



# Supporting athlete mental health

An evaluation of Talk Today

A program of the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario Division

---

“

THE TALK TODAY PROGRAM IS ONE OF THE FINEST THAT I HAVE EXPERIENCED IN REGARD TO ASSISTING AND EDUCATING US ON THE SIGNS OF A FRIEND OR TEAMMATE THAT MIGHT NEED HELP. I HIGHLY RECOMMEND THE TALK TODAY PROGRAM FOR ALL ATHLETES OF ALL AGE GROUPS.

”

- TEAM PRESIDENT, ONTARIO HOCKEY LEAGUE CLUB

“

MENTAL ILLNESS STRUGGLES ARE NOT A BAD THING. YOU SHOULDN'T BE EMBARRASSED BY IT. YOU KNOW, ANYONE CAN HAVE IT. YOU SHOULDN'T BE AFRAID TO TALK. I THINK THAT'S THE BIG THING I TOOK FROM IT.

”

- ONTARIO HOCKEY LEAGUE PLAYER

# Table of contents

---

**3** Introduction

**4** Talk Today program description

**6** Evaluation of Talk Today

**11** Conclusions

# Introduction

Talk Today is a comprehensive mental health program aimed at promoting and spreading awareness of mental health for young athletes. The program includes evidence-based mental health and suicide awareness workshops and, critically, fosters partnerships between participating sports organizations and local branches of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). In order to measure the effectiveness and impact of Talk Today, CMHA Ontario Division launched into a collaboration with Dr. Nancy Heath, Dr. Gordon Bloom and Jordan Lefebvre from McGill University's Faculty of Education to conduct a two-part evaluation of the program beginning in late 2018. This report is the result of quantitative and qualitative data that McGill's researchers collected from Talk Today players and staff in the Ontario Hockey League (OHL) who participated in the program. Specifically, results indicate:

- participant reactions to the program
- participant acquisition and application of knowledge gained from the program
- the benefits/outcomes related to program participation

CMHA Ontario would like to thank the OHL, its players and staff for participating in this evaluation. Having launched the program in

2014, the OHL is CMHA Ontario's inaugural partner in Talk Today and the success of the program would not be possible without the league's leadership and commitment to supporting the mental health of its players and staff.

