



Mental Health  
Commission  
of Canada

Commission de  
la santé mentale  
du Canada

**HEADSTRONG**



# MHCC HEADSTRONG School-Based Activities Toolkit



**BE BRAVE  
REACH OUT  
SPEAK UP**

## ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is intended to help engage schools to create and sustain school-based HEADSTRONG committees after a regional summit. The toolkit is designed for teachers, school staff, and students who will comprise the committees and to ensure that the regional HEADSTRONG coordinators know how to support anti-stigma, school-based activities.

It also provides sample activities that have been tested by schools in the Durham, Ontario region. This toolkit will reside on the MHCC HEADSTRONG homepage ([MHCCHeadstrong.ca](http://MHCCHeadstrong.ca)) and we hope to make it a living document by having coordinators suggest additional activities by contacting us using our email address ([headstrong@mentalhealthcommission.ca](mailto:headstrong@mentalhealthcommission.ca)).

## ABOUT OPENING MINDS

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) was established by Health Canada in 2007 with a 10-year mandate to act as a catalyst for improving mental health systems and reducing the stigma associated with mental illness. The MHCC launched Opening Minds in 2009 to address the problem of stigma head-on.

In any given year, 1 in 5 Canadians experiences a significant mental health problem or illness. This means most of us will know someone who has experienced a mental health problem, yet there still exists the unfortunate stigma related to mental illness. People living with mental health problems and illnesses often report that the experience of stigma has a more devastating impact on them than the illness itself.

In 2001, the World Health Organization declared stigma as the “single most important barrier to overcome.” Over the last five years, MHCC Opening Minds has become the largest systematic effort in Canadian history focused on reducing stigma related to mental health problems or illnesses and the only anti-stigma initiative in the world with such a broad base of academic support. Following five years of extensive research, Canada is now considered a world leader in stigma research. The launch of the Youth Anti-Stigma initiative signals a shift from the research phase to the roll out of evidence-based, anti-stigma programs to schools and communities across the country.



### OTHER TOOLKITS

*Sharing Your Personal Story*  
(Toolkit for Speakers)

*Your Speaker's Story*  
(Toolkit for Speaker Trainers/  
Coordinators)

*Planning a Youth Anti-Stigma Summit*  
(Toolkit for Coordinators)

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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# Introduction

Regional coordinators bring experiences and expertise to MHCC HEADSTRONG'S work to defeat stigma. So do school staff, teachers, and students who are committed to reducing stigma.

Our intention with this toolkit is to support everyone's skillset to allow for engagement and collaboration with school staff, students, community partners, and volunteers to bring MHCC HEADSTRONG to life in each school in order to address mental health stigma and its harmful effects on our youth.

## What is Stigma?

Stigma is the result of negative and prejudicial attitudes and behaviours that are expressed by people to those living with a mental health problem or illness.

Stigma is destructive. It leaves a mark of shame that makes people feel different and socially excluded. It is a major barrier to recovery. Among youth, the stigma often associated with mental health problems or illnesses can lead to teasing and bullying and, in extreme cases, catastrophic outcomes including suicide. A positive experience with people who have recovered from (or are successfully managing) a mental health problem or illness can help change negative perceptions and stereotypes.





# Role of the Regional Coordinator in School-Based Anti-Stigma Activities

## CREATING HEADSTRONG COMMITTEES IN SCHOOLS

Regional coordinators will play an important role in ensuring anti-stigma messages and activities occur in each school represented at the regional summits and that these are delivered in a variety of ways throughout the school term.

Some schools already have a mental health committee which is willing to take on the responsibility of creating anti-stigma activities in the school. Where a committee does not exist, an early priority for the regional coordinator, the school staff, and students who have participated in the regional summits, is to come together to create a HEADSTRONG committee in their school. A teacher in most schools will have accompanied his or her students to the summit, so these individuals will likely be the initial core members of the committees created with support from the regional coordinators.

It may be challenging to create such committees in some schools, so during the initial connection the discussions will focus on the need for their leadership in tackling stigma. Together you will outline the roles and responsibilities of committee members. (See *Role of a School's HEADSTRONG Committee* below.)

