.
- The government expand the Good2Talk help line to include electronic communication, such as an online messaging platform and text-messaging capabilities.
- The province provide funding for post-secondary and community-based pilots of innovative mental health strategies - for example, mental health apps for post-secondary education students to determine their viability and accessibility.
- The province provide funding to strengthen peer-to-peer counselling on campuses.

*"I believe we can tackle many of the problems before they become crisis situations. If we give students tangible resources and teach skills that help them feel confident in approaching challenging situations, we can improve student well-being. Promoting wellness and talking about mental health has increased immensely over the past few years, but now we need to take action to determine what students need and how we can help them with a preventative approach rather than a reactive approach to improve student mental well-being."*

- Gazal K.

Western University student

**PRINCIPLE 3: Prevention and harm reduction are important elements of mental health priorities**

The partnering organizations recommend that:

- Government, health and community organizations, and other community stakeholders, work in partnership with institutions to provide resources and support to educate their student bodies, and broader institutional communities, on the services and supports that exist on their campuses.
- The provincial government provide funding to support research on effective mental health strategies.
- The province provide funding to maintain the Centre for Innovation and Campus Mental Health and to develop resources to help faculty and staff of post-secondary institutions support students who are dealing with mental health issues.
- Post-secondary institutions and student leaders continue to raise awareness of the mental health struggles students attending post-secondary institutions in Ontario face, in an effort to develop a broader understanding of the barriers facing students.
- The Ministry of Education develop mandatory curriculum that emphasizes resiliency and coping skills in K-12, ensuring that students will have an understanding of mental health concerns and the resources to effectively deal with them.
- The province develop and mandate transition programming for students as they finish their high school education and prepare to enter post-secondary education.
- The government invest in early-warning systems for both the primary and secondary school systems and the post-secondary education system.
- Post-secondary institutions, health agencies, and community agencies explore the feasibility of establishing common indicators to track student mental health issues and use of services, including setting targets for wait times.
- Post-secondary institutions, health agencies, and community agencies report the progress of any initiatives developed to improve mental well-being for post-secondary students.
- The government engage leading experts to collect and measure data on the successes and failures of all initiatives developed to improve mental well-being on Ontario's campuses, including fall reading breaks, integration of physical and mental health services, and orientation programming.



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