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# LITERACY AND MENTAL HEALTH

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**DISCUSSION PAPER**

**2022**

# About Frontier College

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Founded in 1899, Frontier College is the national registered charity dedicated to improving the lives of children, youth, and adults through literacy.

We work with volunteers, partners, and communities to ensure that everyone has access to effective, literacy-based learning that empowers them with the capability and confidence they need to realize their goals.

We offer free tutoring and mentoring to adults, youth, and children who need extra support to succeed in the mainstream school system, in the workplace, or in life. Our learners include: those experiencing poverty and living in under-resourced communities; individuals with disabilities; low-skilled workers; and newcomers to Canada. Equity, diversity, and inclusion are key attributes of our approach.

Over the last year, 24,541 people in 211 communities across Canada participated in Frontier College literacy programs.



# Literacy and Mental Health in the Age of COVID-19

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the literacy landscape in Canada has altered dramatically, with many schools and learner-serving organizations forced to reimagine their operations—if they were able to operate at all. Today, the consequences of the pandemic continue to have dramatic impacts not only on people’s literacy skills but also on their mental health.

Canadians are facing a significant increase in mental health conditions due to the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

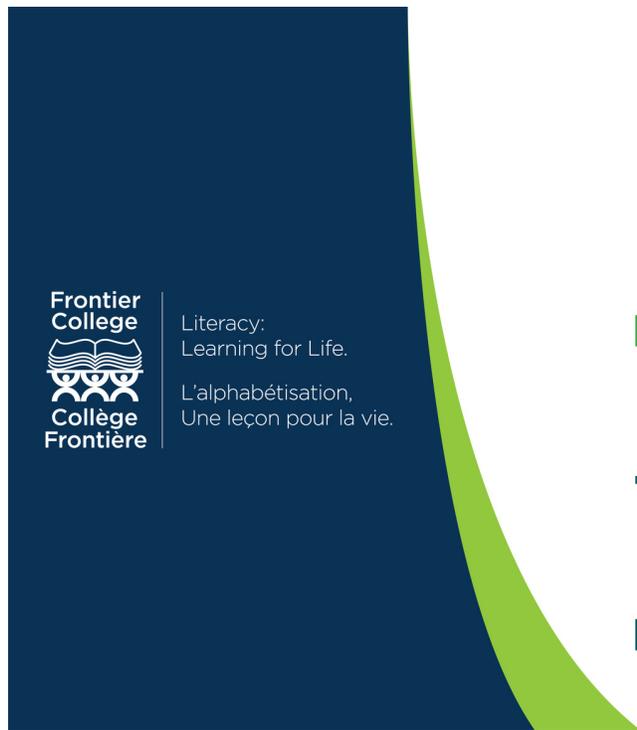
Broadly, 20% of Canadians indicate they are accessing some sort of mental health support right now and an additional 13% believe they should be.<sup>2</sup>

Troublingly, a growing number of people—as many as 8% of those working or in school—find themselves “losing days every week to mental health issues.”<sup>3</sup>

**But what is the relationship between literacy and mental health during and following the pandemic?**

**How can practical interventions, policy changes, and community investments in these areas enhance the well-being and prosperity of Canadians overall?**





# Frontier College NATIONAL FORUM

## LITERACY and MENTAL HEALTH

Frontier College's National Forum on Literacy and Mental Health aims to explore the link between these two quality-of-life factors. Studies indicate that improving literacy skills leads to better mental health outcomes.<sup>4</sup> For example:

- Equipping children and youth with social competence skills through literacy helps them become adaptable and resilient adults who can thrive in the face of adversity.<sup>5</sup>
- Adults with low literacy may not be able to read and understand health education materials,<sup>6</sup> while adults who read regularly and for pleasure have improved social-cognitive abilities and stronger mental health.<sup>7</sup>

The conversation is just beginning, but Frontier College, with its 120 years of experience in the field of literacy, is connecting the dots: ***Literacy skills are a key tool for supporting better mental health in individuals and communities from coast to coast to coast.***

We recommend that governments, community organizations, employers, and researchers explore how literacy engagement can support children's and adults' mental health—and vice versa.

# Opportunities and challenges in an increasingly online world

While still in the wake of the COVID-19 public health emergency, Canada faces a new challenge: the rise in mental health issues across all groups. Evidence suggests that this increase may be due, in part, to the shift to online methods of learning and living. For example, a 2020 study from Toronto's Sick Kids Hospital finds a statistically significant worsening of depression symptoms in young people who spend more than two hours a day looking at a screen.<sup>8</sup> And yet there are also many advantages to being online.