Here are some of the action-items regional coordinators will be involved in to initiate the creation of committees:

- Supporting school staff to organize the first meeting for a school HEADSTRONG committee. This meeting should include regional coordinators, along with student leaders, school administration, support staff, and school-based mental health leaders where they exist. This will be a 30-minute meeting and the HEADSTRONG coordinator should provide a short briefing on the regional summit agenda.
- Sending each HEADSTRONG committee a sample meeting agenda. (See Appendix A.)
- Ensuring that the committee understands what its function is and what it is not – it's important to make clear that it is not a therapy or support group. Its purpose is to serve as an action group that is dedicated to increasing knowledge about stigma, mental illnesses, and mental health problems.
- Ensuring that the school's administration knows the value and benefits that HEADSTRONG committee members bring to the school environment. (See appendix B.)
- Compiling and providing the committee with a list of support services available in its region. This will include phone numbers, hours of operation, and types of services available, including Kids Help Phone

## PROVIDING SUPPORT AND BUILDING MOMENTUM

It is likely that the committees will be largely run by students with school staff/teacher support and it's important that once created, they have the guidance and encouragement needed to move forward. The regional coordinator can play a key role by continuing to support the HEADSTRONG committees, attending meetings when requested by its leadership, and assisting with initial plans.

Here are some action-items that can be presented to the committees to help them continue to move forward:

1. The HEADSTRONG committee chair will schedule a 30-minute meeting with administration and include student leaders, the regional HEADSTRONG coordinator, and the school board's mental health leaders.
2. The committee will recruit new student members to assist in activity development and delivery.
3. Student members will work together to create activities for their schools.
4. The committee will ensure its members understand that more than one kind of activity is important and numerous events and efforts are required to reduce stigma.
5. The committee will schedule bi-weekly after-school meetings.
6. Committee student members, with the help of the regional coordinator, will bring someone to speak to their school about living with a mental problems or illness. This person will have been trained on how best to tell their story and will focus largely on recovery. To be most effective, it should not be a stand-alone event but part of a week of mental health awareness activities within the school. (The regional coordinator will attend these contact-based presentations.)



## SPREADING THE WORD

There are several ways that a school's HEADSTRONG committee can promote itself to students and staff, including posting flyers and making morning announcements.

Everyone has a role to play in raising awareness about mental health and its associated stigma. In every school there are talented and creative students who can help create positive change when called upon.

Each committee should be encouraged to hold an information session to help identify these potential champions.

Although not every student will have the opportunity to attend a regional summit, any student can join their school's HEADSTRONG committee.



# Some Suggested MHCC HEADSTRONG School-Based Activities

The regional coordinators can support the HEADSTRONG committees by ensuring they understand how they can bring anti-stigma messages and activities to their school.

Below are some activities that the school committees can consider. Coordinators and the committees may come up with additional ideas, but we would encourage them to ensure that any activity is clearly focused on reducing stigma. (For guidance, see Appendix C, *Checklist for Stigma Reducing Activities*.)

## BULLETIN BOARD

Getting support from administrators for a permanent Mental Health and Wellness Bulletin Board is an important first step in creating excitement. It offers information and involves the committee's student members who can use their creativity to design this focal point within their school.

Information in the MHCC HEADSTRONG toolkits can be added to the bulletin board to ensure that it challenges stigma and reinforces that everyone's mental health needs to be given the same care as their physical health. Some examples of what else can be on the bulletin board include:

- Information on mental health problems and illnesses
- Facts and myths
- Definition and dangers of stigma
- Community supports

The HEADSTRONG Bulletin Board can also be referenced in morning announcements and can be changed monthly to reflect mental health and wellness themes.



## EXAMPLES OF MONTHLY BULLETIN BOARD THEMES:

September – Mental Health Information

October – What is stigma?

November – Movember

December – Turning Winter Blues into Christmas Cheer

January – Stress management

February – Celebrities living with a mental illness

March – Facts and Myths

April – Hope and Recovery

May & June – General Info/Support

## MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS WEEK

The regional coordinator will strongly encourage the HEADSTRONG committee to work with school administration to schedule a mental health awareness week. Many schools across the country are choosing to schedule their own week to coincide with the National Mental Health Week (first week of May) or the Mental Illness Awareness Week (October).

