

# NAVIGATING MENTAL HEALTH ON CAMPUS

Becoming an adult can be both scary and exciting. It can also be intense. As we navigate new challenges and experiences, we might feel a lot of different feelings, including joy, anticipation, stress, fear, or anxiety. When you add post-secondary school to the mix, life can be a rollercoaster.

In fact, post-secondary students are at high risk for mental health and substance use health problems. They often face new stresses and pressures. Here's why:

## **Mental health problems**

Young adulthood is a time of increased vulnerability for mental health and substance use health concerns: Seventy percent of symptoms of mental illnesses first show up around this time of life. As a result, many students come to post-secondary school with mental health problems already or are more vulnerable to them because of the added stresses of their studies.

## **Leaving home just isn't easy**

Many students are living away from home for the first time. They have left their support network behind and may feel homesick and lonely.

## **Money pressures**

With high tuition fees and living expenses, financial pressures are a stark reality for many students, and this can make it difficult to cope. Students might have to take a part-time job to make ends meet, which can crunch their time and put pressure on their mental health.



## **The need to succeed**

When you put deadlines, exams, and workload together with the pressure to compete and excel, it's a recipe for stress, anxiety, burnout and depression. Juggling academics with part-time jobs and personal life can be overwhelming.

## **Using substances to cope**

In post-secondary settings, students often have increased access to substances. Although many people use substances without harmful effects on their mental or physical health, some may be at risk for substance use problems or harms, especially if they are using alcohol or drugs to cope with stress or an underlying mental health problem.

## **This is where Campus Peer Support comes into play:**

Campus Peer Support is an innovative service provided *by* students *for* students. Peer supporters who have struggled with – and come through – mental health or substance use concerns themselves are trained to give support to other students. Many post-secondary institutions offer peer support on campus.

From 2021 to 2024, with funding from Health Canada, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) National joined forces with four CMHA branches and five post-secondary schools in Canada to develop curriculum and train student peer supporters who understand what it's like to navigate challenges with mental health and substance use concerns. The **Campus Peer Support Pilot** project provided customized training and employment for students to support peers with struggles of their own.



***“With peer support, I don’t have to wait for weeks or months just to talk to someone.”***



**Sometimes getting help is hard. Getting peer support can make things easier.**

Long wait times for mental health services on campus mean that help isn't always there when you need it. Students may also hesitate to seek help in the first place, since having mental health and substance use health concerns still comes with stigma.

***“It reassures me that I’m not alone and that someone actually has time for me.”***

## What Campus Peer Support services can offer:

- **Help when you need it:** Many mental health services make you wait for care. Peer support can sometimes be there faster, potentially preventing things from getting worse.
- **A skillful ear:** Peer supporters are there to listen, and to help untangle challenges. They use their training and experience to help students work through stresses and concerns.
- **Real-life strategies:** Campus peer support equips students with proven strategies to manage the stress of academic and financial responsibilities.
- **A sense of belonging:** Students may experience loneliness and isolation. Peer support can help create community and help students feel like they belong.
- **A judgment-free zone:** Peer support provides a safe space for open discussions about mental health and substance use health, removing the fear of judgment. Some schools in the Pilot set up drop-in spaces where students can socialize and decompress. They talk to a peer supporter when – and if – they're ready.
- **A boost in confidence:** Peer support recognizes and celebrates students' strengths, boosting confidence, self-esteem and compassion for oneself.



For more, see: *What is Peer Support Exactly, The Power of Peer Support* and *Peer Support in Action*.

For more about CMHA's Campus Peer Support Pilot Project, visit: [cmha.ca/campus-peer-support](https://cmha.ca/campus-peer-support)

Financial contribution from



Health Canada Santé Canada