Edmonton Family and Community Support Services (FCSS)

Edmonton

Strategic Program Priorities Literature Review 2025

Positive Mental Health

FCSS
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PROGRAM PRIORITY: POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH

What is Positive Mental Health?

Positive mental health is vital not only for personal well-being but also for community health.

Mental health is the state of a person's psychological and emotional well-being. Having a good state of mental health is necessary for living a good quality of life and has a major impact on overall health (Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2020). PHAC defines positive mental health as the "capacity of each and all of us to feel, think and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face (PHAC, 2020). Positive mental health is vital not only for personal well-being but also for community health. It affects individuals, families and entire communities, contributing to the social and economic prosperity of society (Barry et al., 2015). Promoting positive mental health focuses on the strengths, capacity, and resources of individuals and communities, aiming to improve both the causes and outcomes of mental health (Clarke et al., 2015). This proactive approach emphasizes interventions that build individual skills, create supportive environments, and address community resilience (Canadian Mental Health Association [CMHA], 2019).

This review will cover positive mental health for both individuals and communities, drawing on evidence from academic literature and organizational reports. The information contained in this update will offer areas of direction for programs and organizations, emphasizing the need to align funding with people centered, prevention based, collaborative, accessible services.

What is the Current State of Mental Health for Albertans?

While there is no available data about the current state of mental health specific to Edmontonians, there is sufficient evidence for the province. Albertans are struggling with their mental health due to the increased cost of housing, an opioid crisis, gender-based violence, rising crime, food insecurity and poverty as well as social disorder (CMHA, 2024). The data shows that 17.4% of Albertans with poor to fair mental health live in core housing need, higher than the national average of 15.8% (CMHA, 2024). Albertans with mental health challenges experience a lower sense of community connection

Albertans are experiencing the highest self-rated levels of anxiety Canada-wide since the onset of COVID-19.

at 49.7% compared to 54.4% nationwide. They also report slightly more incidences of discrimination and victimization (9.9%) than the national average of 9.1%. (CMHA 2024). The suicide rate in Alberta is 14.3 deaths per 100,000, which is higher than the national average of 10.9 (CMHA, 2024). Half of all suicide deaths in Alberta happen in Edmonton and Calgary (CMHA, 2024). Furthermore, 54% of Canadians with mental health concerns did not seek help due to stigma and cost (Ipsos, 2021). In 2020-2021, 17,029 unique patients made 29,052 visits to the emergency room for mental health reasons, with over 75% of these individuals having not received any mental health care in the previous year (Mental Health Foundation, 2021). Albertans are experiencing the highest self-rated levels of anxiety Canada-wide since the onset of COVID-19 (Mental Health Foundation, 2021). This data paints a troubling picture of mental health in Alberta, by extension underscoring the significant challenges faced by many Edmontonians.

Which Social Determinants of Health are Particularly Significant for Improving Positive Mental Health?

Positive mental health programs and policies should focus on individuals, their connections within the community, and the broader environment in which they reside. This can be achieved through addressing the social determinants of health such as social inclusion, freedom from discrimination, stigma and violence, and access to economic resources and opportunities. The definitions, significance, and supporting evidence for each of these key factors will be addressed.

1. Social Inclusion

Social inclusion is defined as "the participation of a person in society and is evidenced by an individual having the opportunities, resources, and abilities to build and maintain relationships, engage in education and employment, and participate in community events and organizations" (Stain et al., 2012). For an individual to feel socially included, they must have the opportunity to participate in activities that the majority of people engage in. This includes having access to strong social networks and support, stable and suitable housing in a safe and well-resourced neighbourhood, and the ability to be employed, educated or obtain education (Filia et al., 2018). Many mental health services and supports focus on individual well-being by offering social-emotional skills training (including cognitive behavioral therapy), awareness training, mindfulness programs, workplace health promotion, and

Community mental health considers individuals from a holistic perspective, acknowledging the full range of what people need to thrive.

school-based well-being curriculums. These programs reflect a strengths-based approach to human functioning that is rooted in individualism (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihialyi, 2000).

While such services are important for individuals, it is essential to recognize that community well-being and mental health are more than just the sum of individual well-being. Community well-being requires both the well-being of individuals and of the community, as they are dependent on one another and should work together in harmony (Lee & Kim, 2015). "Community mental health considers individuals from a holistic perspective, acknowledging the full range of what people need to thrive" (Edmonton Strategy for Community Mental Health, 2024). Recent research supports this shift in understanding that people's mental health and health outcomes are not solely the result of their decisions or will, but rather the product of their interactions with the environment in which they live (Magro et al., 2024). This underscores the importance of dedicating funding, programming and services to both individual and community aspects of social inclusion as a means of promoting positive mental health.