## STIGMA WALL

One important aspect of a summit is the power of the large Stigma Wall – On a wall that is central and visible, create a very large sign saying, "Stigma Hurts." Have the sign surrounded by hurtful words such as "crazy" and "psycho" with a thick line crossing them out – this will be the focal point for awareness. Underneath this, post the MHCC HEADSTRONG definition of stigma. Beneath that, list the dangers of stigma in addition to methods that can be used to combat stigma.



## CONTACT-BASED ASSEMBLIES

One of the best ways to get the message out to the whole school is to organize, with support from school administration, one or two assemblies in which students hear a HEADSTRONG regional coordinator (or designate) deliver a presentation on mental health and stigma, followed by a HEADSTRONG speaker's story that focuses on hope, recovery, finding help early, and taking action to eliminate stigma.

## POSTER CAMPAIGN

The HEADSTRONG committee can design posters that provide statistics, facts, definitions, myths, and misconceptions about mental illnesses. Educate the school about the mental health continuum. Design the posters so that everyone realizes that we all have both mental and physical health needs. List strategies on how everyone can take care of their mental health.

## DEPARTMENT POSTERS

Put up a display of prominent people who have managed a mental health problem or illness. Each poster could have a theme tying it to the department in which is displayed. Some examples of where the posters of famous people could be seen include:

- Gymnasium area: athletes, coaches
- Drama department: actors/actresses, directors, producers, playwrights
- Science: scientists and inventors
- History: leaders, activists
- Music: musicians, songwriters
- English: writers, poets
- Religion: activists, leaders
- Math: mathematicians

Each poster needs to highlight that mental health problems and illnesses do not define who people are. These famous and successful people are so much more than their illness.

## LIBRARY DISPLAY

Set up a large table displaying all of the library's resources on mental health problems and illnesses, taking care of mental health, stigma, and community resources.



### NOTE

MHCC HEADSTRONG encourages schools not to organize stand-alone assemblies. Our research shows that such events are most effective only when supplemented by other activities, which can often occur within the context of a mental health awareness week (see other suggestions in this list). Students should be given information in a wide variety of mediums before participating in an assembly.

It is also beneficial for the regional coordinator to meet with the HEADSTRONG committee several weeks prior to an assembly in order to obtain a clear view of the demographics and prevalent issues within the school. This will assist the coordinator in making a solid decision on which speaker would be the best fit for the school at that time.

## STEPS TOWARD CHANGE

HEADSTRONG committee members can plaster the school with paper boot prints, each boot print containing information and inspirational quotes about mental health. These boot prints will appear to walk up and down the walls and across ceilings. The key messages include: recovery is possible, hope is real, and you're not alone.

## MORNING ANNOUNCEMENTS

Each morning during the school's mental health awareness week, the HEADSTRONG committee's student members could prepare a brief announcement about mental health. (See Appendix D for examples).

### MIXED MEDIA CONTEST

Challenge all students to create works of art, videos, songs, or poetry that are aimed at breaking down barriers and encouraging positive mental health and wellness. Give prizes to first place winners in each category as decided by the HEADSTRONG committee. All submissions will be performed or on display during a school assembly or community outreach evening. This activity will require a few donations from school administration, parents, and/or community partners.

### SIDEWALK CHALK

*Use your Chalk and Walk the Talk.* HEADSTRONG committee members will use chalk to create informational and inspirational messages on sidewalks around the school and the concrete entranceway. The messages will be about taking care of their mental health, wellness, dealing with stress, and the importance of getting help.

### HONK FOR MENTAL HEALTH

HEADSTRONG committee members can create sandwich board signs and line up along the street outside the school to create awareness among passing drivers about mental health facts and myths.

### PUZZLE PIECES

HEADSTRONG committee members may want to design puzzle pieces incorporating facts about mental health or an inspirational quote. The individual pieces will be put together to complete a puzzle that is put on display for the school. This could be an activity carried out over a lunch period.

### NON-UNIFORM DAY FUNDRAISER

Non-Uniform Day Fundraiser – In schools that require uniforms, students who make a donation get to wear their casual clothes. These funds can go toward prizes for the mixed media contest, honorariums for HEADSTRONG speakers, supplies for a community awareness event, or any other cause that promotes sustainable messaging on mental health and wellness. Funds may also be used to support additional school-based activities such as those listed below.

