



**cornwall, ontario - march 11-15 mars 2005**

# table of contents

1 : the process

2 : barriers to physical  
health

3 : solutions to physical  
health barriers

4 : mental health barriers

5 : solutions to  
mental health barriers

6 : links

# 1 : the process

Go Mental, Get Physical 2005 concludes a series of three conferences focusing on mental and physical health. The subject was chosen by youth from across the country in an old fashioned vote on the web. As youth developed workshops and other tools to take back into their communities, recommendations for youth, community and government began to take form. "GMGP" 2005 was designed to bring these recommendations to light.

Young people from Newfoundland, Labrador, all the way to British Columbia arrived at the NavCanada centre in Cornwall on March 11 - 15 for a weekend of learning, sharing and fun. The diverse gathering of Canadian youth presented many varied opinions, and many unique challenges. Bringing together french, english and american sign language was particularly challenging, yet also extremely rewarding. When they arrived, they met their group and team leaders and had the opportunity to connect with every member through engaging icebreakers, ensuring that every participant understood that they are an integral part of the conference community. Opening ceremonies, like all parts of the program, was led by youth and the whole group committed to the four pillars that underlie the process: Respect, Listen, Understand and Communicate.

Courageous youth shared their experiences about health on panels during the plenary sessions. Their stories inspired and set the context for the rest of the participants to have in-depth discussions about the days' topics. But discussion was not the only way that the delegates would learn and network with others from across Canada; freetime for physical and creative activities, and opportunities to share ideas in a social setting is key to ensuring that there were opportunities for informal learning.

Continuing into the evening, production sessions to develop and deliver creative presentations of their day's work engaged the more hands-on participants and raised the level of energy for the *Nightly News*.



This report sums up a weekend of very hard work and very interesting and eye-opening discussion. We hope that this report will help everyone that reads it gain more of an understanding of the issues that young people face, but in addition also deliver some idea of what young people need to be healthy members of society.





**“Do it for yourself, not for your parents!”**

**"I take some things for granted, I have access to sports complexes and**

**I don't even use them!"**

**"I learned a lot about different types of physical health"**

**"I feel cautioned, drug abuse can cause more than mental health problems, it can cause real bad physical problems too."**

**"I will be positive and active!"  
".. I may change the world.. perhaps. (no lies)"**



**"Everybody needs motivation to keep fit and healthy."**

**"I learned so much about things that affect other people, things I never knew existed."**

## 2 : barriers to physical health

**Physical health defined:** physical education, eating/sleeping/drinking water, fitness, energy, working out, physical balance, fun, friendly, wellbeing, friends, physical environment (e.g. fresh oxygen), sports, making healthy decisions, puberty, insomnia, illnesses, and life experience all help to give meaning to the broad term "physical health".

**Financial support** seemed to be the strongest factor preventing good physical health amongst young Canadians. Concern regarding the lack of funds available at a community level to promote physical health through organized sport and sport facilities seemed to be at the top of every group's list.

It was also regularly stated that without organized programs in place that promote youth involvement (particularly in the area of sport), **young people were turning to substance abuse** to entertain themselves.

The dangers of **drug and alcohol abuse** were really brought home when a participant shared with the entire group his past experiences that involved addiction to drugs and alcohol. He shared with us his story of ongoing, permanent health issues that were caused by substance abuse, and also speculated that had he been involved in something as a young person he may have been better able to avoid the pitfalls of drug and alcohol abuse.

**chronic illness/sickness** **easy access to fast food technology:**  
**convenience that leads to laziness (e.g. driving instead of walking)** **poor sexual health (e.g. unplanned pregnancies, STIs)** **time**

Another common theme between groups was **lack of time**. With so many pressures to deal with, the average young person really cannot find the time to enjoy physical activity.

In addition to all of these, there seemed to be the message that the fear of "not being good" at sports prevented many from participating. Many young people seem to be afraid to make attempts to join teams or play organized sport because of the **very demanding pressures to compete to win**. These pressures, coupled with many other high-stress areas of life, often out-weighed the benefits of sport for these young people.

# 3 : solutions to physical health barriers

We have grouped the recommendations into the following categories:

- Getting together (How youth can help themselves)
- Funding
- Sports
- Education / Awareness
- Resources

Youth, through their input, are calling on all levels of government, local community organizations, and each other to help bring about lasting change that will affect all communities in need. These quotes from youth in breakout team 3 and 4 say it all:

*“We are the future and we want it to be a positive future”*

*“You hang with positive people you’ll live a positive lifestyle”*

## **Getting Together**

*For youth:*

Make connections with the positive youth leaders in your community. Talking to someone who will listen and understand is one of the easiest and best ways maintain a health lifestyle physical and mentally. “Stress can be good if you can learn to handle it”



## **Funding**

*For local community organizations:*

It was suggested that community mobilization at a grassroots level is the most effective (and often only) way to generate enough interest to generate funds for particular programs.

