

# There's more to me.

#UnmaskingMentalHealth

## UNMASKING MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AT WORK

People with mental health challenges may routinely hide their true emotions under a mask. When we mask, we hide or suppress emotions, personality traits, behaviours or symptoms from others. People mask for a lot of different reasons, but the number one driver is stigma. The pressure to mask extends to the workplace as well, where about three in four of working Canadians would not tell their leader or coworkers about their mental illnesses<sup>1</sup>.

### The impacts of masking

- **It's exhausting.** Suppressing emotions takes a toll, adding stress and increasing the risk of burnout.
- **It creates disconnection.** Frequent masking can lead to isolation, strained relationships, and a loss of self-identity.
- **It prevents help-seeking behaviours.** Fear of judgment can stop employees from accessing the support they need.
- **It impacts the workplace.** Masking contributes to unresolved stress, poor team dynamics, lower productivity, and increased turnover<sup>2</sup>.

### Creating cultures that support unmasking

A psychologically safe workplace encourages employees to bring their full selves to work. Here's how leaders and teams can help break down stigma and foster a more accepting environment:

### Talk about mental health

When mental health is a regular topic of conversation, it reduces stigma and makes it easier for employees to seek support without fear of judgment. Acknowledging tough days, sharing coping strategies, and checking in with colleagues all help normalize these discussions. Leaders can reinforce this by integrating mental health into team meetings, policies, and workplace culture.

### Encourage authenticity

A culture that values authenticity allows employees to be themselves rather than conform to an unrealistic idea of what's "normal." This means recognizing that mental health exists on a spectrum and that everyone's experience is different. Flexibility in work arrangements, validation of different perspectives, and interacting with curiosity and respect are some of the ways we can make everyone feel accepted. When employees don't feel the need to hide who they are, they can engage more fully, build deeper connections and experience a stronger sense of belonging<sup>3</sup>.



## Lead by example

Leaders set the tone for the psychologically safe culture they would like to see. This is done by building genuine and trusting relationships that support employees in feeling safe to unmask and seek support without fear. Leading by example, whether that's by being open about challenges, setting healthy boundaries, or encouraging employees to ask for help, reinforces that employees don't need to mask to be respected, supported, and successful at work. Explore the Not Myself Today® five-part e-learning course for managers to learn more about building safe and supportive workplace cultures.

## Model vulnerability

Colleagues who model vulnerability help others feel safe to do the same. By sharing their own challenges, asking for help when they need it and speaking openly about mistakes, they set the tone for a more accepting culture. Demonstrating vulnerability shows that seeking support is a strength, helps build trust, deepens relationships, and fosters a culture where employees feel safe unmasking their mental health challenges<sup>4</sup>.

## TEAM ACTIVITY: THE WEIGHT OF MASKING

Use this activity to spark meaningful conversation about the impact of masking at work and to promote a culture of authenticity and psychological safety.

This activity helps your teams understand the added strain and distraction that comes with masking in the workplace, and can be built into larger team meetings, one-on-one manager meetings or any workplace wellness initiatives you already have planned.

### Step 1: Prepare

Ask each employee to bring an object they can hold throughout the discussion (e.g., a water bottle, stationary object, cellphone).

### Step 2: Engage

Begin your meeting and proceed through the agenda as usual while everyone continues to hold their object. Encourage them not to mention or acknowledge the item during the discussion.

After 5 minutes, ask participants:

### Step 3: Reflect

- How did it feel to carry the extra weight?
- Did it distract you or make the discussion more difficult?
- Would it have been easier to acknowledge the weight, or set it down?

Explain after the reflection that the object represents the “mask” people wear to hide stress or challenges at work. Discuss as a group how masking affects well-being and what your organization can do to lighten the load, fostering a culture where employees feel safe to be their authentic selves. Share the key insights from this resource with the team on building a supportive workplace.



## Want to bring mental health to your organization?

CMHA National has a suite of solutions developed by our in-house experts to help organizations build a more psychologically safe workplace and equip employees with practical skills to improve their own well-being. Explore our options below to learn more!