### FEEDER SCHOOL VISITS

HEADSTRONG summit teams, the regional coordinator, and school administration can discuss ways for beginning outreach with elementary schools. Ideally this will lead to introductory meetings with elementary students to open a dialogue about mental health. These younger students will be invited to participate in – and one day eventually lead – an initiative. The HEADSTRONG committee can elect two students to organize and deliver approved discussion themes in each elementary school.



## ACTIVITIES REQUIRING FINANCIAL SUPPORT

### COMMUNITY OUTREACH EVENING

An event for students, parents and community members. The HEADSTRONG committee's student members may want to create a "coffee house" atmosphere where all students who have created music, videos, poetry, and art are recognized for their efforts in making their school community a safe and accepting environment. In some schools, the committee has called upon parents who wish to donate an item from a family business and then conducted a silent auction or bake sale. The evening should focus on information about mental health, hope, and recovery that includes a presentation from the coordinator and a speaker's story.

### GROUP T-SHIRTS

Members of the HEADSTRONG committee can design T-shirts that include the MHCC HEADSTRONG logo and tag line. These shirts can be worn at any time in a school that does not require uniforms and a few times in uniformed schools during your mental health awareness week.

### STRESS BALLS

These can be purchased at minimal cost and distributed to students who need something to assist them during exam time. These stress balls should be imprinted with the MHCC HEADSTRONG logo and local links where students can find support, including [www.kidshelpphone.com](http://www.kidshelpphone.com).

### BATHROOM STALL FRAMES

Install message boards on the back of bathroom doors throughout the school. Change the information periodically but always have a focus on mental health education, early intervention, and supports within the community.

### STRESS KITS

Select a strategic day in which to distribute granola bars and juice boxes as well as stress management tips, especially during exam time. This can be an opportunity to strongly deliver a clear message telling students they are not alone, they should try to engage in positive thoughts and exercise their mental health. Include yoga instruction and mindfulness meditation to reduce stress. Let them know there is always hope and let them know where they can find help.

### WALL OF FAME

The HEADSTRONG committee can research famous people who have spoken publicly about their struggles with mental health and addictions. There are online resources that can be accessed to obtain clear pictures of each individual as well as companies that specialize in printing professional posters. This is an activity that can be included in the area of the school's stigma wall, library, and during assemblies, community nights, and feeder school visits.

## Conclusion

**When provided with opportunity, support, and encouragement, youth have tremendous capabilities to deliver strong messages and create sustainable awareness activities in their school communities. When also provided with a framework and guidance from their regional HEADSTRONG coordinator and teacher champions, they will make a difference in school culture. Together, you will accelerate positive changes that could save lives.**

# Appendix A

## **SAMPLE HEADSTRONG COMMITTEE MEETING AGENDA**

### **i. Introductions**

### **ii. Regional summit feedback**

- Lessons learned

### **iii. Next Steps**

- Share sample action items

### **iv. How can school administration help?**

- Continue to be supportive
- Provide a permanent bulletin board
- Schedule a mental health awareness week

### **v. Follow-up**

- Have student leaders draft a thank-you note to school administration with a summary of action items and deliverables

# Appendix B

## KEY MESSAGES FOR HEADSTRONG MEETINGS WITH ADMINISTRATION

### 1. WHY SHOULD STUDENTS BE INVOLVED IN THIS ACTION?

- Build student leadership capabilities
- Change students' and teachers' views about mental health
- Reassure struggling students and teachers that they are not alone
- Create a welcoming and comforting environment
- Drive home the message "recovery is possible and hope is real"
- Build on the foundation
- Students can spread the message to take initiative and embrace change

### 2. WHY ANTI-STIGMA ACTIVITIES AND MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS ARE NEEDED IN YOUR SCHOOL?

- Showcase leadership, advocacy, social action, and project planning
- Help students deliver project goals
- Build healthy relationships

# Appendix C

## CHECKLIST FOR A HEADSTRONG COMMITTEE'S *STIGMA REDUCING ACTION PLAN*

- Meet with HEADSTRONG regional coordinator
- Meet with administration (see Appendix A)
- Gain support from administration for a permanent bulletin board
- Send thank you note to administration and include ongoing action items
- Decorate bulletin board
- Morning announcement inviting all students to visit the board
- Produce and deliver a powerful announcement welcoming all interested students to the next committee meeting
- Schedule the school's mental health awareness week and make an announcement
- Determine weekly awareness activities leading up to a mental health awareness week
- Provide HEADSTRONG coordinator with regular updates
- Obtain list from HEADSTRONG coordinator of all local mental health supports

