



Talk Today in the CJHL: An evaluation of a mental health program in junior hockey

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Canadian Mental
Health Association
TALK TODAY



McGill

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Executive summary

Since 2018, [McGill's Faculty of Education](#) has collaborated with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), Ontario Division to evaluate their [Talk Today](#) program.

CMHA Ontario designed the Talk Today program that supports junior ice hockey players aged 15–21. The season-long program is a comprehensive, multi-faceted mental health awareness and suicide prevention initiative that educates, supports and raises awareness about mental health.

The focus of this evaluation is on the impact of the Talk Today program as delivered to athletes in the Canadian Junior Hockey League (CJHL) during the 2021-22 hockey season.

Individuals who took part in this program were asked to complete online questionnaires pre- and post-participation. In total, 116 athletes from the CJHL completed the online questionnaire pre-participation. Of this sample, 68 also completed the questionnaire post-participation.

Key findings included:

Athlete satisfaction

- 91 per cent of participants “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they were satisfied with the program
- 94 per cent of participants indicated that they learned “a medium amount” to “a lot” about mental health after attending the program
- 86 per cent of participants indicated they were “likely” or “very likely” to change the way they responded to individuals with mental health issues as a result of this program

Stigma

- 69 per cent of participants demonstrated a decrease in self-stigma following participation
- 69 per cent of participants demonstrated an increase in awareness of public stigma following participation

Confidence to seek support

- 60 per cent of participants demonstrated an increase in their knowledge and confidence to seek help following participation
- On average, participants’ levels of knowledge and confidence to seek help increased by 31 per cent following participation

Confidence to provide support

- 58 per cent of participants demonstrated an increase in their knowledge in identifying, approaching and supporting a person experiencing mental health issues following participation
- On average, participants’ levels of knowledge in identifying, approaching and supporting a person experiencing mental health issues increased by 30 per cent following participation
- 53 per cent demonstrated an increase in their confidence in identifying and responding to a person with thoughts of suicide following participation
- On average, participants’ levels of knowledge in identifying and responding to a person with thoughts of suicide increased by 26 per cent following participation

This was the second cohort of Talk Today evaluation. The [first cohort](#) involved program participants in the Ontario Hockey League during the 2020-21 season.

Special thanks to the Fifth Line Foundation and National Hockey League Foundation for their generous funding of Talk Today in the CJHL.

The team that worked on this collaboration included:

- Dr. Nancy Heath, director of Education for Mental Health Resilience, McGill University Faculty of Education
- Dr. Gordon Bloom, professor, McGill University Faculty of Education
- Dr. Jordan Lefebvre, postdoctoral researcher, University of Queensland
- Siobhan Henderson, doctoral student, McGill University
- Joe Kim, chief operating officer, CMHA Ontario
- Alexander Salomie, program and communications manager, CMHA Ontario
- Hinda Koza-Culp, communications and engagement officer, CMHA Ontario



Photo credit: Michael Hall

About Talk Today

[Talk Today](#) is one of the most comprehensive mental health/sport-related programs in Canada. Its aim is to provide suicide prevention education to young athletes and to spread awareness of the benefits of positive mental health across the country. Among CMHA Ontario's key hockey partners on the program are the Canadian Junior Hockey League (CJHL) and the Canadian Hockey League (CHL).

CMHA branches across Canada possess expert clinical expertise in the provision of mental health and addictions services. Additionally, branches offer significant holistic and psycho-social approaches to mental health and addictions care often rooted in addressing the social determinants of health. CMHA branches provide Talk Today participants a front-door to community-based mental health and addictions resources and services within their jurisdictions.

Delivery of Talk Today, especially the evidence-based mental health and suicide-awareness workshops for athletes, would not be possible without the skilled facilitators from CMHA branches. CMHA staff are certified to deliver suicide-prevention workshops in their branch capacity as mental health educators or similar roles.

The following four components of the Talk Today program help educate, support and raise awareness about mental health:

1. Mental health and suicide awareness training

Awareness training is a core component of Talk Today. During the period of this evaluation, participants received training in safeTALK. This training teaches individuals to recognize persons with thoughts of suicide and how to take action to help.

2. CMHA Mental Health Coaches

Each team is paired with a designated Mental Health Coach from a local CMHA branch. They are directly tied to each team to provide resources and supports for the players and the people that surround them.

3. Team Mental Health Champions

Each participating team appoints a Mental Health Champion to help the team connect with their local CMHA Mental Health Coach. Mental Health Champions can be coaches, trainers, staff or anyone else associated with the team.

4. Talk Today game day awareness events

Each team typically hosts an annual Talk Today game day event to increase awareness about suicide prevention and promote positive mental health in their community. (Due to COVID-19, awareness events weren't part of Talk Today in the CJHL in 2021-22.)



Photo credit: Robert Lefebvre / icelevel.com



Photo credit: Robert Lefebvre / icelevel.com

Evaluation overview

Measures and procedures

Individuals who took part in the Talk Today program were asked to complete the online program evaluation questionnaire. To do so, CJHL representatives sent a link to the online consent form and questionnaire to teams in the CJHL. Participants who provided consent were asked to complete the program evaluation questionnaire.

