

2023

**MENTAL
HEALTH CALLS
OF ACTION:
FEDERAL**

Calls of Action to the Government of Canada for 2023 on improving mental healthcare and mental health in Canada.

Published: 15 December 2022

Published online: 15 December 2022 via joshuamjbell.ca/fed23 (direct) or joshuamjbell.ca/2023calls

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Suggested citation: Bell, J. (15 December 2022). *2023 Mental Health Calls of Action: Federal*. Hamilton, ON

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The views expressed in this calls of action document are the views and opinions of Joshua Bell through his work as a community leader and mental health advocate alone and are not tied to, influenced by the views of, or coerced by any political party, federal or provincial organization, or any other group or organization. The decisions and advocacy calls made in this document have been informed through a year's (2022) worth of conversations with members of the community across Ontario and Canada and through attending mental health conferences/events in 2022 as well as through personal experiences. The mental health information and recommendations found within should not be taken as medical or professional advice. If you are in a mental health crisis, please reach out and make that connection or speaker to a trusted person in your life.

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS LINES

If you are in a mental health crisis or are in need of assistance, please contact a crisis line. If it is an immediate emergency, please call 9-1-1.

Ontario Crisis Line (ConnexOntario)

Phone: 1-866-531-2600

Canadian Suicide Prevention Line

Phone: 1-833-456-4566

Message: CONNECT to 45645 (only available from 4pm EST to 12am EST)

First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness

Phone: 1-855-242-3310

LGBT YouthLine

Phone: 1-800-268-9688 (only available from Monday-Tuesday 4pm EST to 9:30pm EST)

Message: 647-694-4275 (only available from Sunday-Friday 4pm EST to 9:30pm EST)

Additional crisis lines may be found worldwide via ymhmcanada.ca/help.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

7 Welcome and Overview

8 Current State of Mental Health in Canada and Needs

Suicide

Addictions and Overdose Crisis

Youth

Eating Disorders

LGBTQ Mental Health

Economic Costs and Access

12 Calls of Action to the Government of Canada

Call of Action 1: Canada Mental Health Transfer

Call of Action 2: National Suicide Prevention Strategy

Call of Action 3: National Addictions and Substance Use Strategy

Call of Action 4: Support for a National 988 Suicide and Crisis Line

Call of Action 5: Youth Mental Health Support

Call of Action 6: LGBTQ Mental Health Support

16 References

WELCOME AND OVERVIEW

Mental health is health. Mental health matters. As the mental health needs of people all across Canada from all different age groups and backgrounds continue to grow, the support systems that are in place and the ways that we provide care need to evolve and change with it to keep up with the demand.

This document, prepared through my work as a community leader and mental health advocate based out of Ontario, is designed not only to show the continued and only growing need for mental health services and care in Canada but also to advise and make calls of action to the Government of Canada for 2023. What I, through a year's (2022) worth of conversations with individuals, groups, organizations, attending events and focus sessions/panels, personal experiences, and more from across Canada, see as the areas with the most need of action and what I will be advocating for throughout 2023 on the federal level.

These calls of action are calls that I make in urging the Government of Canada to take a closer look at the mental health of Canadians in 2023. Goals and recommendations that, when acted on, I truly believe will make an impact on communities across Canada and will help to improve the mental health of all everywhere.

The mental health of Canadians everywhere can no longer wait. Urgent action is needed **now**.



Joshua Bell
Community Leader & Mental Health Advocate

CURRENT STATE OF MENTAL HEALTH IN CANADA AND NEEDS

The state of mental health in Canada is at a breaking point and only continues to show day after day the urgent action that is needed to ensure the mental health and well-being of everyone from everywhere in Canada. The mental health of everyone can not wait any longer. Prevention efforts are needed for suicide, eating disorders, anxiety, and much more while also working to ensure increased knowledge promotion and support for those living with a mental health disorder or poor mental health and/or addictions in Canada.

The following sections document the current challenges and state of mental health/addictions in different sections in Canada, and when put together, help to give a bigger picture of the need to improve services and supports.