*For youth and local community organizations:*

Letter writing and petitioning of local, provincial and federal levels of government, fundraising activities inside the community and reaching out to surrounding

communities are all seen as ways to help generate the money needed to have sport programs.



*For the government:*

The government should be concentrating on youth health as the most important issue for all Canadians by providing money for healthy food, and for school sports.

**Sports**

*For youth:*

Engage in sports activities to keep your physical health at its best. Staying active is one of the best ways to stay out of trouble with drugs, the law and in school.

*For local organizations and government:*

Create more sport programs in the smaller communities especially for girls to get involved in that won't be a financial strain on youth and their families. Even after sports programs are established there are continued issues facing young people. Often times the level of pressure from coaches, peers and family members on a young person participating in organized sport is enough to cause them to not want to participate. Mandatory education programs for coaches of "little league" sports programs was seen as a necessity. Similar programs are mandatory at higher levels of coaching and it seems that some programs need to be focused to youth at a younger age. It was also suggested that educational campaigns could be used to reach parents of younger children to alert them to the dangers of encouraging unhealthy levels of competitiveness and pressure to win. "Do it for yourself, not for your parents!"

**Awareness/ Education**

*For youth:*

The main recommendations to overcome/prevent addictions center around getting more involved in activities and finding pass-times that are meaningful to you. Media portrays sexual health issues in both a negative



and positive way, but instead of conforming to media images, youth should rely on experiential knowledge about what feels right for them and make healthy decisions. Trust is a major component of sexual health in a relationship.

*For the government:*

Early education (within elementary schools) is very important because kids experiment with drugs when they are very young and can become addicted very easily.

## **Resources**

*To the government and local community organizations:*

Resources like shelters, recreation centers and detox centers designed for youth with youth friendly staff were needed most.



*For youth:*

Take advantage of programs offered in your community, they are provided as a way out for when youth feel bored after school, evenings and on weekends. The kid's help phone has many connections to programs in your community.

Mediation services are also there to provide support to youth who get caught up in some of the traps out

there in their communities. Getting in trouble isn't the end of your world there are people who run programs that are willing to help

# 4 : mental health barriers

The mental health plenary session helped to get people thinking about mental health before returning to small groups to discuss it further. The overall impression of the plenary was positive, people enjoyed hearing about the varied experience of others. The differences between rural and urban communities were easily identified, and the group eventually worked out that some common themes were similar. While the specific issues may be different, some of the root causes of similar problems being faced were very similar. A lack of support from the adult community was a common theme, and the general idea that there would be no support from the adults in communities as well as no financial support. That leads to many young people turning to activities that may be



harming them such as drug and alcohol abuse. Some young people have developed initiatives in their own communities to help combat the boredom that seems to be running rampant. These youth-run programs, while sometimes finding short-term success, have real sustainability issues. Without support from adults in communities, it is extremely hard to offer programs for other young people.

From discussion the participants identified many mental health issues, and noted that some were very closely related. "Main issues" started to emerge. The group had a very hard time distinguishing between products of poor mental health (substance abuse) and causes of poor mental health (depression and stress), much effort was made by the facilitators to help the group work through this and discover the differences.

**Drug and alcohol abuse.** It was decided that this was both a contributing factor, as well as a result of, bad mental health, and often caused a vicious cycle of self-abuse to occur.

**accessibility, easy to acquire.** the feeling of belonging and that meant partaking in drugs and alcohol use. **drugs in schools** **negative family**

**situation abuse** peer pressure **"if your friends are doing it, then you'll be doing it"** social environment **"if you surround yourself with peers living a positive lifestyle then you'll live a positive lifestyle or vice versa."**



**Self-esteem/self worth issues.** A lack of self-esteem was seen as a catalyst to more severe mental health issues. Some causes of this lack of esteem include: racism, bad home life, feelings of isolation.

*Some other contributing factors to poor mental health are:*

**Depression Negative personal image Negative pop culture role models Frustration Tension Pressure Taking on others stress academic stress prioritizing and time management exclusion and status bullying**

“I will do my best to take back everything I learned here back to my community and try to put it in to effect.”

“Depression is a gateway to drugs”

“umm... What are things that contribute to bad mental health and what are solutions to put it (mental health) back in balance.”



“How stress can occur and that addictions could lead to suicide, depression, leaving home and choosing wrong paths in life.”

# 5 : solutions to mental health barriers

The afternoon began with a plenary session that showcased that youth are doing good things - that young people all over Canada, in diverse communities, are working towards the common goal of promoting youth mental health.

Two young men involved with Saskatoon's Youth Launch program, a core partner of the Students Commission, spoke about their successes in working with and for youth to support their holistic health. He works with adults and youth, through mentorship programs (e.g. Stay in school), and support groups, such as one for young mothers in school. Of the graduates from Nutana, the community high school that houses Youth Launch, there have been almost one hundred young mothers that have successfully earned their diploma.



