

MIND Speaks Up: An online platform for youth mental health

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Abstract

Mental health disorders are common and stigmatized health issues that often present during youth. Although effective prevention and treatment strategies exist, an estimated two-thirds of individuals with mental illnesses do not seek help, and stigma has been identified as a significant barrier. We developed *MINDSpeaksUp.com*, a website designed both to be a local resource for mental health and to lower the barrier to seeking help by reducing stigma. The website hosts videos featuring members of the University of British Columbia community sharing stories of their personal struggles with mental health. It also includes a portrait project, written submissions, and a resources tab.

MIND Speaks Up: <http://mindspeaksup.com/>

Facebook: Mental Illness Network for Destigmatization – MIND

Twitter: @ubcmedmind

Instagram: mindexperiences

Introduction

Canadians have a 20% lifetime risk of mental illness, yet only one in three seek treatment.¹ Among Canadian youth, 10–20% are affected by mental illness, with suicide among the leading causes of death.^{2,3} These rates are even higher for university populations, with 30% of students experiencing depressive symptoms.^{4,5} Given that mentally ill children and youth are particularly vulnerable, there exists a strong imperative to focus on child and youth mental health.⁶

Although more Canadian youth are using mental health care services than in the past, many factors still limit access.⁷ Lack of a regular family physician results in increased use of acute services for mental health.⁸ Low availability and funding for cognitive therapy imposes barriers to treatment,⁹ and nearly a third of Canadians seeking mental health care report unmet needs.¹⁰

Another barrier to the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness is stigma.^{11,12} According to a 2008 Canadian Medical Association report,¹³ 42% of Canadians would no longer socialize with a friend with a mental illness, and 84% would be unlikely to enter a spousal relationship with someone with a mental illness. Given this, it is unsurprising that 50% of Canadians reported they would not tell others about a family member's mental illness.¹³

The Speaks Up initiative

Social media provides an avenue for community-building amongst youth. Internet video, in particular, allows for personal discourse between content producers and viewers that can challenge stigma through empowerment and hope.^{14–16} Therefore, we developed a website through the Mental Illness Network for Destigmatization (MIND), a student club that promotes mental health awareness.¹⁷ *MINDSpeaksUp.com* aims to address the stigma surrounding mental illness by highlighting personal mental health experiences. The website is inspired by *Harvard Speaks Up*,¹⁸ and campaigns such as “In One Voice”¹⁹ and “It Gets Better,”²⁰ which have generated discussion surrounding experiences with mental illness. The mission of the project is to show viewers that they are not alone, to empower them to

seek assistance, and to speak openly.

MINDSpeaksUp.com features members of the University of British Columbia (UBC) community—students, alumni, faculty, and staff—sharing stories about their experiences through videos, photos, text, and artwork. Initial submissions were gathered through personal invitations to individuals and were incorporated into a launch trailer to generate excitement. Video submissions are typically brief and conclude with the message “Speak Up, You’re Not Alone.” Contributors film videos on any device, upload to their personal YouTube channel, and then submit the link through a submission page on the site. This process allows the contributor to retain content ownership and the freedom to remove the submission.

Because video can be an intimidating medium, MIND introduced additional ways to join the conversation. Participants can “Take the Pledge,” which involves a photo submission holding a sign pledging to be a mental health advocate. “MIND Experiences” is an Instagram platform allowing anonymous submissions on mental health-related topics.²¹ “MIND Portraits” profiles members of the community and their responses to questions about wellbeing, particularly in relation to the medical profession. The diversity of modalities improves inclusivity and reduces barriers to contribution.

Primary outcomes are assessed through website analytics evaluating uptake and engagement. In the first year of launch, *MINDSpeaksUp.com* was accessed 566 times by 414 unique users. These statistics represent viewership following website launch, and do not include repeat visits by authors and members of the development team. Traffic increased by 720% in the month when portrait photography was introduced, suggesting a correlation between viewership and new content. Visitors to the site come from across Canada and even as far away as the United Kingdom.

Presently, our efforts have been aimed at curating additional content for *MINDSpeaksUp* across all modalities. While a formal relaunch has not yet happened, the authors have been involved in developing curricular sessions on stigma delivered to medical students annually. The *Speaks Up* initiative is introduced to students at these sessions, providing an avenue to engage with our target audience. The project has also been presented at various mental health conferences.

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MINDSpeaksUp ultimately aims to provide a safe platform to foster community and encourage discussions around the experience of mental illness. This initiative specifically provides UBC students with an approachable, interactive medium for learning about mental health, along with information about appropriate resources, thus reducing barriers and allowing for earlier interventions. Similarly, members of the broader community may also benefit. Through its online format, *MINDSpeaksUp* has the potential to reach and inspire students at other universities. In November 2017, students at the University of Ottawa School of Medicine launched *UOMed Speaks Up* and have begun sharing portraits and stories, with plans to expand to other avenues.²²

Considerations for implementing a Speaks Up initiative

Based on our experience developing *MINDSpeaksUp*, we suggest the following timeline for those interested in starting a similar platform in their community:

- 2 months for production of an introductory video and for securing sponsorship to fulfill technical needs, including website development and maintenance fees
- 2-4 months for website development, including user experience testing
- 1 week for website launch events
- Ongoing need to collect video, photo, and written submissions
- Ongoing need to update resources and ensure links are usable
- An annual relaunch event may be beneficial to maintain viewership

Please note, *MINDSpeaksUp.com* does not provide immediate support or crisis intervention. It does, however, provide contact information for emergency medical services and local resources.

Conclusion

As mental health emerges as a global issue, the medical community is well positioned to take a leadership role. The prevalence of mental disorders in youth makes this an essential population to impart change. Through discussions on mental health, medical student groups, such as ours, help the public understand that mental health issues are universal medical disorders that can, and should, be treated promptly. This can be as involved as pharmacological therapies or psychotherapy, but can also be as simple as sharing a story. “Speak Up, You’re Not Alone.”

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