



CMHA Mental Health Week 2021 – Fact Sheet

About Mental Health Week

- Every year since 1951, CMHA has hosted Mental Health Week in the first full week in May, making 2021 the 70th year.
- This year, CMHA Mental Health Week is being observed May 3-9, 2021.
- Mental Health Week is a Canadian tradition, with communities, schools and workplaces rallying to celebrate, protect and promote mental health.
- The core objective of Mental Health Week is to promote mental health because mental health is something we can promote and protect, not just something we can lose.
- Visit www.mentalhealthweek.ca for info and tools about CMHA Mental Health Week.
- Connect on social media using the hashtags #GetReal and #MentalHealthWeek.

About the 2021 CMHA Mental Health Week campaign

- The theme of this year's Mental Health Week is understanding our emotions.
- Recognizing, labeling and accepting our feelings are all part of protecting and promoting good mental health for everyone.
- Naming, expressing and dealing with our emotions—even when they're uncomfortable—can make us feel better.

A time of unprecedented stress and anxiety

- People are experiencing unprecedented stresses and feelings of anxiety related to COVID-19.
- 40% of Canadians say their mental health has deteriorated since the onset of the pandemic.¹

¹ CMHA/UBC study on the effects of COVID-19 on the mental health of vulnerable populations.
<https://cmha.ca/documents/summary-of-findings>

About the basics of emotions

- Emotional literacy is the ability to recognize how we feel, understand our feelings, label them and express them.
- When we are emotionally literate, we are better able to manage our emotions, or “regulate” them.
- Although we “feel” our emotions in the body and may recognize they are there, sometimes our emotions can be hard to put into words.²
- An event can trigger emotions very quickly, automatically, and even unconsciously.
- Emotional events can trigger changes in our facial expressions, muscle tone, and voice tone, in our autonomic nervous system that regulates our heart and respiratory rate, digestion, perspiration, and in our endocrine system, which involves our hormones.³

About putting emotions into words

- Scientists call the act of putting feelings into words *affect labelling*.
- Saying “I feel sad” or writing about what’s upsetting you are both examples of affect labelling.⁴
- When we put our feelings into words, we are actually constructing and making meaning of our emotions. Without words for emotions, our feelings might seem unclear to us.⁵
- Affect labelling has been compared to the effect of hitting the brakes when driving a car. When you put feelings into words, you are putting the brakes on your emotional responses.⁶

How affect labeling works

- When people put their feelings and thoughts about upsetting experiences into language, their physical and mental health often improve. Writing about our feelings can reduce physician visits and positively influence our immune function. Writing can also reduce cortisol (stress) levels and negative mood states.⁷

² Zajonc, R.B. Feeling and Thinking: Preferences need no inferences. *American Psychologist* 35 (1980): 157-93.

³ Levenson, Robert W. Blood, Sweat, and Fears: The Autonomic Architecture of Emotion.

⁴ Torre, Jared B. and Matthew D. Lieberman, Putting Feeling into Words: Affect Labeling as Implicit Emotion Regulation,” *Emotion Review* 10.2 (2018): 116-124.

⁵ Lindquist

⁶ University of California - Los Angeles. "Putting Feelings Into Words Produces Therapeutic Effects In The Brain." *ScienceDaily*. ScienceDaily, 22 June 2007. <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/06/070622090727.htm>.

⁷ Expressive Writing: Connections to Physical and Mental Health James W. Pennebaker and Cindy K. Chung *The Oxford Handbook of Health Psychology* Edited by Howard S. Friedman

- Giving attention to our feelings can help ease anxiety and decrease rumination (or obsessive thinking).
- Naming, talking and writing about our emotions helps to regulate them by decreasing our anger or fear response.
- Naming our emotions lowers amygdala activity – the part of the brain involved in the fear response – and activates the prefrontal region of the brain thought to be involved in inhibiting behavior and processing emotions.⁸
- Affect labeling can reduce the anxiety response in our bodies; for instance, talking about your feelings before giving a speech can help reduce your physiological stress response and anxiety.⁹

About uncomfortable emotions

- Although negative emotional states like sadness are not usually considered desirable in Western society, these emotions can actually help us adapt.
- The experience of “negative” emotions has traditionally been linked to physical illness and decline. However, research shows that our health is based on a complex interplay of positive and negative emotions and that good physical health is promoted when we feel both “the good with the bad.”¹⁰
- Expressing so-called negative emotions can have a positive impact on our relationships.
- Expressing “negative” emotions – such as anxiety, fear and sadness – increases support from others, builds trust in new relationships and deepens intimacy.¹¹

If emotions are overwhelming, please seek support

- Naming – or labelling – our emotions can help us understand and process them. It can even make us feel better. However, if your emotions are overwhelming, persistent and/or are interfering with your daily life, it is important to seek mental health supports.

⁸ Torre, Jared B. and Matthew D. Lieberman, Putting Feeling into Words: Affect Labeling as Implicit Emotion Regulation,” *Emotion Review* 10.2 (2018): 116-124.

⁹ Niles, A. N., Craske, M. G., Lieberman, M. D., & Hur, C. (2015). *Affect labeling enhances exposure effectiveness for public speaking anxiety*. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 68, 27–36. doi:10.1016/j.brat.2015.03.004

¹⁰ Herschfield, Hal E., Susanne Scheibe, Tamara L. Sims, and Laura L. Carstensen, “When Feeling Bad Can be Good: Mixed Emotions Benefit Physical Health Across Adulthood,” *Society for Personality and Social Psychology* 4.1 (2013): 54-61.

¹¹ Graham, S. M., Huang, J. Y., Clark, M. S., & Helgeson, V. S. (2008). *The Positives of Negative Emotions: Willingness to Express Negative Emotions Promotes Relationships*. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34(3), 394–406.

- If you or someone you love is struggling, there is hope and help:
 - Please [contact your local CMHA](#).
 - Visit www.cmha.ca/bounceback.
 - Visit the Government of Canada's [Wellness Together](#) portal.
 - Thinking of suicide? Please call 1-833-456-4566 toll free in Canada (1-866-277-3553 in Quebec).