Participants

In total, 116 junior hockey players from the CJHL (aged 16–20) completed the online questionnaire pre-participation. Of this sample, 68 also completed the questionnaire post-participation. Athletes in this sample represented four hockey leagues including the Northern Ontario Junior Hockey League, Manitoba Junior Hockey League, Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League and Alberta Junior Hockey League. Athletes in this sample played various positions (forward, defenseman, goalie). At the time of completion, athletes had been involved in junior hockey for 2.25 years on average.

Key findings

Athlete satisfaction

The results indicated high athlete satisfaction following the Talk Today program. That is, 91.2 per cent of participants “agreed” or “strongly agreed” they were satisfied with the program. Also, 94.4 per cent of participants indicated they learned “a medium amount” to “a lot” about mental health after attending the program. Additionally, 86.1 per cent of participants indicated they were “likely” or “very likely” to change the way they responded to individuals with mental health issues as a result of this training. Athletes also provided feedback on the program which included statements such as “I’d love to bring these talks to my community back home. I thought it was very helpful and intriguing,” and “I think it was really informative and good for people who are struggling with mental illness.”

Athlete stigma

Results demonstrated significant reductions in levels of personal stigma following the program. As such, participants’ personal beliefs towards individuals with mental health issues improved. Furthermore, the program appeared to have helped sensitize participants to the stigma related to mental illness that is present in the general public given how their views of public perceptions towards persons with mental illnesses increased following participation.

Confidence to seek support

Following the program, participants reported feeling more confident in their abilities to seek help. Particularly, athletes felt more comfortable asking for help from one of their teammates, their coach, their CMHA mental health coach and the team mental health champion, but not from a parent, sibling or friend outside the team. This highlights how the program contributed to creating an environment in which athletes felt comfortable seeking help from individuals present in their sport environment.

Confidence to provide support

Results demonstrated that the program helped to improve athletes’ knowledge in identifying, approaching, and supporting a person experiencing mental health issues or thoughts of suicide. In general, athletes reported feeling more comfortable discussing mental health issues following participation.

“

I’d love to bring these talks to my community back home. I thought it was very helpful and intriguing, and I think it was really informative and good for people who are struggling with mental illness.

”



Detailed analysis

Self-stigma

The findings indicated a significant difference for participants' personal beliefs towards individuals with mental health issues between time-point 1 (pre-training) and time point 2 (post-training), in which athletes' perceptions of self-stigma were lower post-participation in comparison to pre-participation.

Researchers looked at the percentage of participants who had any decreases in stigma. Prior to doing so, they removed nine per cent of participants who had the lowest possible score on self-stigma at time 1 (6/68). Of the remaining 62 participants who reported some self-stigma at time 1, 69 per cent (43/62) demonstrated a decrease in self-stigma following the training.

On average, there was a 16 per cent decrease in stigma among individuals who reported any decreases in self-stigma following the training.

Public stigma

A significant difference was observed in participants' views about public perceptions towards persons with mental illnesses. Levels of awareness of public stigma were higher post-participation compared to pre-participation, thus demonstrating that the program helped sensitize participants to the stigma towards mental illness that is present in the general public.

Researchers looked at the percentage of participants who had any increase in public stigma. No participants had the highest possible score at time 1. Therefore, of the 68 participants, 69 per cent (47/68) demonstrated an increase in public stigma following the training.

Then, they calculated the average percentage of change for the individuals who reported any increases in stigma following the training. Researchers looked at the average change of awareness of public stigma between time points for these individuals. On average, participants' levels of public stigma increased by 17 per cent following the training. Together, findings demonstrated that the program helped participants become more aware of the stigma that is present related to mental illness in society.

69% (43/62)
demonstrated a decrease in self-stigma following the training.

69% (47/68)
demonstrated an increase in awareness of public stigma following the training

Confidence to seek support

In terms of help-seeking, findings indicated a significant difference in participants' knowledge and confidence to seek help between time-point 1 and time-point 2. Precisely, athletes' knowledge of how to ask someone for help and their confidence to do so were higher post-participation compared to pre-participation.

Researchers looked at the percentage of participants who had any increase in knowledge and confidence to seek help. Prior to doing so, they removed eight per cent of participants who had the highest possible score on levels of knowledge and confidence to seek help at time 1 (5/60). Of the remaining 55 participants who reported some knowledge and confidence to seek help at time 1, 60 per cent (33/55) demonstrated an increase in their knowledge and confidence to seek help following the training.

Then, researchers calculated the average percentage of change for the individuals who reported any increases in knowledge and confidence to seek help following the training. They looked at the average change in knowledge and confidence to seek help between time points for these individuals. On average, participants' levels of knowledge and confidence to seek help increased by 31 per cent following the training.

Lastly, researchers looked at the percentage of participants who were scoring high on their knowledge and confidence to seek help pre- to post-participation. Forty-three per cent of participants had a high score at time 1 compared to 67 per cent at time 2.