2.   *Freedom from discrimination, stigma and violence*

Experiencing discrimination, stigma and violence are all risk factors for poor mental health. Discrimination is defined as "actions taken to exclude or treat others differently because of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and/or disability" (CMHA, 2008). When people experience discrimination while attempting to access opportunities, resources, employment, friendships or education, it creates barriers to meaningful participation in society and adversely impacts their mental health and well-being. Stigma is "negative attitudes, beliefs or behaviours about or towards a group of people because of their situation in life. This includes discrimination, prejudice, judgment and stereotypes" (Health Canada, 2022). Despite noticeable progress in the last decade, stigma surrounding mental health concerns and support persists, functioning both as a form of discrimination, and at times, a barrier to seeking support.

Stigma is negative attitudes, beliefs or behaviours about or towards a group of people because of their situation in life. This includes discrimination, prejudice, judgment and stereotypes.

These issues related to stigma are particularly relevant to those from diverse cultural backgrounds, who are at increased risk of facing stigma for accessing mental health support due to differing cultural contexts around accessing mental health supports (Children's Hospital of Orange County [CHOC], 2020).

These cultural contexts include collectivist cultures, where the fear of shame and embarrassment may prevent people from seeking help; differing expressions of emotional pain; religious beliefs; sometimes the belief that mental health issues are caused by curses or spiritual forces; as well as having limited access to mental health services in certain cultures (ConnexOntario, 2025). Stigma also affects older adults, who are less likely to seek help for mental health needs due to fear of judgement, as they may have too much pride to admit they need help, or have negative previous experiences accessing mental health supports. These are difficult barriers to overcome during a time when older adults are often experiencing significant declines in their well-being as a result of discrimination and other aspects of aging (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022).

In extreme cases, discrimination can manifest as violence. Violence can take many forms, including child abuse, parental neglect, bullying, youth violence, violence committed by intimate partners, abuse of the elderly, sexual violence, self-directed violence and collective violence (Krug et al., 2002). These acts of violence have negative and long-lasting effects on victims, as being a victim of violence is associated with substance use and mental health issues (CMHA, 2008).

3.   *Access to Economic Resources and Opportunities*

Poor mental health is a direct and immediate consequence of poverty.

Access to economic resources, such as safe, adequate and affordable housing, education, employment, and income, are strongly correlated with positive mental health. These resources are essential for fostering quality social connections, are influenced by socio-economic status, and provide individuals with a sense of competence and control (CMHA, 2008). According to Broadbent et al. (2023), poor mental health is a direct and immediate consequence of poverty and there is evidence that the "structural determinants, or sociological intervention points, have a stronger predictive impact on future health and well-being outcomes compared to psychological factors" (Ivan et al., 2023). For instance, Ivan et al. (2023) suggest that access to economic resources – such as providing safe housing for someone experiencing homelessness – can lead to more effective mental health and well-being outcomes than only psychological intervention such as cognitive behavioural therapy. Preventing homelessness from occurring in the first place can similarly be preventive of future poor health and well-being outcomes. For instance, homelessness is also linked to developmental delays

in young children: "Homelessness in early childhood exposes children to 'toxic stress,' which can disrupt the brain's critical early development" (Burt, 2024). These disruptions in brain development "may result in anatomic changes and/or physiologic dysregulations that are the precursors of later impairments in learning and behavior as well as the roots of chronic, stress-related physical and mental illness" (Shonkoff, 2012).

However, some sources suggest that the correlation between housing insecurity and mental illness can be bidirectional (Government of Canada, 2024). This means that "for some individuals, mental health issues can precede the onset of homelessness, as mental illness can negatively impact physical health, work, study, social interactions, and social and cognitive functioning" (Government of Canada, 2024). This means that mental health services, supports and programs can also help people maintain their housing. Interventions should focus on improving the environmental conditions in peoples' lives, with a focus on the physical, emotional, psychological and social tolls caused by financial hardship (Ridley et al., 2020).

How do we Implement Information from these Social Determinants of Health for Edmontonians?

1. *Social Inclusion*

There are numerous ways in which activities, programs and changes can be made on a local level to focus on social inclusion to increase positive mental health. These include:

- Strengthening social interaction for individuals, families and groups by ensuring access to free spaces such as recreational centres, libraries, and other third spaces, as well as structured opportunities for volunteerism and civic participation (CMHA, 2008).
- Creating opportunities for youth and adult participation in arts and cultural activities to foster inclusion (Bux & Van Schalkyk 2022; CMHA, 2008; Crouch et al., 2011; Devroop, 2012; Gervais, 2011; Linds et al., 2020; Rosetti 2016).
- Play for children through a mix of both indoor and outdoor settings and intentionally creating and maintaining spaces for all kinds of play that are not just in designated play spaces (BC Healthy Communities & Vancouver Coastal Health, 2024).
- Education, mental health support and programs for new mothers and extended family (Hill et al., 2023).