Suicide

In Canada on a daily basis, an average of 10 people end their lives by means of suicide [1]. On average about 4120 people [2] will end their lives per year while another 3.1% attempt to do so [3]. According to the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention (CSAP), in 2015 over 3 396 000 Canadians who were 12 years or older had thoughts of suicide or suicidal behavior. The impact that suicide has had on Canadian life and Canadian society does not stop there with the individual as for every suicide there are hundreds of people directly and indirectly affected by the decision such as family, friends, coworkers, and many more. According to a survey released by Kids Help Phone, 1 in 5 teens in Canada have seriously considered suicide as a means to end their life [5]. According to the *Prevalence of suicidal ideation among adults in Canada: Results of the second Survey on COVID-19 and mental health*, published by the Government of Canada, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has also had a very significant impact on people with the prevalence of suicidal ideation increasing to 4.2% - an increase from 2019 when it was about 2.7% [6].

The public health epidemic of suicide ranks as the 9th leading cause of death for Canadians overall [1] with suicide for youth in Canada between the ages of 15 to 34 being the second leading cause of death [3] of youth in this age group.

The disproportional effect of death by suicide and self-harm on members of the Canadian community, such as suicide death rates being higher in men compared to women, self-harm resulting in hospitalization being higher in women [3], and the overlooked effect of suicide in Indigenous communities and youth across Canada with rates of suicide in Indigenous communities being as high 3 times the rate of non-indigenous people [4], all come together to show the desperate need of action and support (prevention, intervention, postvention) needed from our governments as well as the current needs in communities for suicide prevention supports.

These statistics are not just numbers on paper and should not be reduced to that either. These are real people from across Canada who have lost their life by means of suicide or those who have thought about

suicide and self-harm. The number of people lost to suicide and who have thought about or inflicted self-harm highlight an urgent public health crisis of suicide that should be at the front of everyone's minds and that needs urgent action and leadership now by everyone.

Addictions and Overdose Crisis

The addiction and overdose crisis is a public health crisis that has grappled Canada in recent years. With about 21% of the Canadian population being able to meet the criteria for addiction in their lifetime [9], it is clear that if actions are not taken now to help support harm reduction, treatment, and research, as well as continued education and supportive housing that people will only continue to be failed during their recovery.

From January of 2016 to March of 2022 according to the Government of Canada, there have been 30 843 opioid-related deaths with an additional 32 319 hospitalizations around the country for opioid-related overdoses [10]. Looking more recently between January to June of 2022, the government reports that there were about 20 deaths per day with about 97% of deaths being accidental [11].

It is not only an increase in resources and funding that is needed to help provide the much-needed services and supports to individuals struggling with an addiction or substance use, but it is also working to expand general public knowledge about substance use and addictions that will work to break the stigma and put an end to misinformation around the topic. Working to expand training for overdoses with the use of Naloxone (Narcan), expanding resources through community-funded partners for people with substance use or addiction, and working to ensure that people feel safe and cared for at all stages of recovery.

While it can often be overlooked, greater support is needed for members of the population who may be at greater risk for substance use and/or addictions. This includes individuals who may be experiencing homelessness or risk of homelessness, co-occurring mental health disorders, and more.

Youth

Youth are the future of the country and the future of the world. While youth continue to be the future generation, their mental health continues to decline. From ever-changing events in the modern world to the long-lasting effects of COVID-19, youth are in need of support for their mental health and well-being now more than ever before it is too late.

In the *Campus Mental Health Across Canada Report (2022)*, conducted by the Campus Mental Health Community of Practice (CoP) from the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), it was indicated that 90% of student leaders are reporting fatigue from the COVID-19 pandemic and more than 80% said that isolation was linked to depression, anxiety, and loneliness [12]. In addition to this, about one-third of students are reporting more anxiety-related problems [13] and depression levels too high that they have indicated that they are not able to function for the purposes of working for their education [14].

Students in portions of the country, such as Alberta, have indicated a lack of support for their mental health with 71% of students in Alberta indicating that "their post-secondary institutions' mental health services [are] lacking" [15]. Access to on-campus or in-school support and resources is crucial to ensuring the proper mental health and well-being of students across the country. This includes access to supports where the students and youth feel safe, comfortable, and supported both in the post-secondary and secondary levels, but also outside of their school setting.