Confidence to provide support

Knowledge in identifying, approaching and supporting an individual with mental health issues

There was a significant difference in athletes' reports of their knowledge in identifying, approaching and supporting a person experiencing mental health issues between time points. As such, athletes' knowledge was higher post-participation compared to pre-participation.

Researchers looked at the percentage of participants who had any increase in knowledge in identifying, approaching and supporting a person experiencing mental health issues. Prior to doing so, they removed seven per cent of participants who had the highest possible score on levels of knowledge in identifying, approaching and supporting a person experiencing mental health issues at time 1 (4/61). Of the remaining 57 participants who reported some knowledge in identifying, approaching and supporting a person experiencing mental health

60% (33/55)
**demonstrated
an increase in
knowledge and
confidence to
seek help**

31%
**increase in
participants' levels
of knowledge and
confidence to seek
help**

issues at time 1, 58 per cent (33/57) demonstrated an increase in their knowledge in identifying, approaching and supporting a person experiencing mental health issues following the training.

Then, researchers calculated the average percentage of change for the individuals who reported any increases in their knowledge in identifying, approaching and supporting a person experiencing mental health issues following the training. They looked at the average change in knowledge in identifying, approaching and supporting a person experiencing mental health issues between time points for these individuals. On average, participants' levels of knowledge increased by 30 per cent following participation.

Lastly, researchers looked at the percentage of participants who were scoring high on their knowledge in identifying, approaching and supporting a person experiencing mental health issues pre- to post-program. Thirty-one per cent of participants had a high score at time 1 compared to 70 per cent at time 2.

Levels of confidence in identifying and responding to a person with thoughts of suicide

There was a significant difference in athletes' levels of confidence in identifying and responding to a person with thoughts of suicide between time points. Specifically, athletes felt more confident in identifying, approaching and supporting a person with thoughts of suicide post-participation compared to pre-participation.

Researchers looked at the percentage of participants who had any increase in confidence in identifying and responding to a person with thoughts of suicide. Prior to doing so, they removed nine per cent of participants who had the highest possible score on levels of confidence in identifying and responding to a person with thoughts of suicide at time 1 (6/65). Of the remaining 59 participants who reported some confidence in identifying and responding to a person with thoughts of suicide at time 1, 53 per cent (31/59) demonstrated an increase in their confidence in identifying and responding to a person with thoughts of suicide following the training.

Then, researchers calculated the average percentage of change for the individuals who reported any increases in their confidence in identifying and responding to a person with thoughts of suicide following the training. They looked at the average change in confidence in identifying and responding to a person with thoughts of suicide between time points for these individuals. On average, participants' levels of knowledge increased by 26 per cent following the training.

58% (33/57)
**demonstrated
an increase in
their knowledge
in identifying,
approaching
and supporting
a person
experiencing
mental health
issues following
the program**

30%
**increase in
participants' levels
of knowledge
in identifying,
approaching
and supporting
a person
experiencing
mental health
issues**

Lastly, researchers looked at the percentage of participants who were scoring high on their confidence in identifying and responding to a person with thoughts of suicide pre- to post-program. Thirty-five per cent of participants had a high score at time 1 compared to 60 per cent at time 2.

Levels of comfort in discussing mental health issues

There was a significant difference in how comfortable athletes' felt discussing mental health issues between time points. Specifically, athletes reported feeling more comfortable speaking about others' and their own mental health issues post-participation compared to pre-participation.

Researchers looked at the percentage of participants who had any increase in levels of comfort in discussing mental health issues. Prior to doing so, they removed two per cent of participants who had the highest possible score on levels of comfort in discussing mental health issues at time 1 (1/62). Of the remaining 61 participants who reported some levels of comfort in discussing mental health issues at time 1, 61 per cent (37/61) demonstrated an increase in their levels of comfort in discussing mental health issues following the training.

Then, researchers calculated the average percentage of change for the individuals who reported any increases in their levels of comfort in discussing mental health issues following the training. They looked at the average change in levels of comfort in discussing mental health issues between time points for these individuals. On average, participants' levels of comfort increased by 19 per cent following the training.

Lastly, researchers looked at the percentage of participants who were scoring high on their levels of comfort in discussing mental health issues pre- to post-program. Twenty-six per cent of participants had a high score at time 1 compared to 48 per cent at time 2.

61% (37/61)
**demonstrated an
increase in their
levels of comfort
in discussing
mental health
issues following
the program**



Photo credit: Michael Hall

Conclusion

In conclusion, the preliminary analysis of the 2021–22 data collected demonstrated very promising results regarding participant satisfaction and effectiveness of the program. As such, the inclusion of additional measures in the expanded version of the online questionnaire delivered at multiple-time points enhanced understanding of the impact of the Talk Today program. The present findings demonstrate the effectiveness of the program in reducing participants' levels of stigma, improving their confidence to seek help and improving their knowledge and confidence to support individuals with mental health issues or thoughts of suicide.

Overall, as a result of the synergy between the research team at McGill University and CMHA Ontario, a thorough evaluation of the Talk Today program has highlighted multiple strengths of this program and can help advance research and practice in mental health and sport.