



**DALHOUSIE
UNIVERSITY**

FACULTY OF MEDICINE

A Generation at Risk: Early Interventions in Youth Mental Health

The Need for Mental Health Research

Positive mental health is declining among Canadian youth. Even before the global COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people aged 18 to 34 who reported good mental health from 2015-2020 declined 55 percent more than the mental health of people in all age groups.

During the pandemic, social isolation increased depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, especially in youth 18 and under, who visited emergency departments across the country for mental health-related reasons in higher numbers than ever before.

Currently, more than 1.25 million youth in Canada need mental health support – the vast majority of whom, 720,000, are not getting it, according to Mental Health Research Canada, a national charitable organization that collects data about the state of mental health across the country.

The lack of publicly funded services to address mental health care, barriers due to clinician shortages, geographic barriers, and affordability all contribute to an on-going crisis in youth mental health care.

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Even more troubling, suicide is the second-leading cause of death among 15- to 34-year-olds in Canada, and disproportionately affects Indigenous youth. Inuit youth are up to 11 times more likely to die by suicide than non-Inuit youth. For First Nations' youth, the suicide rate is up to six times greater than that of non-First Nations young people.

Canada's growing shortage of affordable housing, high rates of youth substance use, and income inequality levels also contribute to worsening levels of mental wellness among youth.

This disturbing picture is what led Mental Health Research Canada to dub youth 16 to 24 a "Generation at Risk."

This crisis is particularly concerning because up to three-quarters of all mental health issues first show up in people under the age of 24.

The good news is that preventing or intervening early in young people's lives can provide them with treatment and coping strategies that can reduce their long-term mental health challenges.

Research that is informing treatment, as well as evidence-based policy solutions, like the creation of Canada's new 9-8-8 suicide line and the development of youth services hubs across the country, provide a vital foundation for solutions to improve mental wellness amongst Canadian youth.

At Dalhousie University, our researchers are at the forefront of providing evidence for new approaches, new treatments, and youth-informed policy solutions. Our research is helping to improve outcomes and shrink waiting times for those who require faster access and more equitable solutions to receive mental health care that meets their needs.





Dalhousie Solutions

Dalhousie researchers working in the field of youth mental health are improving diagnosis, treatment, and policy guidelines for young people in Atlantic Canada and beyond.

Their partnerships with youth who are at the centre of this work, their first-in-the-world trials of early interventions for depression, their pioneering studies of new ways to treat mental health and addictions, their innovative use of apps and other forms of technology, and their practical tools and guidance to help families coping with mental illness and at-risk behaviours make the Dalhousie team uniquely qualified to improve outcomes for children and youth.

Meet some of our researchers

Dr. Rudolf Uher is a Professor in the departments of Psychiatry, Community Health and Epidemiology, Psychology and Neuroscience, Medical Neuroscience, and Pathology.

His research focuses on intervening early with youth and those with a family history of mental illness, to prevent psychosis, and interrupt or reduce depression.

He examines the interaction between genomics and environment and is also investigating the ability of AI to analyze speech to better diagnose depression. He is currently conducting clinical trials involving youth, to improve treatment outcomes.



Dr. Sandra Meier is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and holds the Canada Research Chair in Developmental Psychopathology and Youth Mental Health. She also leads the PROSIT Lab.

Her research focuses on leveraging mobile technology to improve youth mental health care, with a strong emphasis on co-designing digital interventions with young people. She has developed several mental health apps, integrating mobile sensing and AI for early detection and tailored interventions.

Dr. Meier has secured significant research funding and published extensively on digital mental health and psychiatric genetics.

As a mentor, she strongly advocates for equitable and youth-centred research that informs academic, clinical, and public discussions.



Meet some of our researchers

Dr. Lori Wozney is an Assistant Professor in Psychiatry at Dalhousie and holds the Sun Life Chair in Youth Mental Health.

