



Mental Health  
Commission  
of Canada

Commission de  
la santé mentale  
du Canada

**HEADSTRONG**



# Sharing Your Personal Story

**SPEAKER TOOLKIT**



**BE BRAVE  
REACH OUT  
SPEAK UP**

## **ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT**

This toolkit will help equip you with the skills and knowledge to share your personal story of hope and recovery from mental illness. If you are a family member or caregiver, becoming a speaker and sharing your experiences with mental health problem or mental illness are also important to an anti-stigma program. By the time you have completed the training process, it is our hope that you know how important your story is to the success of reducing stigma.

## **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 tackle the stigma problem head-on.

Seven million Canadians will experience a mental health problem or a mental illness this year. This means that most of us will know someone who has experienced a mental health problem, yet there still exists the troubling and frustrating stigma related to mental illness. Many describe stigma as more life-limiting and disabling than the illness itself, and stigma is also a major barrier to people seeking help.

In 2001, the World Health Organization declared stigma as the “single most important barrier to overcome.” Over the last five years, Opening Minds has become the largest systematic effort in Canadian history focused on reducing stigma related to mental health problems or mental 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.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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Perth, ON

**Edward the Crazy Man**  
Toronto, ON

**Mind Your Mind**  
London, ON

**TAMI Ottawa**  
Cornwall, ON

**Difficult Lives.  
Inspiring Stories.**  
North Bay, ON

**Elevated Grounds**  
Toronto, ON

**Partners for Life**  
Montréal, QC

**Key 56**  
Montréal, QC

**Partnership Program**  
Regina, SK



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# 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 a mental 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 mental illnesses can lead to teasing and bullying and, in extreme cases, catastrophic outcomes including suicide. Having a positive experience with people who have recovered, or who are in the process of recovery, from a mental health problem or mental illness can help change negative perceptions and stereotypes.

## Why Anti-Stigma

### FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

We know that youth who are struggling with their mental health have difficulty succeeding at school and this impacts greatly on post-secondary dreams and aspirations. We also know that 70% of adults living with a mental health problem or mental illness state that the first onset of their symptoms began when they were teenagers.

- The fear of stigma often delays diagnosis and treatment, yet early intervention can make a dramatic difference in quality of life.
- Only one in six children diagnosed with a mental health problem or mental illness will get treatment.
- 40% of parents say they would not admit to anyone, not even their doctor, that they had a child with a mental health problem or mental illness.

On the positive side, adolescents are one of the best targets for anti-stigma campaigns (Corrigan et. al., 2005). It is during this developmental period that foundations are laid for adult attitudes and beliefs which, if positive, could prevent stigmatizing behaviour in the future.



### REASONS FOR ANTI-STIGMA PROGRAMS IN SCHOOLS

Many school boards across the country are now embracing mental health education for their students and teachers. We know that high school is when many people begin to experience symptoms often associated with mental health problems or mental illnesses, but because of stigma and a lack of understanding and education, many students don't know who to turn to for help or they are embarrassed and scared to talk about how they are feeling.

You probably remember what high school was like for you. We've heard many speakers across Canada say that they wish they had had a mental health education program that addressed stigma when they were in school. They say that anti-stigma speaker programs send a message of hope that people managing a mental health problem or mental illness can and do recover. They also say that by telling their story to high school students, they and the students are taking giant steps in addressing stigma and creating school communities of acceptance and inclusion.

By telling your story, you become the respected teacher who will inspire all students and other to take the necessary steps to make positive changes in their individual lives and the lives of those around them.

### NOTES

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# As A Speaker

## YOU PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE

If you have recovered and are successfully managing a mental health problem or mental illness, you can play an important role in combating stigma. Your story of hope and recovery can go a long way to changing how young people think about mental health problems and mental illnesses, and how they react and treat those struggling with their mental health. If you are a family member or caregiver of someone living with a mental health problem or a mental illness, you too can play an important role as a speaker in an anti-stigma program.

- **Speakers with lived experience are the most important part of any anti-stigma program.**

Research shows that when young people hear positive personal stories of hope and recovery, it breaks down barriers about mental health problems and mental illnesses and can change attitudes and behaviours. This is known as contact-based education and research has shown it to be the most powerful model of learning.

- **Your story can help young people seek help.**

Stigma can prevent young people from approaching others to ask for help. One of the main goals of an anti-stigma program is to encourage youth experiencing mental health problems or mental illnesses to step out of the shadows of stigma and talk with someone they trust.

- **You may find the experience personally valuable.**

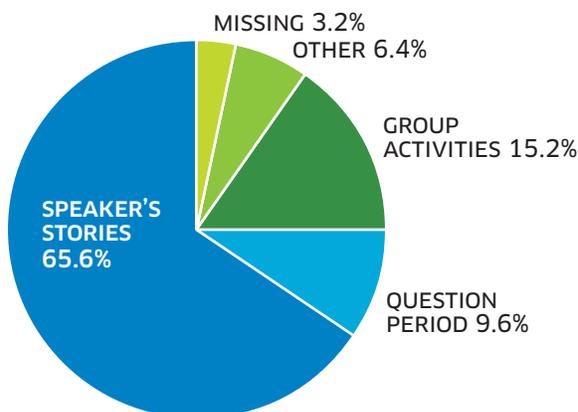
We know that it takes courage to write your story and then speak in front of an audience. From experience we know that speakers in anti-stigma programs find the experience rewarding, empowering, and even an important part of their recovery.