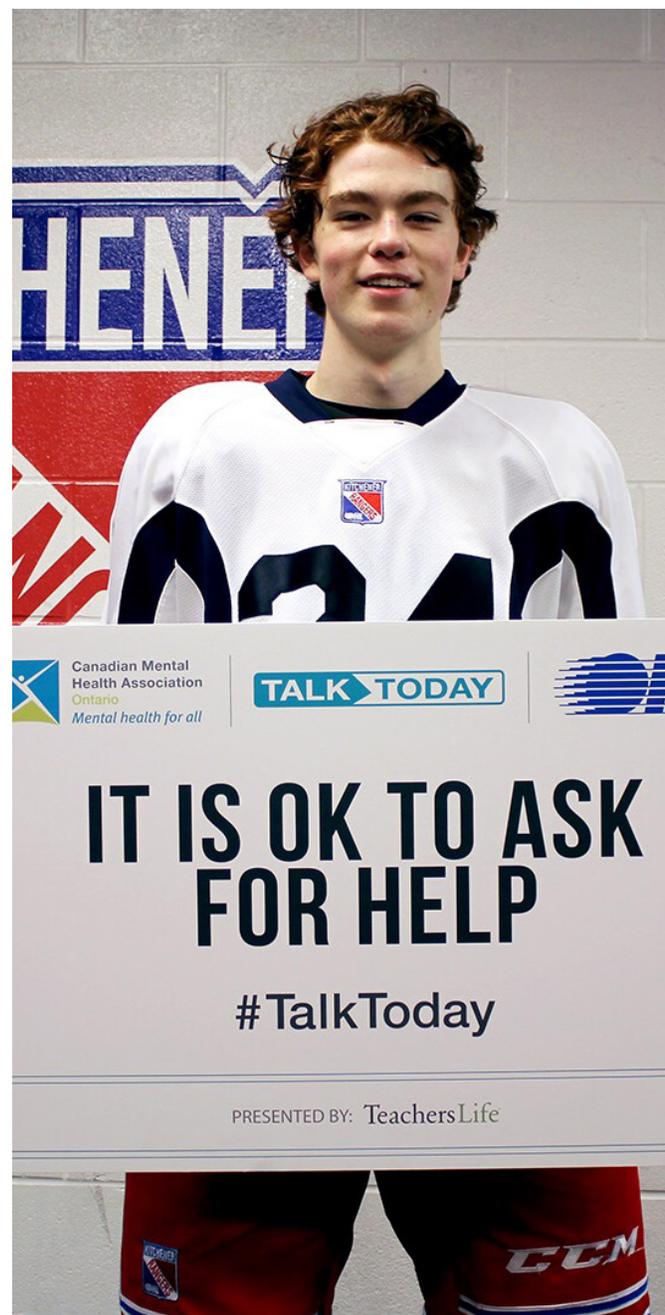


# Talk Today program description

Talk Today, designed by CMHA Ontario, is a comprehensive mental health program aimed at supporting the mental health of young athletes. Co-ordination of the program occurs at a provincial level, but the success of the program is attributable to the strong connections between CMHA branches and their sports partners.

CMHA branches across Ontario 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 connections to community-based mental health and addictions resources and services within their jurisdictions.

Delivery of Talk Today in Ontario, especially the evidence-based mental health and suicide-awareness workshops for athletes, would not be possible without the skilled facilitators from the 16 CMHA branches that partner with the OHL (more than 40 CMHA branches participate in Talk Today nationwide). CMHA staff, such as mental health educators, mental health promotion specialists, resiliency facilitators or other similar roles, are certified to deliver suicide-prevention workshops.



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

- 1. Mental health and suicide awareness training.** All players receive safeTALK training, a suicide alertness program that teaches individuals to recognize persons with thoughts of suicide and how to take action. This training is also made available to coaches, team staff and billets/parents. safeTALK is a fully-accredited program created by LivingWorks, a globally-recognized leader in suicide intervention training.
- 2. CMHA mental health coaches.** Each OHL team is paired with a designated CMHA mental health coach who is often the branch staff person that delivers the safeTALK training. As a direct connection to the team, the CMHA mental health coach is able to provide resources and support for the players and people that surround them should anyone struggle with their mental health.
- 3. Team mental health champions.** Each OHL team appoints a mental health champion to act as liaison between the team and their local CMHA branch. The mental health champion, who is also encouraged to take safeTALK, is often someone who has a close connection to the athletes (such as a trainer, physiotherapist, etc.) and is accessible to players if they feel they need to reach out about a mental health challenge.
- 4. Game day awareness events.** Every February, each team across the OHL hosts an annual Talk Today game day event to increase awareness about suicide prevention and promote mental health in their community. CMHA partners participate in the event which allows the partners to spread awareness about mental health resources available in the community.



# Evaluation of Talk Today

---

**Participants.** The participants were major junior hockey players from all 20 OHL teams (aged 16-20) and their support staff (coaches, team staff). In total, 105 participants completed online questionnaires and 12 participants completed qualitative interviews.

**Contextualizing the program: Athlete challenges.** During their time in junior hockey, athletes can encounter a number of challenges in both hockey and life that can strain their mental health. For instance, the participants reported a number of challenges related to the transition to junior hockey, pressure from parents and agents to perform, dealing with poor performances, being traded, strenuous coaching relationships, injuries and concussions, etc. Outside of hockey, athletes may be leaving home for the first time and living with a billet family, learning to be in the public spotlight or dealing with other personal matters such as relationships with partners or parent divorces. No athlete is immune to the challenges of hockey and life. Given the many challenges that are faced by athletes, it is imperative athletes are educated and prepared to face the realities of mental health.

The following section will examine (a) the participants' perceptions of the Talk Today program, (b) the acquisition and application of knowledge gained from the program, (c) the outcomes that can be attributed to participation in the program and (d) recommendations for the program.

## Key findings

### A. **Participants' perceptions of the program**

The participants unequivocally expressed the value and importance of participating in the program. For instance, "I think it's imperative in today's years. Mental health and awareness is one of the number one things that should be taken care of in junior hockey," said one staff member. Likewise, one player added: "This is really important. Especially nowadays with mental health skyrocketing, I think everyone should learn this. Especially young guys... and I think that [Talk Today] benefited us really well."

