



heretohelp

Mental health and substance use
information you can trust



Canadian Mental
Health Association
British Columbia
Mental health for all

let's discuss

evaluating mental health and substance use information

info sheets 2014 www.heretohelp.bc.ca



With all of the information coming at us these days, it can be hard to filter out what is good information and what information isn't so good. This is especially true when it comes to information about mental health and substance use. If you've been looking online or in the media for information to help yourself or a loved one, you may be frustrated by some of the conflicting information you've found. With all of the information out there, how do you know what information you can trust?

Mental health and substance use information online

We use the Internet to look up almost everything these days, and health information is no different. The problem with the Internet, though, is that anyone can post anything they like. This means that the posting about depression you just read might be by someone who isn't qualified to talk about depression at all. There is also conflicting information available on the web. One website might say one thing about a substance use treatment and the next site you look at might say the opposite. When you or someone you

love is living with a mental disorder or substance use problem, the last thing you want to do is sort through bad information or worry that the information you do get is wrong.

Personal experiences online

Many people living with mental disorders or substance use problems share their stories online through websites, blogs, web forums or other social media. Our own site, HeretoHelp, provides them on our

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it's all in the numbers

Numbers, such as the number of people affected by a disorder or the number of people who experience side effects of a particular medication, can help you understand more about the story and about the risks and benefits. But some people use numbers and statistics to overemphasize information, underemphasize information, or just plain confuse you!

Keep in mind that:

- 10% is the same as 1 in 10, 10 in 100, or 100,000 in 1 million. A credible source will tell you what guidelines they used—for example, whether it's 10% of people in a study of 1,000 people or 10% of people in a study of 10 people
- The reverse is also true: if 1% of people are affected, it also means that 99% of people aren't affected
- When it comes to health, everyone has different risk factors because everyone's body and lifestyle is different. So some people may be more likely to experience a particular health problem than others. Numbers and statistics can give you a general idea of how big or small the problem is, but they can't tell you how the problem will affect you personally

Source: Dr. Kimberly M. Thompson, Harvard School of Public Health

home page. These stories can help inspire hope and connect you to others going through similar experiences. They are an incredibly powerful tool to help you feel less alone and see how others navigated the system and what their recovery journey was like. When you read these stories, it's important to remember that it's one person's experience—not everyone's experience. For example, a blogger may write that a particular treatment didn't work for them, but that doesn't mean the same treatment won't work for others.

Anyone can post almost anything online, so it's up to you to decide if a website, blog or post is good for you. Here are some key questions to ask:

- Is the fact that you're reading someone's personal experience clear from the start?
- Does the writer claim that their opinions or views are right and everyone else is wrong?
- Does the writer claim that their own experiences are scientific facts?
- Does the writer claim to have information that no else has? For example, do they claim to have found a "miracle cure?"
- Does the writer offer detailed medical advice, even though they aren't a doctor or other health professional?
- Is the writer using the site or blog to sell or endorse their own product?

Mental health and substance use information in the media

You can find news media online as well as in print and on TV and radio. But they're worth singling out to say a few things.

TV shows that include substance use like drinking or news stories about substance use may be full of mixed messages. For instance, you often see people using substances on TV or in movies, but then a news story might tell you that any substance use is harmful and dangerous. Or you might hear about an instant "miracle cure" for substance use problems, and then hear that no treatment ever works.

The problem is that a brief news story often can't explain the full story when it comes to mental disorders, substance use problems or recovery options. Space or airtime in the news is limited and very expensive, and major news stories are not always balanced and might be sensational and exciting. So a story may be entertaining, but it may not apply to all people in all cases. Major news stories may lead you to believe that harmful things are happening to a lot of people, when in reality they might be very rare.

News media can help you understand very complicated issues. But information around mental health or substance use that's too simple can also be misleading. For example, if new research finds a link between depression and bone loss, it's not unusual to see a headline that says,



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"Depression causes bone loss," even though that may not actually describe the link. Headline writers aren't as cautious as researchers when they state conclusions.

What should I look for when I'm looking for mental health or substance use information?