- **Speakers are very popular with young people.**

In an evaluation of an anti-stigma summit, more than 65% of participants said that speakers with lived experience were the best part of the event. (A summit is a day-long gathering of students and school staff from various schools to learn about mental health problems and mental illnesses and ways to reduce stigma.)

## WHAT PARTICIPANTS LIKED MOST ABOUT THE SUMMIT CONFERENCE

(All Summit Participants n=103)



Handwriting practice lines consisting of a blue arrow pointing to the right, followed by a series of horizontal blue lines for writing.





# I Want To Share My Story

## WHAT DO I DO NEXT?

You have already completed the first two steps of becoming a speaker by:

1. completing your speaker application and
2. making arrangements for your police check.

You have this toolkit because you have already participated in a meeting with your Speaker Trainer. You should now have a clearer understanding of the role and expectations of the speakers, as well as the goals and objectives of the anti-stigma program. You know the role of your Speaker Trainer and are ready to use this toolkit as a guide to help you write your story.

### 1. Start to Write Your Story

Use the templates and information provided in the section **Getting to Work on Story Creation** (pp 6 -14).

### 2. First Story Meeting

When your first draft is ready, contact your Speaker Trainer and a meeting will be set up to review your story and to assist you in the editing process.

### 3. Second Story Meeting

You will bring your second draft to the Speaker Trainer and will be given the opportunity to read your speech out loud and receive feedback.

### 4. Presentation to the Program Organizers

When you and your Speaker Trainer feel that you are ready, you will present to the organizers of the anti-stigma program. After you share your story, they will ask you questions that are similar to ones that students have asked speakers in the past. At the end of this presentation, you will be offered feedback to help improve your story the way in which you can share your story.

### 5. Observation

Wherever possible, you will be invited to attend a speaker's presentation to get a better feel for the role and the process. Seeing an experienced speaker in action, should provide you with a boost of confidence and/or highlight areas you might want to polish in your own story.

### 6. Q&A Opportunity:

Wherever possible, you will be invited to attend an additional speaker's presentation to meet a group of students and have the opportunity to take part in a Q&A session. You will not be asked to share your story at this point, but it will give you an even better idea of the questions you might be asked, as well as an opportunity to practice answering questions students may have. This is another effective help prepare for sharing your story.

### 7. First School Speaking Session

When you feel ready you will be offered the opportunity to share your story to a group of students.



## DEBRIEFING

At each speaking event, you will be accompanied by at least one member of the organizing group for the anti-stigma program. After the presentation, they will offer helpful feedback. There may be an opportunity to improve your story, or to focus on being more comfortable with presentation skills.

At the same time, you have the opportunity to discuss your impressions and feelings about your presentation, and raise any concerns you might have. The speaker role plays a central part in contact-based education. Remember to reach out for support when you need it; your Speaker Trainer and others are available to support you.

# Getting to Work

## ON STORY CREATION

### DEVELOPING YOUR STORY | 4 STEPS

The first step toward sharing your story is to get down your initial ideas on paper. The template below will help you gather your thoughts as you prepare to share your journey of recovery. Think of this as a rough draft and don't worry too much about the wording right now. The completed template is an outline of your personal experiences and provides you with the opportunity to think more about events and how you felt at the time.

### STEP 1 | THE MAIN IDEAS

These questions can guide the development of your story. Use the template below to record some initial ideas in bullet form:

**What mental health problem or mental illness are you in recovery from?**

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**What were your signs and symptoms?**

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**What factors do you think were associated with your mental health problems or mental illness?**

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**What was your life like before the onset of your mental health problem or mental illness:**

(Talents, education, work, hobbies, relationships, etc.)

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**What effect did your mental health problem or mental illness have on your life?**

(Education, work, relationships, family, activity participation, spiritual beliefs, attitude toward life, etc.)

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**What was it like having your first symptoms?**

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**What made you decide to get help?**

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**How did your family and friends respond to your mental health problem or mental illness?**

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**How would you have liked them to respond?**

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**What was helpful in supporting your work toward recovery?**

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**What are your coping strategies?  
How do you manage your mental health problem or mental illness?**

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**What do you enjoy?**

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**What is your life like now?**

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### STEP 3 | THINK ABOUT KEY MESSAGES IN YOUR STORY

For a presentation to be effective in reducing stigma, it needs to highlight messages of hope and recovery. If you focus too much on negative experiences, this can reinforce negative stereotypes and stigma.