# Appendix D

## EXAMPLES OF MORNING ANNOUNCEMENTS

### MONDAY

Two HEADSTRONG committee members take turns reading the following:

*We all have physical health and we all have mental health. We have days and sometimes weeks when our physical health is not at its best. We might have allergies, headaches, or a stomach ache. These are all physical health concerns; not necessarily illnesses, but maybe something we need to watch if it gets worse, or seems to have no understandable cause. With some sort of treatment, most physical illnesses will get better. Some of us will live with a physical illness, but with support and strategies, we can manage and even feel healthy and strong.*

*Some of us will have days or weeks when our mental health is not at its best. This is true for all people. If a concern continues, or gets worse, or impacts us participating in our daily lives, getting help (like we would for a stomach ache) is important. Some people may experience mental health problems or illnesses which will need different types of treatment to feel mentally healthy. The key here is that everyone can improve their mental health and wellbeing, whether or not they are experiencing symptoms of a mental health problem or illness.*

### TUESDAY

**True or False:** One HEADSTRONG committee member reads the following statements and two or three other members shout out the correct answers:

**One person in 100 develops schizophrenia . . . . . TRUE**

**People choose to have a mental health problem or illness . . . . . FALSE**  
*People do not choose to have a mental health problem or illness any more than they would choose to have a physical illness.*

**Mental health problems or illnesses are contagious . . . . . FALSE**

**Mental health problems or illnesses tend to begin during adolescence . . . . . TRUE**  
*The first episode of a mental health problem or illness usually begins between the ages of 15 and 30. 70 per cent of adults with a mental health problem or illness say that their first symptoms appeared in their teenage years. Early intervention enables people to get a head start on their journey of recovery.*

**Drug use causes mental health problems or illnesses. . . . . TRUE and FALSE**  
*Alcohol and drugs sometimes play a role in the development of some symptoms associated with a mental health problem or illness.*

**Mental health problems or illnesses are a sign of weakness . . . . . FALSE**

**People with a mental health problem or illness never get better . . . . . FALSE**  
*With the right kind of help, most people with a mental health problem or illness do recover.*

**People with a mental health problem or illness tend to be violent . . . . . FALSE**  
*People with a mental health problem or illness are more likely to be victims of violence than the perpetrators of violence.*

**Many people say that dealing with the stigma is more difficult than the illness itself . . . . . TRUE**

**All homeless people are mentally ill . . . . . FALSE**  
*Homelessness contributes to the decline of physical and mental health. Positive supports can decrease the rates of homelessness in people who are mentally ill.*

### WEDNESDAY

**Stigma Challenge:** HEADSTRONG committee members announce to the school that every student is being challenged to pick up a piece of paper that is in the shape of a head's profile (pre-cut by committee members) and write an inspiring and motivational comment on it. The school halls will then be decorated with these quotes that demonstrate support, hope, and recovery.

### THURSDAY

**Famous People:** HEADSTRONG committee members will take turns speaking about celebrities who have been managing a mental health problem or illness and how they didn't let it define who they are, but rather are able to contribute greatly to our social fabric.

Examples: Demi Lovato, depression; Howie Mandel, obsessive compulsive disorder; John Nash, schizophrenia. Key message: Disable the Label.

### FRIDAY

**Supports Available:** From school social workers to psychologists and guidance counsellors, students need to know that in order to receive support for a mental health problem or illness, they need to speak to a trusted adult first. Friends may be there to support and encourage, but friends are not trained professionals. School personnel will know how to connect students and families to community supports when required. Wherever possible, invite mental health community support services to set up display tables in the school.





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## FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

Mental Health Commission of Canada,  
Opening Minds

Suite 320, 110 Quarry Park Blvd SE  
Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2C 3G3

T 403.255.5808

F 403.385.4044

E [headstrong@mentalhealthcommission.ca](mailto:headstrong@mentalhealthcommission.ca)