Here are some general things to look online and in the media:

- Where did the information come from? Is it based on research published in a journal, the writer's own research, an interview or a press release? If it's on a website, does the writer list their credentials?
- What website is it on? Websites that belong to governments, government-funded agencies, well-known health providers, universities or groups of medical professionals are generally the most reliable.
- Why are they providing the information? Are they trying to sell you something? Does the source have anything to gain from a media story?
- Can you tell the difference between advertisements and information? Web advertisements are common, but a credible website will clearly show ads differently than

information. Less credible websites may not, so advertisements may look like part of the information.

- Does the story seem to accurately describe the problem or the information?
- Does the story reflect both the possible harms and benefits? Does the story mention any alternatives?
- Does the story seem balanced? Does the story make it seem like a problem hurts (or helps) more people than it really does, or does it make something sound scarier than it really is? A balanced story generally gives real numbers.
- Does the story claim to know everything, or does it mention that we don't know everything about all the issues?
- Does the writer tell you where the information came from or who reviewed the information? Information on credible websites is usually reviewed by professionals—and it says so on the website. If the writer lists references, look at the kind of sources they used. Academic journals, which are reviewed by experts in the area of study, are generally the most reliable. News stories, magazine articles and articles from other websites may be less reliable.

- How new is the information? Look for a date. If it's more than a couple of years old, it may be outdated.
- Do they offer overly simple solutions for complicated problems? This is a huge warning sign. An example of this is claiming that vitamin D "cures" all types of depression.
- Does the story respect everyone? Does it encourage you to think, ask questions and make your own decisions?

What can I do about it?

If you're concerned about something you've heard, talk to your doctor or mental health care professional. If it's about medication, definitely talk to your doctor first. It may be dangerous to suddenly stop taking medication.

You can also:

- Get a second opinion from a trusted source for health information, like those listed in the 'Where do I go from here' section of this sheet.
- Look for more stories from different media sources like newspapers or news stations.
- Read many different personal experiences from different places, online and offline in books. This is one of the best ways to benefit from what they have to offer.

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where do I go from here?

In addition to talking with your doctor or mental health professional, here are a few good places to learn more:

BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information

You can find fact sheets on medications and different mental illnesses, workbooks, personal stories and resources at www.heretohelp.bc.ca. Learn more about who's behind the site on our About Us page.

HealthLinkBC

Call 811 or visit www.healthlinkbc.ca to access free, non-emergency health information for anyone in your family, including mental health information. Through 811, you can also speak to a registered nurse about symptoms you're worried about, or a pharmacist about medication questions.

Health Canada

Health Canada provides a lot of information on health, medications, news and research. Visit the Health Canada website is at www.hc-sc.gc.ca or call 1-800-O-CANADA (1-800-622-6232; available Monday – Friday from 8 am – 8pm). Health Canada operates a program called MedEffect Canada. Through MedEffect Canada, you can find up-to-date information on medication recalls and advisories, and report harmful side effects you've experienced. Visit MedEffect Canada at www.healthcanada.gc.ca/medeffect. To access MedEffect Canada in French (MedEffet Canada), visit www.santecanada.gc.ca/medeffet.

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health: Understanding Psychiatric Medications

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's Understanding Psychiatric Medications is a series of booklets that discuss antidepressants, mood stabilizers, antipsychotics and benzodiazepines. They're available for free at www.camh.net.

Public Health Agency of Canada

Visit www.publichealth.gc.ca for reliable information on mental illnesses and other chronic or infectious diseases.

Health on the Net Foundation

Health on the Net Foundation is an organization that is dedicated to the sharing of reliable health information and the proper use of health information. Visit www.hon.ch for more.

Media Smarts

Visit Media Smarts at www.mediasmarts.ca for resources and tips on digital and media literacy.

This fact sheet was written by the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division. The references for this fact sheet come from reputable government or academic sources and research studies. Please contact us if you would like the footnotes for this fact sheet. Fact sheets have been vetted by clinicians where appropriate.



BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information
HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addictions Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy Program at Family Services of the North Shore, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.