**Participant satisfaction.** The findings indicated athletes and staff reported high levels of satisfaction with Talk Today. That is, 78 per cent of athletes and 90 per cent of staff said they were

satisfied with the program. More specifically, on individual items of program satisfaction:

- 82 per cent of participants agreed the information presented in the program was relevant and met expectations
- 91 per cent of the participants agreed the presentations were informative and understandable
- 86 per cent of the participants agreed the program presented valuable strategies and techniques
- 82 per cent of the participants agreed the program was a valuable professional/personal development experience
- 83 per cent of the participants agreed the program is something they would recommend to other athletes
- 81 per cent of the participants agreed the program should be mandatory for all junior hockey players

Although it appears staff reported higher ratings of satisfaction compared to athletes, this difference was not statistically significant.

In support of these findings, the participants had many positive comments in regard to how, where and when the program was delivered. First, the participants felt the CMHA instructors were professional, personable and trustworthy. This was important to the athletes in case they needed to bring up a sensitive matter with one of them.

The instructors were also said to be effective at communicating the content. The participants highlighted their favourite aspect of the presentation was the interactive activities and role playing. Said one player: “I think it's just how everybody was interacting with each other and it wasn't just sit-back-and-listen, kind-of-get-lectured type of thing. It was ‘here's this certain way of doing it, now let's put that into practice and have some kind of real-life scenarios on when you might be able to use this.’ And yeah, I think that was pretty cool to be practicing firsthand and being able to see where we might be able to use them in the future.” The effective communication from instructors and interactivity of the workshop played a role in the level of engagement with the program and also helped athletes understand and remember information.

The participants also appreciated the athletes are in their own environment. Interestingly, when asked about the location of the program, the consensus across participants was the location didn't matter as long as it was a team experience. This was said to result in a team-building activity and some athletes felt that this shared experience made it easier to provide support later on.

The participants unanimously appreciated the program taking place in the early part of the season, if not right at the beginning to, “Get those skill sets in the back of your mind right away,” said one player. Interestingly, one participant felt it would also be important to have a refresher later on in the season because at the start they may not have experienced a great deal of adversity.

I THINK IT'S IMPERATIVE  
IN TODAY'S YEARS.  
MENTAL HEALTH AND  
AWARENESS IS ONE OF  
THE NUMBER ONE THINGS  
THAT SHOULD BE TAKEN  
CARE OF IN JUNIOR  
HOCKEY.

-OHL STAFF MEMBER

## B. Acquisition and application of knowledge

**Acquisition of knowledge.** The findings indicated participants felt the program helped them acquire knowledge on mental health. Specifically, 85 per cent of athletes and 87 per cent of staff indicated they learned “a medium amount” to “a lot” after attending the program. More specifically, according to the qualitative findings, the participants reported learning how to identify, approach and support someone who might be experiencing mental health issues.

Interestingly, there was a small minority of athletes (15 per cent) and staff (13 per cent) who indicated they learned a “small amount to nothing” after attending the program. However, some of this could be due to an existing familiarity with the subject matter, rather than an indictment of the program itself. In qualitative interviews, one player and one staff member who each indicated they hadn't learned “a lot” in the training said it was because they had previous knowledge of mental health issues through personal experiences.

**Application of knowledge.** The findings also indicated participating in the Talk Today program changed how participants responded to individuals with mental health issues. Interestingly, there was a significant difference between staff and athletes. Although both groups indicated changes in behaviour, staff reported a higher likelihood of changing their response in comparison to athletes. More specifically, 87 per cent of staff in comparison to 68 per cent of athletes indicated they are likely to have changed the way they behave in response to someone with a mental health issue. In fact, only two per cent of staff and six per cent of athletes indicated their behaviour did “not at all” change to “somewhat likely” to have changed. Not surprisingly, participants' likelihood of changing their behaviours was positively correlated to their satisfaction with the program. That is, the greater the participants' satisfaction with the program, the more likely they reported changing how they responded to those with mental health issues as a result of what they learned in the program.



“  
 THEY SEEMED LIKE  
 PERSONABLE PEOPLE  
 THAT YOU CAN TEXT OR  
 CALL WHENEVER YOU  
 HAD A MENTAL HEALTH  
 PROBLEM, THEY SEEMED  
 TRUSTWORTHY AND THEY  
 REALLY MADE AN EFFORT  
 AT THE START TO GAIN  
 OUR TRUST AND TO LET  
 US KNOW THAT THEY  
 UNDERSTAND AND THAT  
 THEY CAN HELP US.

-OHL PLAYER

Many participants described having a greater aptitude for providing emotional support following the program. For instance, according to one player: “[Talk Today] helped me when I’ve had to help someone who’s going through a tough time or when I was going through a tough time... all the self-talk that they teach you to try and help you when you’re down...have definitely helped.” In fact, two participants even described providing support for individuals with suicidal thoughts.

