

Meeting the Needs: Post-Secondary Students Speak on Mental Health and Support Gaps

Qualitative Study



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About Mental Health Research Canada

As an independent national charity, we work hard to enable a future where mental health in Canada is transformed using evidence, data and stakeholder engagement. We are dedicated to turning mental health research into real-world solutions. We unite researchers, communities, and people with lived experience to bridge gaps in care through national population polling, rapid data reporting, and partnerships that inform policy to improve outcomes. We also invest in the next generation of researchers through fellowships and studentships and foster collaborations between academia and communities to drive innovation. Upstream investments drive down stream solutions - because without research, it's just guesswork.

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Research Methodology

This study engaged an online community of 65 post-secondary students from across Canada, including a mix of international students (13 students), 2SLGBTQIA+ students (18), French students (18). Other factors such as the backgrounds of the participants were examined to understand how that impacts their experiences (e.g., newcomer status and gender). In addition, we asked the province of study and if they have access mental health supports before.

The online community took place over three days (July 8-10, 2025), in both English and French, with structured daily tasks and moderated activities designed in collaboration with our research partners at Abacus Data. To encourage full participation, incentives were offered to individuals who completed all discussions and tasks by the end of the third day.

For more information about this research, please contact info@mhrc.ca

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Introduction

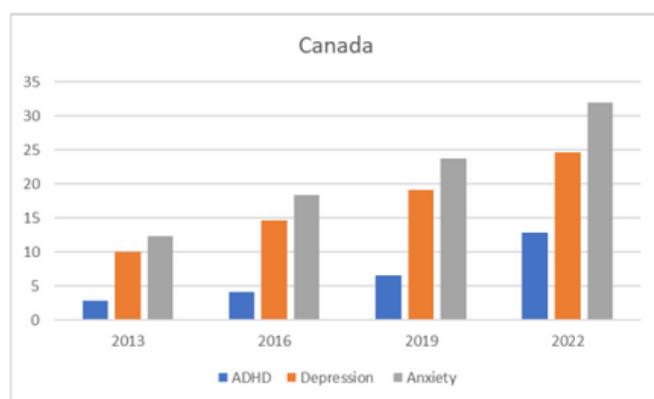
The state of youth mental health has become an urgent concern with the alarming numbers of youth reporting elevated levels of anxiety and depression. Despite this growing need for mental health care, current supports are not adequately meeting the demands of this population. At MHRC, we have taken a concentrated look at better understanding youth and the varying factors impacting their mental health through our National Population Polling Initiative. In December 2024, we reported that **youth ages 18-34 are disproportionately struggling with mental health challenges, with 24% having considered suicide in the past year, compared to the national average of 14%** (MHRC, December 2024). This is not just a statistic – these are real young people navigating significant and potentially catastrophic mental health challenges every day.

Our research has helped us to better understand the experiences of post-secondary students by looking at the intersections of **socio-demographic factors such as race, newcomer and employment status, gender, and sexual orientation**. We know that these factors influence the trajectory of a **young person's mental health journey in how and when they receive care**. The 2022 National College Health Assessment study reveals that 35.2% of post-secondary students reported having received psychological or mental health services in the last 12 month - with clear disparities faced by transgender and gender non confirming students. The same study reports that more students are being clinically diagnosed by a health care professional with ongoing and chronic conditions such as ADHD, depression and anxiety. (Figure 1)

Students are in a unique position where they are facing pressures such as financial strain and burnout during a demanding and transitional period of life that impacts their mental health. To support our quantitative findings of this issue, **MHRC engaged 65 post-secondary students from across Canada to report on their stories and experiences firsthand. This study presents some worrying but hopeful insights from the post-secondary students.**

These findings are necessary to answer the questions, **1) what is the current state of student mental health? and 2) how can interest groups such as post-secondary institutions and mental health providers advance and modernize their support network to better meet the needs of students?**

Figure 1 -Have you ever been diagnosed by a healthcare or mental health professional with any of the following ongoing or chronic conditions?