She is a transdisciplinary scientist focused on re-thinking approaches to mental health services through the systematic study of possible, probable, and preferable future models of mental health care.

Her collaborations span mental health, community health, emergency medicine, computer-science, and implementation science.

She leads large-scale local and nationally funded research initiatives with a focus on learning-health systems and health equity. Recently, she received the Robert Bortolussi Award for Research Mentorship at the IWK Health Centre.



Dr. Jill Chorney is a clinical psychologist and an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry.

Dr. Chorney's research interests are in the areas of shared decision-making, patient-provider interactions, and behaviour change.

She is one of the principal investigators on a \$7.5-million Focused Research Investment grant from Research Nova Scotia.

As Scientific Lead for the Mental Health and Addictions Program at IWK Health and Director of Research for the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Dr. Chorney is deeply committed to connecting research and care delivery to improve mental health outcomes for youth and those who support them.



Meet some of our researchers

Dr. Alexa Bagnell is a Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Chief of Psychiatry at the IWK Health Centre.

As a clinician researcher, she concentrates on anxiety disorders and child and adolescent mental health, early intervention, school mental health and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

She promotes earlier intervention for mental health disorders, with a focus on schools and web-based programs to improve health outcomes in youth.



Dr. Vincent Agyapong is a Professor and Head of Dalhousie's Department of Psychiatry, and Chief of Psychiatry for the Central Zone at Nova Scotia Health.

His research focuses on health innovations, such as delivering text-based interventions, which expand access to quality mental health care.

Text4Hope and his other text-based programs have more than 80,000 subscribers. He plans to study the effectiveness of this cognitive-behavioural-based approach for youth through Wellness4Students, and to correlate the prevalence of students' reported anxiety, depression, and PTSD with social determinants of health.



Dr. Sabina Abidi is a Professor in the Department of Psychiatry. She studies high-risk states for psychotic spectrum disorders in youth and has published guidelines for pharmacological treatment of schizophrenia in children/adolescents. Dr. Abidi is also interested in rationalizing approaches to complex cases of youth with psychotic spectrum disorders.



Meet some of our researchers

Dr. Leslie Anne Campbell is an Associate Professor in the departments of Psychiatry and Community Health and Epidemiology.

Her research revolves around health system decision-making in complex, resource-strained setting. She has introduced an electronic questionnaire to community health clinics so health-care professionals can track patient functioning in real time and is examining systemic ways to address the increasing emergency department visits by children and youth for mental health crises.



Dr. Penny Corkum is a professor in the departments of Psychology and Neuroscience, and Psychiatry. She conducts clinical research into ADHD as well as pediatric sleep and is particularly interested in the use of eHealth to deliver interventions.

One of her research goals is to intervene in pediatric sleep problems to reduce their negative impact on the development of the child (e.g., attention, learning, behaviour, social-emotional) and on family functioning.



Dr. Shannon Johnson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at Dalhousie, and Co-Director of Dalhousie Centre for Psychological Health. Her research focuses on understanding and improving well-being, resilience, and behaviour change in children, families, and undergraduate students.

She is particularly interested in the physical, mental, and cognitive benefits of connecting to nature, as well as the reasons people are disconnected from nature and the development of interventions to increase that connection.



Your invitation to transform lives

When we invest in the future of healthcare through medical research we are investing in the future well-being of our communities, our families, our friends, and ourselves.

Now, more than ever, when our youth are a “generation at risk” because of their struggles to maintain their mental health, we need our community of generous donors and strategic partners to support the innovative work our researchers, post-graduate students and trainees carry out at the Faculty of Medicine.

Investing in the next generation of researchers, cutting-edge training facilities, and transformational discoveries will ensure Dalhousie leads the way to a better future. If you would like to know more about how you can be part of the Faculty of Medicine’s extraordinary accomplishments, efforts, reach out today.

Join Us Today

For more information on how you can make a profound difference through philanthropic giving, please contact:

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