Alternatively, some participants experienced a few minor barriers in their attempts to apply the knowledge acquired from Talk Today. For instance, some participants described how some people can be closed off and may not actually want to talk.

### C. Program outcomes

Program outcomes were measured via two quantitative assessments of stigma: the Attribution Questionnaire and the Self-Stigma of Mental Illness Scale. The Attribution Questionnaire was designed to measure participants' perceptions of various mental illness stereotypes. The Self-Stigma of Mental Illness Scale measures stereotype awareness and stereotype agreement. Additionally, program outcomes were explored in more depth via participant interviews.

**Stigma.** The participants who were a part of the Talk Today program reported low levels of stigma towards persons with mental health issues.

First, both athletes and staff reported positive attribution towards individuals with mental health issues. More specifically:

- 82 per cent of participants reported they would not be scared of teammates with mental health issues
- 95 per cent of participants would not blame teammates with mental health issues
- 94 per cent of participants would not feel anger towards teammates with mental health issues
- 96 per cent of participants would not stay away from a teammate suffering from mental health issues
- 68 per cent of participants would help a teammate who is suffering from mental health issues to develop his hockey skills

Accordingly, the majority of participants reported experiencing low levels of stigma. One exception, however, is a tendency for



participants to feel pity towards individuals with mental health issues. Specifically, 42 per cent of participants reported high levels of pity towards teammates with mental health issues. Interestingly, there was a significant difference between athletes and staff for the individual items of pity and help with development. That is to say, athletes were more likely than staff to feel pity towards teammates who struggle with mental health. Furthermore, staff were more likely than athletes to help a teammate who is struggling with mental health to develop his hockey skills. Unsurprisingly, participants who were more satisfied with the program reported more positive attributions toward teammates with mental health issues.

Second, the findings indicated 77 per cent of participants do not feel that persons with mental illness are to blame, are unpredictable, will not recover, are dangerous or are unable to take care of themselves. Furthermore, participants who were more satisfied with the program also reported feeling less stigma towards individuals with mental illness. Additionally, participants who reported low levels of stigma towards individuals with mental illness also reported more positive attributions towards teammates with mental illness.

These findings are qualitatively substantiated, where participants directly expressed the importance of the program in relation to stigma. Specifically, learning about mental health helped the participants feel it was alright to struggle with mental health. Said one player: “Mental illness struggles are not a bad thing. You shouldn’t be embarrassed by it. You know, anyone can have it. You shouldn’t be afraid to talk. I think that’s the big thing I took from it.”

**Increased access to resources and external support.** The participants also described the program made them realize they are well supported and there are a number of resources accessible to them. During the program, there is a strong emphasis on ensuring participants are well-informed of the resources at their disposal. This recognition of support left some participants feeling a sense of reassurance. “If we’re ever struggling with something, you know that someone’s there, there’s people there for us. I think that was the key to it,” said one player.

“  
A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO SOMEONE WOULD BE LIKE ‘AH, MAYBE HE’S JUST HAVING A BAD DAY OR SOMETHING’...BUT I KIND OF LEARNED THAT YOU SHOULD GO UP AND TALK TO HIM AND SEE IF HE’S OK...HE MIGHT BE LIKE THAT EVERY DAY, BUT YOU JUST KIND OF SEE IT THAT DAY,...JUST TO GO UP TO TALK TO HIM. IT’S NOT GOING TO HURT YOU AT ALL, SO YOU MIGHT AS WELL.

-OHL PLAYER  
”

# Conclusions

---

Building on our combined expertise, the Faculty of Education at McGill and CMHA Ontario were able to successfully develop and implement the evaluation of a program designed to promote and spread awareness of mental health for young elite athletes. Specifically, the evaluation revealed the participants valued the program's mandate and content, and were highly satisfied with the delivery of the program. Furthermore, the evaluation suggests that participation in the program results in the acquisition and application of mental health knowledge, such as providing support to those who may be suffering from mental health issues. The evaluation also indicates that athletes and staff who have participated in the Talk Today program reported low levels of stigma towards individuals with mental health issues and also led to feelings of support and increased awareness. Overall, this report is a positive first step towards developing an intervention program that can assist young hockey players and other elite athletes dealing with various aspects of mental health.

IT IS OK TO ASK  
FOR HELP

#TalkToday



**Canadian Mental  
Health Association**  
Ontario



**McGill**

Faculty of  
Education

