

MIND THE GAP

# Mental Health Disparities Between Women and Men

## In this report

This report focuses on biological sex assigned at birth (women and men). We recognize there are additional needs for those not included in this definition.



# Differences in mental health

Taking all mental disorders together, studies show that the **rates** of disorders between women and men are the same. Where the differences lie is in the **types** of mental disorders they experience.



## Women

Women are more likely to internalize emotions. This can lead to withdrawal, loneliness, generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder. As a result, women suffer from higher rates of depression and anxiety. We refer to these as internalizing disorders.

**Symptoms in women can be more obvious.** Women can show sadness – and a loss of energy, motivation and interest in life when depressed.



## Men

Men are more likely to externalize emotions. This can lead to aggressive, impulsive, coercive and noncompliant behaviour. It also leads to higher rates of substance use disorder than women. We refer to these as externalizing disorders.

**Symptoms in men can be hidden.** Men are more prone to anger attacks, irritability and overreaction. In fact, irritability by some measures is the strongest indicator of depression in men. Studies have also shown strong associations between alcohol misuse and depression. In many cases, alcohol consumption is a coping strategy for depression in men.

Health professionals diagnose women with depression more than men. But many studies question whether men actually experience less depression or if depression among men often just remains undetected. This could be due to the different symptoms of depression in women and men.

Women are also more likely to seek help, with more women accessing formal support than men. Men may be under-diagnosed because of their reluctance to get treatment and the different symptoms they present.



# The reasons behind the differences

When we look at the reasons behind these differences, research shows that it's part biology and part societal factors.



## Biological factors

From a biological perspective, differences in mental disorders among girls and boys start in adolescence. Girls become disproportionately impacted by mood and anxiety disorders compared to boys. And boys show a steeper spike in rule-breaking or risk-taking behaviours.

Timing in the development of two brain systems – the hippocampus and amygdala – may be partially responsible for this.

The hippocampus and amygdala play crucial roles in memory, emotion, and behaviour. But they grow at different rates in boys and girls. These different rates may be a contributing factor in the differences we see in boys and girls in adolescence.



## Societal factors

Biology isn't the whole story. There are many societal factors that influence the differences when it comes to mental health.

- **We still socialize men** to prioritize traits like strength, independence, emotional stoicism, and self-reliance. This can lead to externalizing behaviours like aggression, substance use or violence rather than addressing underlying mental health issues.
- **We still expect women** to be nurturing, emotionally expressive, and relationship-oriented. These contribute to a social pressure to "do it all." Balancing things like caregiving, work and personal responsibilities can contribute to stress and mental health challenges.

# Facts and trends

We can clearly see the differences in mental health reflected in official diagnosis categories in Canada.



## Mood and anxiety disorders

Women have higher rates of mood and anxiety disorders than men, and by a substantial margin. This is especially true in younger age groups.

The greatest increases in each category over the past 10 years are in young women. The rate of generalized anxiety disorder among young women tripled from 3.8% in 2012 to 11.9% in 2022.

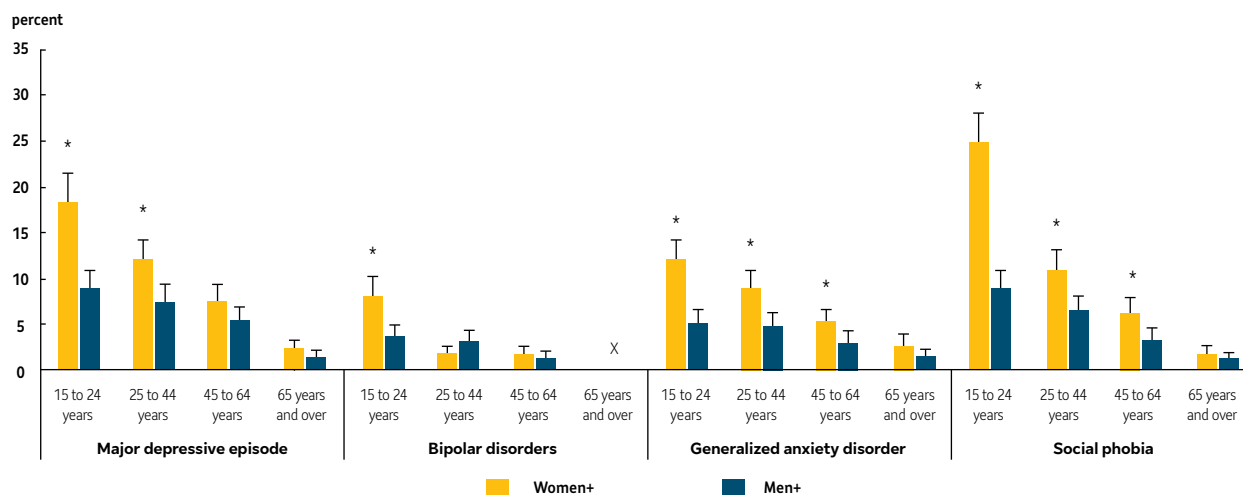
Similarly, major depressive episode rates doubled for young women, from 9.0% in 2012 to 18.4% in 2022. The prevalence of a manic, hypomanic, or depressive episode among young women with a history of bipolar disorders also increased from 2.3% in 2012 to 8.1% in 2022.