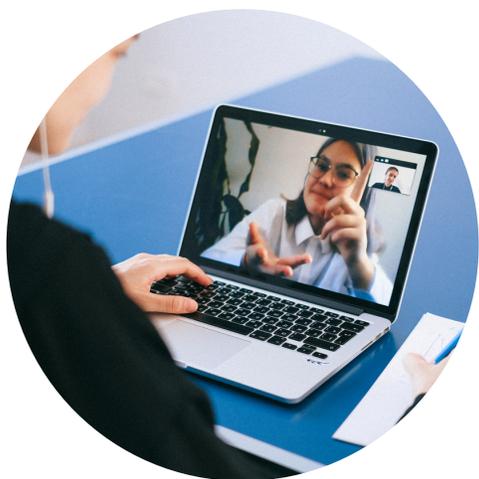
Being online can:

- allow people in remote but digitally connected regions to have more access to educational and health resources
- prepare learners to thrive in a knowledge-based society
- provide children and adults with flexible, lifelong learning opportunities<sup>9</sup>



But, of course, online literacy or mental health services only work if people can access them:

- About 25% of Canadian households in lower-income neighbourhoods rely solely on smartphones to access the internet, limiting the platforms and learning tools they can use.<sup>10</sup>
- Approximately 10% of households—most of them located in rural areas—lack reliable broadband internet, meaning that they cannot count on online learning services being accessible when they need them.<sup>11</sup>
- For people with limited mobility or other accessibility concerns, online life can be both at their fingertips and out of reach, depending on individual circumstances.<sup>12</sup>



# Literacy and mental health: adults

Canadian adults who experience low literacy are more likely to report poor mental health status compared to adults with higher literacy skills.<sup>13</sup>

A 2022 study about the impact of COVID-19 on Canadians showed that working adults with low literacy skills report significantly lower mental health levels than those with high literacy skills. Simply put, working adults who struggle with reading, writing, and math are finding it hard to maintain their mental health while also performing their jobs well.<sup>14</sup>

Adding to the pressure, the pandemic's consequences of high inflation and record debt compound and magnify stressors associated with negative mental health outcomes across all sectors.<sup>15</sup>

Sadly, while the prevalence of mental health issues increases with lower literacy rates, people with low literacy skills are also less likely to access mental health supports.<sup>16</sup> While addressing the mental health challenges of adult learners is important for educational progress, many adult education centres do not have the necessary resources and training in mental health to help all their students. Similarly, without strong literacy skills, people might find accessing mental health supports and resources intimidating or challenging, leaving them feeling isolated and vulnerable.<sup>17</sup> For each additional level of education, individuals were:



**12% more likely to see a family doctor**



**15% more likely to see a psychiatrist**



**16% more likely to see a psychologist**



**16% more likely to see a social worker**

*Steele, Dewa, Lin, & Lee, (2007).<sup>18</sup>*

**“ Depressed or anxious individuals without high school diplomas have lower rates of mental health services use than individuals who have finished high school. ”**

*Steele, Dewa, Lin, & Lee, (2007).<sup>19</sup>*

# Literacy and mental health: children and youth

While adults face the increased stress of a precarious labour market, inflation, and uncertainty about the future, children and youth may also find themselves confronted with new and unfamiliar stressors as a result of COVID-19 impacts—too often without the support necessary to deal with them effectively.

Even before the pandemic, a 2017 Toronto District School Board census completed by about 90% of the total student population of Toronto revealed that many middle and high school students felt nervous, stressed, and worried, especially about their future and their school marks.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the high prevalence of mental health problems in the young adult age group, young adults are less likely than more mature adults to seek treatment or help. One reason for this is low mental health literacy within the young adult population. We define mental health literacy as the knowledge and beliefs about mental health problems that aid in their recognition, management, and prevention.<sup>21</sup> Without strong basic literacy skills, young adults cannot develop their mental health literacy, a fact that can have detrimental effects in the long-term.



**“I see everyday in my life how important holistic development is. As a student of mental health and health studies, I believe literacy and education are among the most important determinants of health. As a child of immigrants, I see firsthand the needs of our diverse communities.”**

*Chanelle, Frontier College literacy volunteer*

# Rewriting the story of literacy and mental health

The very act of communicating feelings, whether to a friend, parent, mental health professional, or even to yourself through journal writing, can help people mitigate negative emotions, manage stress, and understand their mental state more clearly. Reading books, whether fiction or nonfiction, helps build the vocabulary necessary to identify, express, and manage “big feelings” in a generative way.<sup>22</sup>

## Initiatives and innovations

**MindYourMind**, a self-expression design lab that works to provide youth with a safe space to learn about self-expression as a form of self-care, has found that by running sessions that combine creative writing, art, and self-expression practices, they can support young people who struggle with mental health by helping them find a creative outlet for their negative feelings.<sup>23</sup>

High literacy is a precursor to many forms of self-expression and creative engagement. Artistic projects such as short story or poetry writing, collage making, and drama performance rely on participants having strong basic literacy skills. Without strong literacy skills, people often find themselves cut off from such potentially therapeutic creative outlets.