### Not Myself Today<sup>®</sup>

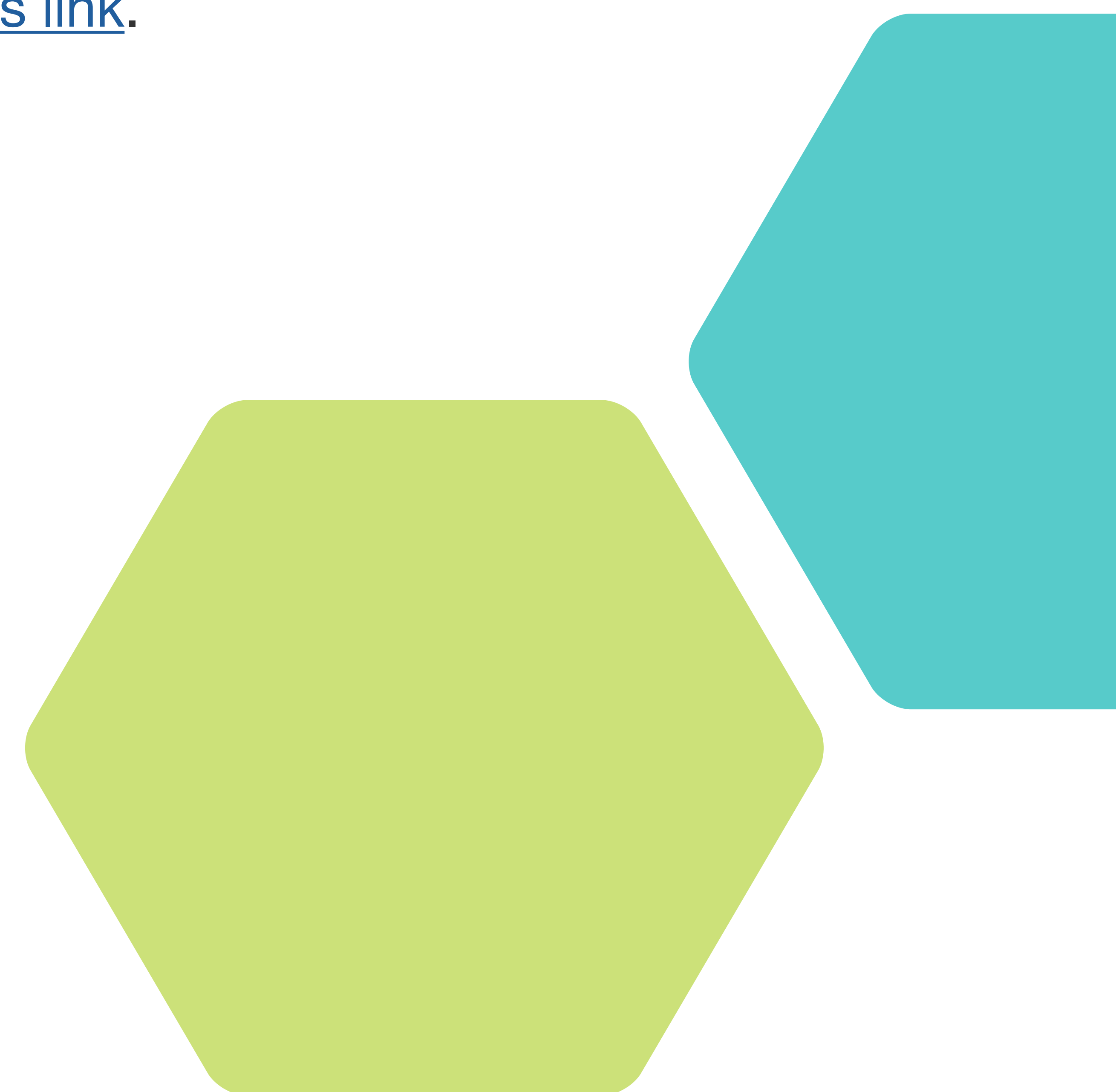
Not Myself Today<sup>®</sup> is an awareness and capacity-building program that helps your organization break down stigma, support your employee's mental health and train your leaders on how to support employee mental health. As part of your subscription, you will also receive access to a learning environment specifically designed for managers. Connect with an account manager through our contact form to learn more and get started, or [visit this link](#).

### Workplace mental health training

CMHA National offers evidence-based organizational training that is interactive and solution-focused. Our in-house experts collaborate with you to develop unique and catered learning experiences that help create a psychologically safe workplace. For more information visit this link. Reach out to [workplace@cmha.ca](mailto:workplace@cmha.ca) to see how our team can customize services to meet your training needs.

### Psychological health and safety training

CMHA National offers two public sessions focused on how to support psychological health and safety at work through management systems. We offer both an introduction to management systems and the core concepts of the National Standard, as well as a much more in-depth look into assessing, identifying, and responding to opportunities for psychological improvement in alignment with the National Standard. For more information on our public offerings, contact [workplace@cmha.ca](mailto:workplace@cmha.ca) or [visit this link](#).



<sup>1</sup> National Institute of Mental Health. Mental Health and Mental Disorders. National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK537064/#:~:text=On%20the%20contrary%2C%20there%20is,crime%20rather%20than%20the%20perpetrator](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK537064/#:~:text=On%20the%20contrary%2C%20there%20is,crime%20rather%20than%20the%20perpetrator).

<sup>2</sup> Milligan-Saville, Josie S., et al. "Workplace Mental Health Training for Managers and Its Effect on Sick Leave in Employees: A Cluster Randomized Controlled Trial." *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, vol. 60, no. 12, 2018, pp. 1007–1015, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7767606/>

<sup>3</sup> Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion. Toolkit: The Business Case for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. CCDI, <https://ccdi.ca/media/3646/toolkit-business-case-en.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Brené. *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* Random House, 2018.