Youth are working towards change

“Every person you interact with, you take a part of them with you”

“We could double the good of this if we double the people”

Farris, a young woman from Clearwater River in northern Saskatchewan, shared her experience living on a reserve “way in the bush” where they have a role model program pairing older and younger youth, and hold youth nights at the school gym to give youth something to do in the evenings.

Jennifer works in a community centre in Winnipeg with girls that are/were gang-involved. They deliver workshops about issues important to and effective for them (e.g. sexual health, relationships, staying in school, positive role modeling) and rewarding field trips (e.g. getting nails done, skiing,



shopping sprees). Jennifer used to hang out with gangs and now as a youth worker, the other girls can make a connection with her. For her, “helping them is helping me basically”.

Maggie shared her experience working with a youth advisory council in Vancouver and her Aboriginal community where there are not a lot of services for them. She recently wrote her first proposal and has received

funding to bring youth from her community to Brandon MB to witness a Sundance and help them connect to culture. “The Aboriginal community is weak, I want it to be strong again”

Q. What are your next steps? “Just being heard, **this** is our next step”

“Our voices are important, we are the youth and we know what we want”

Q. What initiated your engagement?

“Reality. You don’t want to see it so you do something to change it.”

“Little kids [in my community], they all knew who I was, they needed something to do”

“I saw friends do drugs and drink and didn’t want to follow their path. Instead I wanted to help and support them”

Inspired by the panel’s successes and momentum, the teams created solutions and recommendations to address the barriers to mental health that they had identified.

*For Youth:*

Find a trustworthy friend, family member, health professional or youth worker to talk to and share your concerns. Engage in open discussions about mental health to reduce isolation, loneliness and stigma. Try new activities and get involved in your community. Be a mentor and positive role model to other youth that have similar experiences and try to engage others. Become youth workers or train staff to become youth-friendly. Become involved with your family from a basis of mutual respect.



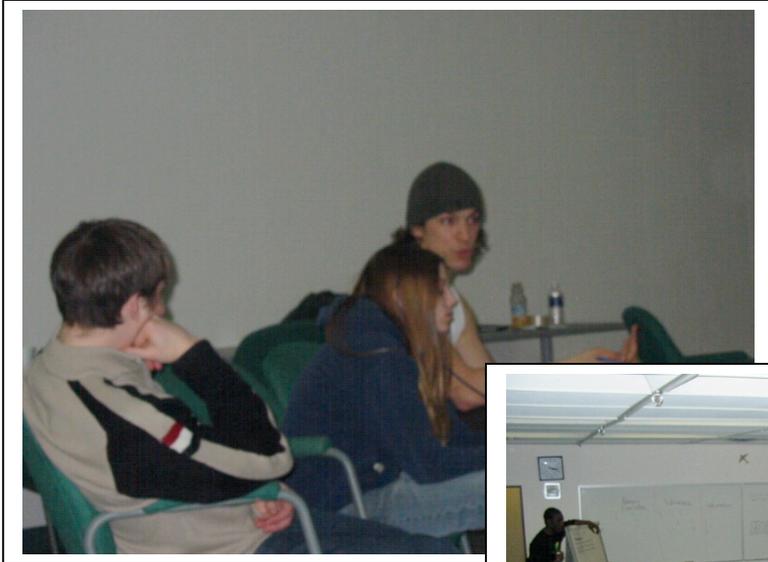
*For Community Organizations:*

Create opportunities for youth to express themselves and talk about mental health issues through youth conferences (specifically targeting low-resource regions). Work with youth to develop programs for alternative ways to heal (e.g. through music and art) and offer diverse and appropriate community programs for youth. Work with partners in program/resource provision. Provide supportive programs for bullies, such as opportunities for them to be positive leaders. Hold sharing circles (an open and safe environment that makes professional and peer support more accessible and also removes some of the stigma of mental health issues amongst young people) involving youth, and community members.

*For Government:*

Increase funding for youth programs and support for-youth-by-youth services. Support youth to train staff at shelters, recreation and detox centres to make their programs more youth-friendly. Partner with youth and NGOs to develop

and deliver programs. Increase visibility of national youth organizations in Aboriginal communities by providing funding for visits to northern and remote Aboriginal communities to create personal trust and allow youth from these communities to benefit from existing programs.



# 6 : links

The links between mental and physical health are very strong. It is very difficult, in fact, to separate the two. Often times we don't feel "good" but it is difficult to tell which solution to apply to a particular problem.

For example, substance abuse was identified many times as both a cause and effect of physical and mental health. Young people are abusing substances because they do not have access to the programs that would provide them with physical outlets, they're also abusing substances because they have poor mental health. Self-esteem, peer pressure and a lack of support from the "adult community" were also shared between mental and physical health.

Attempting to fight a symptom will not work. All stakeholders - communities, government, youth themselves - must work together to develop holistic approaches to youth health. It is really the most effective way to keep young Canadians healthy.