“ I explored poetry as an interesting form of self-expression. Something I hadn't given much thought of before. ”

*MindYourMind participant*

**Ontario Shores Supported Education Program (OSSEP)**, a hospital-based education program for adult learners living with mental health issues, aims to improve participants' quality of life and hopes for the future. A 2014 case study of the program indicates that such supported education programs for adults with mental health conditions "have the potential not simply to provide skills for future employment, but more broadly to improve participants' ability to manage daily life, increase self-confidence, and improve rehabilitation efforts." <sup>24</sup>

In Quebec, the **Fondation Jeunes en Tête** runs awareness campaigns designed to prevent psychological distress in children and teens ages 11 to 18. By partnering with schools to run free in-class workshops across Quebec, Fondation Jeunes en Tête emphasizes the importance of incorporating mental health learning into an everyday educational curriculum, highlighting the link between learning and mental health literacy. <sup>25</sup>

Frontier College's own **Comic Book Club**, run in partnership with the Manitoba Youth Centre, supports justice-involved youth by teaching them to make their own comic books. Teens at the Manitoba Youth Centre—a juvenile detention centre in Winnipeg—are partnered with Frontier College tutors who support them in developing their comic book's narrative, layout, images, and text. Comic books are an ideal art form for young people to express themselves as they combine both images and texts. The program allows learners to not only work on their reading and writing but also create a comic book that is personal and unique to them.



**“My tutor was really nice, always had good things to say, she helped me a lot. This program showed me that trying something new isn't bad who knows anything can be good, never know until you try it. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to try something new. I've learned a lot while being in this comic book club.”**

*Frontier College's Manitoba Youth Centre  
Comic Book Club participant*

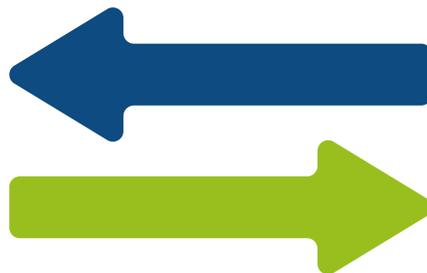
## A two-way street

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Well-developed literacy skills help support mental health, but the relationship between reading, writing, and mental well-being is not unilateral. Not only does literacy help people improve and maintain their mental well-being, but good mental health can also support literacy skill development and learning. Literacy and mental health are linked in a positive feedback loop.

**Better literacy leads to better mental health, and better mental health leads to better literacy. As a result, students with strong emotional control skills and attributes such as empathy tend to have better academic performance.**<sup>26</sup>

Rather than treating mental health as separate from education, teachers, tutors, and curriculum makers should consider mixing academic learning with emotional learning to set learners up for success. Given the increasing complexities of learning over the past two years and the widening economic and social inequalities among learners, it is now more important than ever to understand the connections between social, emotional, and academic learning, for children, youth, and adults.<sup>27</sup>



**“ Students learn best when they are focused, find information relevant and engaging, and are actively involved in learning. This requires them to have a ready and focused brain, use emotional regulation skills, and also be in an environment where they feel physically and emotionally safe, connected, included, and supported. ”**

*CASEL, Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: Social and Emotional Learning Roadmap for Reopening Schools*<sup>28</sup>

# Healthy foundations for a brighter tomorrow

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As Canada moves forward with its COVID recovery efforts and children, youth, and adults return to full-time school and work, they may find themselves neglecting self-care and mental health “check-ups.” By designing programs and supports that integrate emotional and mental health into other areas of learning, we can help people of all ages develop a healthy foundation to grow their skills and achieve their dreams.

“A curriculum using literacy-based practices and materials could be used to support the development of social competence across children’s key social contexts: home, school, and the community, and thus promote change that is likely to be effective and lasting.”

*Shauna L. Tominey, Ph.D et al.* <sup>29</sup>

## Discussion Questions

**How do you understand the relationship between literacy skills and mental health?**

**How can we integrate positive mental health practices into academic curricula?**

**What is the best way to raise awareness of the current mental health and literacy environments and generate impactful change on both fronts?**

**Is Canada doing enough to support literacy and mental health as part of its pandemic recovery efforts?**

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