This graph is National College Health Assessment results over time (Canada: ADHD 13%, Depression 25%, Anxiety 32%)

Key Findings

- Students identify prolonged financial strain and economic conditions including employment opportunities as primary factors impacting their mental health and confidence about the future.
- When facing mental health problems, students report ignoring them until a crisis hits, turning to friends and family for support, or seeking professional help.
- Although many students access public and private support, youth are more inclined than other age groups to use online and community support programs.
- Students indicate that they need affordable, easy-to-access and inclusive services, along with a supportive community.



Understanding the Mental Health of Students Today

It goes without saying that student life is dynamic and met with various stressors borne from the demands of school (e.g., writing exams, meeting deadlines and future career planning). We can say these are normal and expected pressures of student life and without additional external factors, these stressors are not necessarily unhealthy. Student support groups must understand how this combination of pressures can impact an individual to mitigate lifelong challenges on someone's mental health. We heard through this study that there is an overwhelming consensus that student mental health is poor and declining. **Many describe it as "worsening by the day," "terrible," or "on a downward trend". Burnout, stress, anxiety, and hopelessness are widespread, with students frequently expressing that they are overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted.** A few noted that they are doing "okay" or just "managing", but even they acknowledge the broader trend of mental strain and exhaustion across their peer groups. **There is also recognition that while awareness of mental health has improved, access to services remains limited or stigmatized.**

Respondents were able to articulate what good mental health looks like, indicating a solid baseline of mental health literacy. When asked about mental health and well-being in a school setting, students drew clear distinctions between positive mental health and the challenges their peers often face.

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“Mental health is the ability to deal with the regular stresses of life and remain reasonably happy through it.” – Man, Ontario, University

“Well-being... is being happy and peaceful in your daily life.”
– Woman, Quebec, University, 2SLGBTQIA+ Student

versus

“They might not want to go out or be with their friends. They might seem stressed.”
– Woman, Ontario, University, International Student

“He misses several classes... he doesn’t care about his grades.”
– Woman, Quebec, CEGP, 2SLGBTQIA+ Student

When asked to rate their mental health and well-being on a scale from 1 (struggling a lot) to 10 (thriving), student responses paint a mixed picture :

- Half (51%) rated themselves in the positive range (7–10): Students who rated their well-being highly often describe a mix of personal growth or healing, support systems, gratitude and proactive habits (therapy, physical activity, mindfulness, etc.) .
- 37% fell in the middle (4–6): Many in this group are managing but feeling stuck, emotionally flat, or overwhelmed. Financial pressures, uncertainty about the future, job stress, burnout, emotional fatigue and relationship/family issues all emerge among this group.
- 12% rated themselves in the lowest range (1–3): Students who rated their well-being poorly cite serious and often layered challenges.

“ I suffer from depression, anxiety, and ADHD... I’m unemployed and struggling financially... I struggle with my self-image and personality.”

– Woman, Ontario, University, 2SLGBTQIA+, [Accessed support]

For the purposes of this study, participants provided self-reported assessments of their mental health. Clinical screening instruments were not administered, and therefore the severity of mental health concerns was not evaluated.

How are students managing their mental health?

Respondents primarily identified financial hardship and job insecurity as key drivers impacting their mental health and wellbeing. They also highlighted additional sources of stress, including academic pressures, life transitions, and relationships including family difficulties. Additionally, money weighs heavily on students' minds as tuition, rent and debt create constant anxiety. **With the higher cost of living, we are studying the serious impact that this is having on young Canadians. In our recent study, results revealed that 67% of youth say that living through so many financial crises has left them with long-term anxiety about financial security compared to 55% of those aged 30 and older** (MHRC, November 2025). This is clear as students reported working multiple jobs, skipping meals, or going without basic necessities. **Financial pressures are not only impacting student mental health but also not allowing them to thrive and prioritize their mental health.**

“

“Money problems - credit card bills, getting high grades, job hunting.”

- Woman, British Columbia, University, International Student, 2SLGBTQIA+, Accessed support

“I can't find a co-op... what if I can't graduate?” - Man, Ontario, University**“I'm scared I'll be stuck at home after graduating with no job.”**

- Man, Ontario, University

“You're expected to spend thousands of dollars on your education (with many of us going into debt), and we still will not be able to find a job in our respective fields.”

- Woman, Nova Scotia, University, 2SLGBTQIA+ Student, Accessed support

“I have such a packed schedule that I can't afford to take a day off to feel better, which only increases my stress.” – Woman, Ontario, University, Accessed support

What is impacting the mental health of students?