About 70% of mental health disorders or challenges have their onset in the early stages of childhood or youth [16] and if not addressed, could only worsen into something larger as the child grows older. That is why it is so important that these issues are addressed and supported during the early stages and to ensure that youth have the access to the support and services that they need to ensure their mental health.

With youth between the ages of 15 to 24 being more likely to experience a mental illness and/or substance use disorders than any other age group in Canada [17], it is imperative that action is taken to address the youth mental health crisis that is unfolding across the country and the lack of access to services and supports. Youth and the next generation can no longer wait.

Eating Disorders

Defined as "disturbances in behaviours, thoughts and attitudes to food, eating, and body weight or shape" [7], eating disorders currently have one of the highest mortality rates out of any mental health disorder and/or mental illness with estimates at about 10% to 15% [8]. Eating disorders are complex and require not only a lot of support for the individual from loved ones, but also the right level of care and external supportive services from the healthcare system.

With a culture of dieting, bulking and cutting, and a society that is increasingly putting a focus on the way that individuals look and appear, the pressures that many young people and adults may feel can contribute to the start or the increase of an eating disorder or put them at risk for developing an eating disorder. While about 90% of people diagnosed with an eating disorder are women [19], men tend to go longer without a diagnosis or no diagnosis at all [20].

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the rate of hospitalizations for girls between the ages of 10 to 17 with an eating disorder raised by nearly 60% [18] while general admissions into programs for eating disorders, such as at McMaster Children's Hospital in Hamilton, Ontario, spiked to unprecedented levels [21].

It is clear that if nothing is done to work to prevent eating disorders and limit the factors for risk of eating disorders that eating disorders will only continue to affect millions across the country. Action is needed to work to prevent eating disorders among the youth and the general population, as well as to end the stigma around eating disorders and start a greater conversation about body positivity.

LGBTQ Mental Health

Members of the LGBTQ community continue to be individuals who contribute greatly to society, however, both access to mental health services and the mental health of members of the LGBTQ community continues to be poor.

With studies showing that LGBTQ individuals are at about double the risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (also known as PTSD) when compared to their heterosexual peers [25] and that they are 2.5 times more likely than heterosexual counterparts to have attempted suicide [26], studies have also shown that LGBTQ individuals may suffer from higher rates of depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive and phobic disorders, suicidal thoughts and actions such as self-harm, as well as a greater level of alcohol and drug dependence in some cases [27, 28, 29].

With a large number of LGBTQ Canadians saying that they have had unmet mental healthcare and access needs [30], the weight and stress of the COVID-19 pandemic did not help with higher levels of anxiety and substance use being present when compared to heterosexual peers during the same time over the pandemic [31].

Past injustices, years of lack of support and social stigma, and discrimination toward the LGBTQ community have also continued to contribute to the lower-than-average mental health of LGBTQ Canadians [32].

Economic Costs and Access

According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), the combined economic cost to the Canadian economy due to mental illness and mental health-related issues is about \$50 billion per year with an additional annual cost of about \$40 billion in economic loss due to substance use and addiction [22]. While it has been proven that investing in workplace mental health and well-being does deliver a positive outcome, both for the workers and for the economic benefits of the business, people who are living with a mental illness are much less likely to be employed and unemployment rates can be as high as 70% to 90% for individuals with severe mental illnesses [22].

There is also a massive barrier to accessing affordable mental healthcare and access to mental health services in general across Canada. While average wait times for access to mental healthcare for children and youth can be as low as 67 to 92 days, at times depending on location wait times to access mental health services can be as high as two and a half years long [22].

Costs of mental health treatment (therapist services) for Canadians can, on average, range between \$60 to \$150 per 50-minute session [24]. While this is just an average, costs can be much higher in some parts of Canada where there is a greater need or fewer services available.

With more than half of Canadian youth finding mental health services hard to access [23], it is clear that more action and collaboration are needed across all jurisdictions to ensure proper, affordable, accessible, and positive mental healthcare access and support.