Finally, we only have social phobia statistics from 2002 (not 2012). Social phobia rates were four times higher for young women over the past 20 years, from 6.1% to 24.7%.

There could be many reasons – certainly the pandemic, but also the impacts of greater social media use. Research has shown these to be contributing factors. We also know that there has been an increase in general awareness of mental health overall. This in itself could lead to higher rates of people seeking treatment.



12-month prevalence of selected mood and anxiety disorders, by age and gender, 2022



\*significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between men and women in the same age group

Source: Statistics Canada, Mental Health and Access to Care Survey, 2022

# Facts and trends

We can clearly see the differences in mental health reflected in official diagnosis categories in Canada.



## Substance use disorders

For externalized disorders like substance use, we see a couple of stories emerge. The first is a confirmation of the research we discussed earlier. It shows that men have higher rates of substance use disorder than women. We see these higher rates across all age groups.

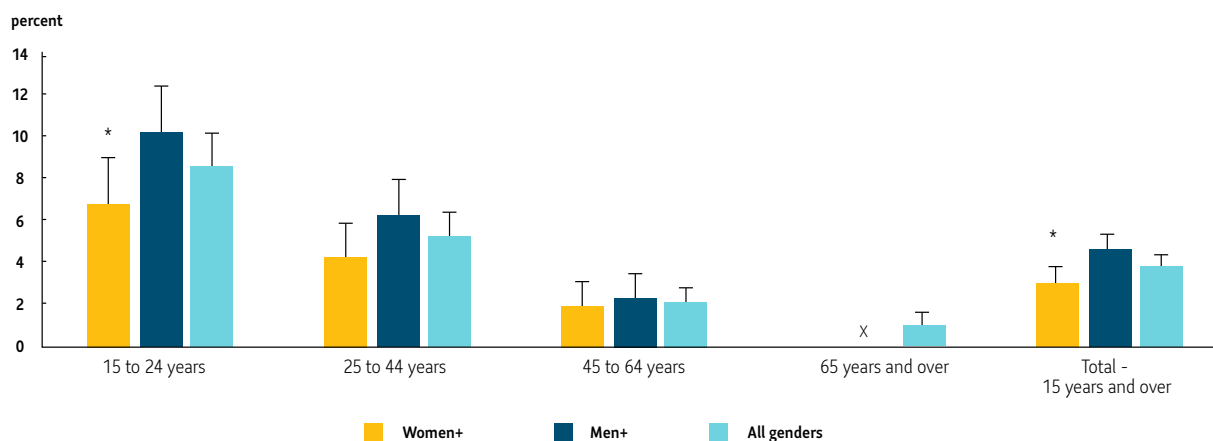
Second, in contrast to internalized disorders, the rate of substance use disorders did not increase from 2012 to 2022. In fact, among young men, it decreased substantially. The alcohol disorder rate for men aged 15 to 24 decreased from 10.7% in 2012 to 4.8% in 2022. And for all Canadians aged 15 years and older, alcohol use disorders decreased from 3.2% to 2.2%.

Cannabis use disorders remained stable at 1.4% in 2022, versus 1.3% in 2012. The rate of other substance use disorders was also stable, decreasing from 0.7% in 2012 to 0.5% in 2022.

We will see if the decrease in alcohol abuse disorder in young men translates into an overall lower mental disorder rate for men. If alcohol abuse disorder is a coping method for some with depression or anxiety, and fewer men are turning to alcohol, we may see higher rates of diagnosed depression among men.