There were mixed results in how respondents manage their mental health. **Some reported going to friends and family to get help while others are accessing professional services.** Our recent research on the impact of social relationships on youth mental health reveals that young Canadians reported less positive social relationships than all other age groups (33% reported always having good relationships and 46% most of the time) – youth also reported having less social support than other age groups (MHRC, June 2024). This presents an opportunity to strengthen community building activities (e.g., culturally safe social clubs) to support young people to seek support through trusted relationships. **A positive outlook for those who need help, generally, they are going to seek help when they need it, showing there is little to no resistance.**

What we learned about the pathways students take to manage their mental health:

Often ignore their mental health needs until a crisis occurs



Relying on informal support : family and peer-based, online, and self-guided supports



Then eventually seek professional support

“

“Since the appointments are focusing on my mental health, I have been taking steps to improve it with professional help... my mental health has been at least stable, if not getting better.”

- Non-Binary, Ontario, University, 2SLGBTQIA+

“I have great support through friends and family.”

- Woman, New Brunswick, College, Accessed support

“I’ve been doing a lot better than in past years... I feel more prepared to take on challenges.”

- Woman, Saskatchewan, University, International Student, 2SLGBTQIA+

I’d recognize that this is not something I can handle alone and that getting professional support is the safest and most important step.”

- Woman, British Columbia, College, Accessed support

Some are left unaware of how to access mental health care or self-manage their mental health challenges which has left some students feeling lost and some feeling less resilient.

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“I usually tend to ignore it... I tell myself it'll pass or that I'm just overreacting.”

- Woman, Saskatchewan, University, International Student, 2SLGBTQIA+ Student

“I try to hide it and deal with it on my own.”

- Woman, Nova Scotia, University, 2SLGBTQIA+ Student, Accessed support

“I try to manage it on my own... I don’t talk to others out of pride.”

- Woman, Quebec, University, 2SLGBTQIA+ Student, Accessed support

“Distracting yourself and pretending the issue doesn't exist is not a healthy or productive way... it almost always makes it worse in the long term.”

- Woman, Ontario, University, 2SLGBTQIA+ Student

How are students accessing support and resources?

Respondents highlighted several avenues in which they access mental health supports to better manage or improve their mental health. Schools and campuses were identified as a main source of support. Some students used same-day counselling or found out about mental health services from staff or posters. **Campus services are the go-to-source for many, but some respondents felt they weren't helpful or had bad experiences. Meeting students where they are – whether that is online, in residence, on campus, or in the community – is essential for helping them navigate options and connect the right services.** MHRC's National Population Polling results show that youth are predominately accessing supports through community supports on campus compared to older Canadians (17% 16-24 vs 9% 25-34) and accessing free and online resources / self help resources (21% 16-24 vs 17% 25-34) (MHRC, December 2025). Improving support through affordable and high-quality community and campus sources will provide more students with access to meaningful care when they need it.

“

"[I access] on-campus services and family health benefits." – Man, Ontario, University

"I normally research on my own."

– Woman, Ontario, University, International Student, 2SLGBTQIA+ Student, Accessed support

"We face a lot of financial constraints. They should offer a discounted amount for international students-or if possible, make it free."

– Woman, Saskatchewan, University, International Student

"Peer groups make the biggest impact on me."

– Man, Nova Scotia, University, 2SLGBTQIA+, Accessed support

What do students need to improve their mental health outcomes?

Affordable options for support

Respondents described the financial challenges of receiving support as a major barrier to care. In MHRC's recent study, youth identified cost (52%) as the leading barrier to accessing care (MHRC, November 2025). Suggesting that **youth need low cost and free services to access the care they need given the current economic conditions resulting in the worst youth unemployment rate in decades** (Benchetrit, 2025).

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“I wish there were more low-cost options for support that were widely known and well-funded.”

– Woman, Ontario, University, Accessed support

“The regular coverage for students is not a lot and doesn’t cover all necessities.”