CALLS OF ACTION TO THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

While there have been many great steps forward in recent years to ensure the mental health and well-being of Canadians, greater action and support are urgently needed by our governments to ensure the continued well-being and support of Canadians and their mental health. If action is not taken now the implications will only be devastating for every individual everywhere.

The following calls of action are calls that have been set out following the information on the previous pages and the urgent need for action to better the mental health of Canadians everywhere by the federal government.

The following goals are things that I, in my work as a mental health advocate, will be looking for and advocating for throughout 2023 as I continue to call on the Government of Canada to take a closer look at the mental health of Canadians in 2023.

Call of Action 1: Fulfill the promise and create a fully operational Canada Mental Health Transfer

- Following a promise in 2021, the federal government needs to fulfill its goal of implementing a Canada Mental Health Transfer - that is having dedicated funding provided to the Provinces and Territories that will help support mental health and mental health services.
- In 2023, I am urgently calling on the Government of Canada and the applicable Ministries and Commissions to fulfill this promise made and dedicate federal healthcare funding to this new Canada Mental Health Transfer. Such funding received by the Province and Territories in this new Canadian Mental Health Transfer should (1) be received based on the continued needs of the Province or Territory to improve mental health and mental health services and care; (2) be adjusted to the rate of inflation on a yearly basis as to not have unintended inflictions; (3) be reviewed on a yearly basis, as determined by the federal budget fiscal period, to ensure that the funds being received by the Provinces and Territories are meeting the needs of that Province or Territory and the people in it; (4) have set funding dedicated to funding and supporting community support services and programs.

Call of Action 2: Urgently create and implement a National Suicide Prevention Strategy

- It is no secret that Canada is the only country in the G7 without a National Suicide Prevention Strategy - and it has been for a very long time. In 2023, I am urgently urging the Government of Canada and the applicable Ministries and Commissions to act to create and implement a fully functional and funded National Suicide Prevention Strategy. A strategy; (1) that works to outline and mandate cross-jurisdiction systems with provincial and municipal counterparts and health ministries where data and records of suicides/attempts are easily able to be accessed and reported; (2) that works to support and increase knowledge of environments and spaces that promote healthy and positive well-being and mental health - including places such as community centers, healthcare offices and locations - and places that empower individuals to speak openly about their well-being and mental health; (3) that takes into account - in the form of specific section and though the appropriate cultural and situational contexts - the voices and lived experiences of marginalized

communities and individuals such as members of the BIPOC community, LGBTQ community, and the voices of Indigenous Communities as to meet the concerns and unique needs for suicide prevention, prevention supports, survivor supports, and more of each of these communities; (4) that works to enhance clinical services and supports for survivors, for individuals who may have suicidal thoughts, and for individuals who have been affected by suicide; (5) that provides outlined supports that are dedicated to community support with the prevention, intervention, postvention, and the support of people who have been affected by a loss to suicide.

- The National Suicide Prevention Strategy must also foster a culture of open dialogue and conversations, work to end the stigma associated with poor mental health and/or suicide, and seeking support, as well as work to ensure a reduction in suicide and suicide attempts across the country. The National Suicide Prevention Strategy should also continue to be reviewed and updated over a 3-5 year period as to implement new research in the field, data, and other important information and possible prevention efforts that would only benefit the prevention of suicide in Canada while working to better the supports available.

Call to Action 3: Increase support for addictions and substance use through the creation of a National Addictions and Substance Use Strategy

- Canada is in need of national standards and support strategies for addictions and substance use. A set of national standards that will work to provide a clear view and set goals while working to ensure the reduction of addictions and substance abuse within the greater Canadian population. In 2023, I am urgently urging the Government of Canada and the applicable Ministries and Commissions to act to create and implement a National Addictions and Substance Use Strategy that (1) works to ensure proper harm reduction, prevention, and treatment for individuals, as well as aftercare, supports for individuals who have been in hospitalization or another form of care; (2) is inclusive and address the unique health concerns and circumstances within select communities and age groups; (3) sets a national standard for reporting, accessing, and sharing information relating to overdoses, substance use, and addictions - including hospitalizations, possible overdoses, deaths, and more - across the country and between jurisdictions on all levels; (4) that works to promote a culture and community of ending the stigma associated with substance use and addictions through actions that bring people together to talk and educate one and other about these health issues.
- In addition to the creation of a National Addictions and Substance Use Strategy, in 2023 I am also making calls to the Government of Canada and the applicable Ministries and Commissions to act to reduce the risks for overdose and the stigma that is associated with addictions and substance use. This includes starting with the decriminalization of simple small possession (cumulative amount of up to 2.5 grams) of illicit substances while putting resources and funding into housing support, community-funded education networks that work to expand people's knowledge and education around substance use, overdose, and harm reduction, as well as working with partners across the country to ensure resources are being delivered and used to best meet the needs of individuals across the country who need them.