- Positive mental health and parent-child programs to support healthy development in children and youth and help parents develop evidence based parenting and good mental health strategies (Hill et al., 2023; Sanders, 2019).
- Youth outreach programs (directed either just for youth or for youth and their families) that build positive self-identity through life skills, healthy leisure and recreation, healthy living, and overall well-being (Hill et al., 2023).
- Increasing mental health literacy in youth, and offering culturally appropriate programs to increase positive mental health outcomes, prevent substance use and suicide risk, increase self-efficacy, increase resilience towards everyday stress, improve productivity in school and work, and enhance contributions to the community in the future (Marinucci et al., 2023).
- Using community-based and people-centered research approaches to promote inclusion, by giving those with lived experience and diverse perspectives a voice in creating effective positive mental health supports and services for overall well-being (CMHA 2024, Kagan, 2022).

- Improve access to culturally appropriate mental health supports
  - An additional barrier for those from diverse cultural backgrounds, is that current mental health supports are biased towards a medical model of mental health based on Western worldviews (Edmonton Strategy for Community Mental Health, 2024). This means that existing support may not be perceived as helpful, relevant or accessible to Indigenous people or people from other diverse groups.
- Community-led initiatives
  - For example, the Grange is a community shop in North-West England stocked with donations and products produced in the community garden where anyone can purchase items with money or by volunteering at the Grange. This has multiple benefits such as the opportunity for people to interact with others and developing a social network. The volunteer credits served not only as financial aid, but also contributed to people's sense of control and choice when "purchasing" food

as well as improved access to healthy food and learning about growing food (Jackson & Ronzi, 2021).

- Positive mental health programs that give individuals the opportunity to practice their mental health promoting skills and include peer or provider support (Hill et al., 2023).
- Accessible, local services that are available in commonly attended places like schools, workplaces, and community centres, which make it easier for people to get help and reduce stigma (CMHA, 2024).
- Mental health resources and supports for social service agency staff to prevent burnout, aid with grief and vicarious trauma (CMHA, 2024).

2.   *Freedom from discrimination, stigma and violence*

Building a safe community free of discrimination, stigma, and violence is important for increasing positive mental health. The following are some examples that can aid in achieving this:

- Expand strategies and ensure policies are enforced to eliminate discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender and/or disability (CMHA, 2008).
- Implement anti-bullying and anti-discrimination programs and policies in schools and workplaces (CMHA, 2008).
- Develop and support a health-promoting environment by: supporting community-led initiatives and events, identifying appropriate zoning, installing proper lighting around the city, having well-maintained housing and streetscaping, controlling traffic, and reducing pollution and noise. These interventions generate a sense of safety and comfort while spending time in the community (BC Healthy Communities & Vancouver Coastal Health, 2024; CHMA, 2008; Jackson & Ronzi, 2021).
- Strengthen programs aimed at educating on positive parenting, healthy family relationships, and good interpersonal relationships for youth (CMHA, 2008 Sanders, 2019).

3.   *Access to economic resources and opportunities*

Limited access to economic resources can lead to material deprivation, ongoing hardship and poorer mental health outcomes. Investing in strategies, support systems, and programs that enhance and improve socio-economic status can significantly foster economic participation and promote better mental health.

- Provide support for educational opportunities including literacy programs, job training, job readiness programs, and employment services (CMHA, 2008).
- Ensure access to quality, affordable childcare so as to improve workforce participation from women (CMHA, 2008).
    - High-quality early learning and care have positive effects on children's cognitive, emotional, social development and educational achievement (ESPC, 2021).
- Improve and increase access to affordable housing and safe housing environments (CMHA, 2008).
- Support programs and advocacy for adequate levels of income to ensure food security, education and housing (CMHA, 2008, Edmonton Social Planning Council, 2024).
- Enhance and enforce workplace accommodation policies for people with physical, mental and/or cognitive disabilities (CMHA, 2008).
- Support programs offering financial literacy skills for youth (Hill & Terashima, 2024).
- Create incentives, programs and opportunities for employers to hire youth and new Canadians (CMHA, 2008).
- Offer affordable access to transit and transportation (Ivan et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Promoting positive mental health requires a holistic, community-based approach that prioritizes both individual well-being and the social determinants of health. For Albertans and Edmontonians, the data reveals significant challenges including rising suicide rates, increasing discrimination, economic hardship, an opioid crisis, and a lack of access to mental health care. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to focus on the social determinants of health such as social inclusion, freedom from discrimination, stigma and violence, and access to economic resources. By implementing evidence-based, community-led programs and policies that promote inclusivity, reduce stigma, offer community connection, mental health supports and economic opportunities, we can foster an environment that supports well-being and positive mental health for both individuals and communities. Collaboration between organizations, policy makers, and the community, is essential to ensuring that mental health programs, projects

and services are accessible, equitable, inclusive, and effective in improving mental health and well-being for all. The positive impacts associated with investing in mental health promotion may have a multitude of effects, including improved familial and interpersonal relationships, scholastic achievement, educational attainment, community safety, productivity gains, and social cohesion (Smith-Carrier et al., 2025).

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