– Woman, Ontario, University, Accessed support

Cultural, inclusive and human-centered services

International and marginalized students told us they want culturally inclusive, long-term care, noting that short-term counselling often fails to meet their needs or reflect their personal backgrounds. **Above all, they emphasized the importance of human-centered care - an approach that designs services around people’s needs, experiences, and emotions, and that respects lived experience and diversity to support better care and mental health outcomes.**

“

“Support should reflect diversity—that means having counselors understand how race, gender, or neurodivergence can affect mental health.”

– Woman, British Columbia, University

“There should be more help directed specifically towards international students who tend to have similar experiences and struggles.”

– Woman, Saskatchewan, University, International Student, 2SLGBTQIA+ Student

Seeking social connections

Respondents also highlighted the importance of stronger social connections for improving their mental health. This signals an opportunity for those supporting post-secondary students to ensure that culturally relevant gatherings and other student events are accessible to a diverse range of learners. Social connection is fundamental to building friendships and fostering a sense of community. Among young Canadians who report mostly negative relationships, 24% have experienced suicidal ideation and 8% have planned a suicide attempt—figures that decrease substantially among youth who consistently report positive relationships (MHRC, June 2024). **Positive social relationships, strong social support, and higher resilience are linked to lower rates of suicidal ideation and planning, as well as reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety.**

“

“Making friends is a lot harder than it was back at home. People feel a lot more individualistic here.”

– Women, Saskatchewan, University, International Student, 2SLGBTQIA+ Student

Better access and awareness

Many students said they didn't know where to go for help or found out too late. They want more visibility for mental health support in emails, classrooms, posters, and apps they already use.

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“I wish there was a roadmap of the mental health system... Maybe there are more options for me, but I just don't know about them.”

– Man, Ontario, University, Accessed support

“Make the process simple. Booking an appointment should take minutes, not hours of searching online.”

– Woman, Ontario, University, Accessed support

“Students are busy and often ask for support at their breaking point... appointments need to be accessible very close to the time a student has reached out for help. Drop-in sessions would be the most ideal.”

– Woman, Nova Scotia, University, Accessed support

Conclusion

The stories and data shared throughout this report make one thing clear: the mental health of post-secondary students in Canada is at a critical point. Financial hardships, uncertain career pathways, and limited access to affordable, culturally relevant supports are leaving many students overwhelmed and under-supported. Yet, their voices also reveal resilience, awareness, and a desire for meaningful change.

To respond to these realities, governments, institutions, and service providers must work together to ensure that mental health care is equitable, accessible, and reflective of the diverse realities of today's students. **Investing in youth mental health is not only a moral imperative - it is an investment in Canada's future workforce, innovation, and collective well-being. The time to act is now to strengthening supports today will determine whether the next generation enters the workforce prepared, health and able to contribute fully to Canada's social and economic prosperity.**

Recommendations

Providers

Improve access to timely, affordable, and easy-to-use supports.

A common theme was the need for free or low-cost therapy and counselling, ideally without long waitlists or difficult booking systems. Students wished for drop-in sessions, anonymous online support, or simply someone to talk to without judgment - especially during high-stress periods like exams, the pandemic, or personal loss. With a diverse student population, tailoring resources and meeting students where they meet, convene and socialize are crucial to enriching the care experience while recognizing the lived experiences of those coming from different backgrounds.

Governments and Policy Makers

Develop and deploy employment strategies for youth.

Canada's economic challenges are hitting young people hardest, particularly students entering the workforce. Employment strategies must prioritize long-term outcomes such as job retention, wage growth, and career advancement. Government support through wage subsidies, tax credits, and training programs is essential to help small and medium-sized businesses hire young talent. As automation advances, policymakers must invest in emerging sectors and ensure technology complements - rather than replaces - entry-level work.

Public and Post-Secondary Institutions

Build communities and healthier environments that put post-secondary students at the center.

Having positive social connections has been proven to improve mental health outcomes for young people. There is an opportunity here to lessen social isolation and loneliness[SM2] with institutions and organizations centering students in their plans in community planning and development. Providing opportunities for young people to connect and build social connections to feel safe and protected by people that can support them in their mental health journeys.

Post secondary institutions also play a critical role to support the mental health and well-being of their students. There are adaptable resources available such as the National Standard of Canada for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post Secondary Students to support postsecondary institutions to raise awareness about mental health, provide healthier and safer institutional environments and improve opportunities for students to flourish.

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