2.

Executive Summary

Over six months in 2019, staff from Choices for Youth (CFY), in partnership with RBC Future Launch, organized a series of province-wide consultations on the topic of mental wellness for post-secondary students in Newfoundland and Labrador as well as a review of the existing research and policy literature.

When we surveyed students here in Newfoundland and Labrador, they said they were:

Under pressure

63% rated their own mental health as fair or poor.

32% rated their own mental health as good or very good.

None rated their own mental health as excellent.

Stressed out

58% said that most of their days were quite stressful or extremely stressful.

Working on self-care

64% said they were doing fairly well, well, or very well at taking care of their mental health.

30% said they were doing “not well” at taking care of their mental health.

Struggling to cope

41% of students said that when they run into challenges with their mental health, they don’t feel equipped to handle them well.

The Scope of the Challenge

Applying national survey findings to the Newfoundland and Labrador population, the data suggests that our province has approximately:

11,000

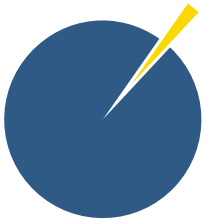
post-secondary students who are experiencing depression

4,500

post-secondary students who have been treated for anxiety

3,250

post-secondary students who have considered suicide



500

post-secondary students who have attempted suicide

Our Province-Wide Consultations

Staff from Choices for Youth consulted with more than 600 people. This included:

Two online surveys for students and for staff/faculty

Student, Staff, And Community Service Provider Consultation Sessions in St. John's, Grand Falls-Windsor, Corner Brook, Stephenville, and Happy Valley-Goose Bay.

Government Consultation. CFY hosted staff from the Department of Health and Community Services and the Department of Advanced Education, Skills, and Labour for a consultation in St. John's.

Common Threads

Brought together, these conversations have painted a broad, informative, and hopeful picture of the mental wellness amongst post-secondary students.

The conversation has changed

Students - and to some extent, staff - feel like there is much more open discussion of mental health and wellness than in the past, but there is still far to go.

Separating situations and illnesses

Students, staff, and faculty all highlighted the changing nature of mental health and specifically the fuzzy line between situational stress and clinical anxiety. There is work needed to broaden student vocabulary and understanding of these nuances, and improve general coping skills and resiliency to stress while ensuring mental health challenges do not go undiagnosed.

Empowering staff and faculty

Staff, faculty and students all see an important role for campus staff, and especially for instructors, in supporting student mental health – but supports for this are very limited.

The power of peers

Access to peer support for students is patchy at best, particularly in the college system where students often do not stay long enough to self-organize. There is a strong desire for more peer support programming and more structures to support it.

Coping skills

Both staff and students spoke of the gaps they saw in their students or peers' ability to cope with school and independent life; supports to address this are an important element of better preparing young people for a mentally well adulthood.

Addressing substance misuse

Students and staff rarely mentioned substance use and misuse in the context of mental wellness. This is sometimes seen as a separate health issue, but with so many relationships between substance use and mental wellness, it should be part of the conversation.

Physical spaces matter

Quiet, private, calming physical spaces are an important support to students' mental wellness, but are very hard to come by on most campuses. General common spaces on campus are also important to consider through the lens of mental wellness.

It is difficult to reach young men

The vast majority of student survey respondents identified as femaie. In person attendance was more balanced, but overall, students who identify as men are less likely comfortable discussing these issuess. Young men also face a quite high risk of mental illness. Attendees also made it clear this dynamic was a challenge. Targeted supports are important here.

Integration with community support services

There is an opportunity to provide closer integration between on-campus and off-campus mental wellness supports, and for those supports to be organized in a way that makes them accessible to students.

Distance learning opportunities and challenges

There is little integration of mental wellness supports into online and distance-learning systems; there is considerable opportunity here to empower these students through better access to supports.

Gaps to Fill

Opportunities for nearer-term investments in mental wellness through existing partners and structures:

- **Investing in peer support**
- **Creating physical spaces for wellness**
- **Integrateing mental wellness resources into distance-learning platforms**
- **Critical training for staff, faculty, and students**
- **Reducing financial barriers to accessing wellness supports**
- **Student mental wellness manuals for faculty**
- **Life skills developmental opportunities for students**

Transformational Investments

High-impact, high-effort initiatives that could move the needle at the provincial scale:

- **A new resilience curriculum:** With resilience and coping skills emerging as a major challenge, more resources are needed.
- **Integrated service delivery:** Bringing together all the supports that students need through one point of access.
- **Empowerment for wellness:** Investing in shifting the dialogue around global challenges away from a feeling of powerlessness.
- **Addressing the social determinants of mental wellness:** Investments in the foundations of a healthy and safe life.

Critical conversations

Topics for continued research and dialogue

- **Supporting male-identifying students**
- **Strengthening community-campus connections**
- **Finding new language to talk about mental wellness**
- **Harm reduction and substance misuse supports**

Mental wellness and the new economy

Mental wellness has a major impact on successful participation in the new economy.

Areas of impact:

- **Equipping students for the gig economy**
- **Helping students thrive in flexible, tech-driven workplaces**
- **Meaningful economic inclusion and skills for self-advocacy**
- **Mental wellness as empowerment in the workplace**