When you are writing your story, be sure to incorporate the following four key messages into your story:

1. There is hope – people can and do recover from mental health problems and mental illnesses
2. People are not defined by their mental health problem or mental illness
3. People living with mental health problems or mental illnesses can and do have happy and successful lives
4. Everyone has the potential to take steps to reduce stigma



#### A NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE AND STIGMA

We don't have to tell you that words hurt. All of us know that words such as "psycho," "loser," "retard" and "dangerous" are damaging to those who are struggling with a mental health problem or mental illness and want to get help. Negative, hurtful words can actually prevent some people from seeking help. If they grow up having everyone around them call them a "loser" they will soon believe it and ask themselves, "Why should I get help? What would a loser gain in going for help?"

People who have been diagnosed with cancer and who are struggling to live with and maintain their physical health are often described as "brave," "strong," and/or "a true role model." What can we do as a society to have similar words used to describe all people living with and managing any form of mental health problem or mental illness? Your story is a starting point for us to have this conversation with students. The message that you can deliver can spark youth to take action to eliminate stigma and support those working towards recovery.



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## STEP 4 | START WRITING YOUR STORY

Based on the ideas you have developed in Step 1 and the key messages in Step 3, follow the guideline below to write your story. You should prepare to have your story take 12–15 minutes to share.

Your story should have three main sections: the Opening, the Body of the Story, and the Closing. Here is an outline to get you started:

### OPENING

I am:

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I want to tell you my story because:

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When I was at your age, I:

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### TIP

A strong opening tells your audience what you are going to talk about and sets the stage for the rest of the story...so, it needs to start with an attention-getting statement. You can use a quote, events in the news, a funny story – or something that happened to you with which your people will be able to relate.

## BODY OF THE STORY

My early signs and symptoms:

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How life was affected:

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My feelings/self-perceptions:

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Events that prompted me to seek help:

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Getting help (how, who, when, where, and what):

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### TIP

It might work best to organize the body of your story **chronologically** (from past to present).

**BODY OF THE STORY...CONTINUED**

My experience with stigma.

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Learning to manage the mental health problem or mental illness, set-backs – coping strategies. Learning to manage stigma.

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Now I am:

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My plans for the future:

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My advice to you to help reduce stigma:

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# Presentation Skills

Now that you have written your story, it's time to practice it! You may already have had some experience making presentations or this might be a new endeavour for you. No matter which, here are some tips that can help you feel confident in front of a group and ensure an effective presentation.

## EYE CONTACT

Eye contact shows that the presenter is sincere and engaged with the audience members and their reactions. You don't have to make eye contact with every person in the room, but looking at people for 3-5 seconds at a time will engage your audience. If you are nervous about making eye contact, from time to time you can focus on one person in the room who seems supportive (for example, your community organization representative, Speaker Trainer or the classroom teacher).

## GESTURES

- Using gestures can strengthen your verbal message. For example, holding up three fingers when saying, "There are three specific things that helped me in my recovery journey." Emphasizing a point with gestures helps to drive home your point.
- Be careful not to use distracting gestures such as fidgeting, jingling keys or change in your pocket or clicking a pen. These gestures will distract your audience from the message you are sharing.
- Be yourself and use your natural gestures.

## POSITIONING AND MOVEMENT

Knowing where to stand and how to move in front of the audience can help you manage the adrenaline rush that many speakers feel when starting their presentation. When you go into a classroom or to an anti-stigma summit, it's important to think about where you are going to stand. For larger audiences, you will probably have a lectern to put your notes on and a microphone in which to speak. In a classroom, you will probably be standing at the front of the room without a lectern.

- **How you stand:**  
Try to stand in a neutral position with your shoulders down, arms at your sides and feet positioned shoulder width apart. This will allow you to become comfortable and stay relaxed. Face your audience.

- **Where you stand:**

The middle of the front of the room is a good place to stand at the beginning of the presentation as it allows the whole audience to see you.

- **Using movement:**

Moving around a little at the front of the room can help you to manage nervous energy and add visual interest for the audience. Taking a few steps to the right or left enables you to make eye contact with different audience members.

## VOICE

Vocal quality is essential to your believability as a speaker. Volume, tone, and speed of speech can make or break a presentation. Your voice can be used to emphasize important points, convey enthusiasm, and communicate emotion and humour. Presenters are not often asked to speak more quietly; it is more common to hear complaints that their voices are too soft or inaudible. If you are someone with a soft voice, make sure you are speaking loudly enough that people in the back of the room can hear you. Projecting your voice to the back of the room can help with this. If you are presenting to a larger group, you may have a microphone, but this is not always the case.

If you simply read your presentation word for word never looking up or if you speak in a monotone fashion you will more than likely lose the attention of the audience with whom you want to share your story. The more you practice your presentation and become comfortable with it, the less likely this is to happen. Varying the pitch of your voice is more interesting for your audience and keeps them engaged in the content of your speech. Equally important is speaking at a speed that allows your audience to take in what you are saying. This might mean speaking more slowly than you do in normal conversation.

Feeling nervous can tighten the muscles around the vocal cords and make your voice squeak or crack. Some speakers rely on breathing exercises to relax before their presentation.





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