Call of Action 4: Continue to support and ensure that the National 988 Suicide and Crisis Line remains accessible, open, and culturally appropriate for individuals across Canada no matter their location, age, or any other factor.

- With the official implementation of a National 988 Suicide and Crisis Line on 30 November 2023, continued action is needed both before and after the implementation to ensure proper funding, accessibility, and reliability, and to ensure that the services that are provided are fit for everyone's needs - including an individual's culture, values, and language(s). Canadians must feel not only supported through such a number but also have trust that such a number is not going to fail or not be available to them when they need it most. The Government of Canada and the applicable Ministries and Commissions must work together across jurisdictions and with community and provincial partners to ensure the smooth rollout and launch of the National 988 Suicide and Crisis Line through continued collaboration, sharing of information, and funding to support such a number. Continued promotion and expanding knowledge of the National 988 Suicide and Crisis line will continue to be needed as to ensure that the general population continues to be aware of the services and supports for people or themselves when in crisis and how these services work.

Call of Action 5: Support for youth and their mental health and the urgent need for access to care

- Youth are the future of the country and can no longer wait for the services that they need to improve their mental health. In 2023, I am urgently urging the Government of Canada and the applicable Ministries and Commissions to take the mental health of youth across the country seriously. Through action plans and a supportive youth mental health strategy, the Government of Canada must work with their provincial counterparts to ensure the supply of funding and to provide support to ensure that youth are able to access the care and support that they need, no matter what it is, to better their mental health and to reduce the risk of an ongoing mental health crisis. As we continue to come out of the COVID-19 pandemic and see the impacts that the pandemic has had on youth across the country, strong supportive actions are needed to fund community support and to increase awareness around access to mental health services for youth. Continued federal support and funding to national programs and organizations such as with Kids Help Phone, the Wellness Together Portal (by the Government of Canada), and most importantly community youth support programs are all going to be needed to ensure a reduction in poor mental health in youth. The Government of Canada must also work closely with youth on the issue of their mental health by working with them to see and get their input into what services are most needed and that they would feel most supported with and comfortable accessing for their mental health and well-being.

Call of Action 6: Support for members of the LGBTQ Community

- In order to support and better the mental health of LGBTQ Canadians, the Government of Canada must confront the conditions and continued circumstances in which lead to their poor mental health and increased risk for mental health disorders or poor mental health head-on. In 2023, I am urgently urging the Government of Canada and the applicable Ministries and Commissions to take action on the mental health crisis within the LGBTQ community across Canada. Greater actions are needed to help support members of the LGBTQ Community through (1) working to ensure access to supportive care that respects and reaffirms identity while also ensuring that the individual seeking

care feels comfortable and accepted in the environment; (2) addressing the discrimination, harassment, and all other forms of past and lingering social stigmas and injustices towards members of the LGBTQ community and working to not only ensure an end to it, but also address the effects that actions such as discrimination and harassment continue to have on one's mental health and well-being through daily life and the possible lack of support that one may feel when seeking services; (3) working to fund and ensure support to community-run LGBTQ mental health services and support groups that are run by LGBTQ members for LGBTQ members; (4) working to ensure funding and continued support for national organizations and groups that provide a safe space to LGBTQ members who may need support in accessing mental health, housing, or other well-being services across the country; (5) working to ensure a reduction in the increased depressive symptoms, self-harm rates, suicidality, and substance misuse/addiction within members and youth of the LGBTQ community.

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