12-month prevalence of substance use disorders, by age and gender, 2022



\*significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between men and women in the same age group

Source: Statistics Canada, Mental Health and Access to Care Survey, 2022

# What employees can do: lifestyle factors that can boost mental health

There are several actions that employees can take on their own to maintain good mental health. Here are four that are foundational and supported in multiple studies for their effectiveness. You may want to encourage these among your employee base, either formally or informally.



## Being physically active.

Physical activity and exercise play a key role in supporting physical health. There's also strong research showing that exercise can significantly improve mental health.



## Maintaining a healthy diet.

Research increasingly shows that diet plays a significant role in the prevention, management, or even improvement of psychiatric disorders. A diet high in sugar and ultra-processed foods can lead to mental disorders like major depressive disorder. Conversely, diets rich in whole foods like fruits, vegetables, legumes, and fish can have a protective effect.



## Getting enough sleep.

Sleep deprivation can lead to increased irritability, mood swings, and difficulty in regulating emotions. It can also exacerbate symptoms of mental disorders such as depression and anxiety. Conversely, consistent, quality sleep can enhance mood, reduce stress levels, and improve our ability to cope with daily challenges.



## Maintaining social connections.

We know from many studies that our relationships, or lack of relationships, can impact both mental and physical health. Having rich relationships is associated with enhanced happiness and quality of life. It can also reduce physical health risks and mental health conditions like depression and anxiety.



# What employers can do

Improving employee mental health is a worthy goal for almost any organization. Mental health continues to be the leading cause of disability among employers of all sizes. And many employees struggle with mental health issues – such as anxiety and depression – while still at work. This can impact productivity, workplace morale and even workplace safety.

A great beginning is our free online resource, the [mental health strategy toolkit](#). We built the toolkit based on our own organizational health consulting best practices. It can ensure you're addressing your organization's unique needs – and approaching mental health improvements using best practices.

Here's a quick overview of the pieces that you might “mix and match” as part of your strategy.



## Engage managers in mental health training.

People managers are usually the first human line of support when mental health issues arise. There are many programs available to train managers on mental health awareness and actions to support employees.

A great foundation for increasing mental health skills and awareness for managers is our [free online training video series](#). These can help managers identify potential mental health issues, communicate effectively, and reduce the stigma associated with mental health.



## Increase mental health treatment coverage plan maximums.

Many group benefits plans have annual maximums for mental health that are far below what's needed for successful treatment. By eliminating the financial barrier to treatment, you can help employees pursue a full and successful treatment program.



## Communicate existing supports.

If you have a group benefits plan and an Employee Assistance Program, you already have valuable supports in place. But the old saying “out of sight, out of mind” applies here. So, provide employee orientation and ongoing education about the role of your EAP and other confidential mental health resources.

Depending on the breakdown of your workforce, you may also want to include some targeted outreach. For women, you can help by encouraging support groups to discuss work-life balance and other stressors.

If you have a male-dominated workforce, promoting resources for issues like substance use disorders can reduce stigma and encourage employees to seek support. You can also encourage men to discuss stress and mental health, to try to break the stigma. The Centre for Suicide Prevention's Buddy Up program has great resources to help you get started.



# Sun Life solutions

There are some additional Sun Life-specific in-plan solutions that can help with mental health.



## The Mental Health Coach.

The **Mental Health Coach** takes a personalized and proactive approach to mental health. The program uses data analytics to engage employees who are the most at-risk of mental health-related absences. It then prompts them to access care before their symptoms worsen.



## Integrated, holistic virtual care.

We offer our **Lumino Health Virtual Care** suite of services, provided by Dialogue. With one app, employees can access virtual primary care, EAP and the Stress Management and Well-Being program (SM&WB). This means that health professionals can treat employee health, both mental and physical, holistically.



## Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) support.

CBT can be an effective therapy for many mental health concerns. Mental health professionals are generally the ones who provide CBT, but internet-based CBT has also proven to be effective. Our Sun Life EAP includes short-term sessions for mental health concerns, plus online CBT available at any time.

By recognizing the unique challenges faced by both women and men, employers can tailor their mental health strategies to better meet the needs of all employees. This approach not only benefits individual workers but also contributes to a more productive, engaged, and resilient workforce. As we continue to evolve our understanding of mental health, it's essential to remain adaptable and open to new insights and solutions. By prioritizing mental health and implementing targeted strategies, organizations can foster a workplace culture that truly supports the well-being of every employee.

## We can help

Talk to your Sun Life representative about solutions and coverages that can help support mental health in your workplace.

Life's brighter under the sun

Group Benefits are provided by Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada, a member of the Sun Life group of companies. MH1177 07-25 ad-cd

