



## EVALUATING INFORMATION on mental health and substance use

With all of the information out there, how do you know what information you can trust?

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

Anyone can post anything online. It's up to the readers to think critically about information to decide if it seems helpful, truthful, or safe. Here are key points to keep in mind as you determine which information is worth considering and which information doesn't pass the test.

- **Find the original source of the information, if you can.** It's so easy to spread information online, and we can't assume that the source we're reading or watching is the original source. Before you can evaluate anything, you need to know where the claims come from and determine if it's a reliable source.
- **Read the entire story or post before you make any decisions.** Headlines and titles need to be simple and short, so they can sometimes be misleading on their own. They may also be purposefully shocking or controversial to entice you to click to read more.
- **Look at the author.** Websites that belong to governments, government-funded agencies, well-known health providers, universities, or groups of medical professionals are generally the most reliable. Be careful of sites that don't



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## PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Many people living with mental illnesses or substance use problems share their stories through websites, blogs, videos, books, magazines and social media channels. Our own site, HeretoHelp, highlights personal stories. These stories can help inspire hope and connect you to others going through similar experiences as well as share information and resources. When you read these stories, it's important to remember that it's one person's experience, not everyone's experience. For example, one person can say that a particular treatment didn't work for them, but that doesn't mean the same treatment won't work for others.

Here are some key questions to ask yourself:

- Is the fact that it is 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?
- Does the writer encourage risky actions like suddenly stopping medication or other treatment without a doctor's supervision?
- What does the writer have to gain by sharing their story? Are they trying to sell their product or someone else's product?

list the author or don't tell you much about themselves. Double-check the author and the credentials of any 'experts' quoted or cited to see if they are actually experts in the topic being discussed.

- **Look at the date.** How new is the information? If it's more than a few years old or doesn't have a date, it may be outdated.
- **See what other sources say.** Can you find other evidence from other sources to support the claims? Does the author list their sources—and are the sources legitimate, like research journals?
- **Look at the evidence.** 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 quality story generally gives real numbers.
- **Beware of overly simple claims.** Mental health and substance use are not simple topics or health issues. Check if a website often uses very strong language like "everyone," "always," "never" or that something "will" happen or definitely "causes" something. Most health researchers use cautious and realistic language like "many," "some," "increases/lowers risk," or describe that something "may" happen more or less often. Uncertainty is not a bad thing. Those who are most likely to share good information are the most likely to be clear about what they don't know.
- **Be mindful of emotions.** Unhelpful sources want you to feel a certain way: scared, angry, distrustful, vulnerable. Helpful news or information sources want you feel informed and empowered.
- **Opinions belong in opinion pieces.** There's nothing wrong with opinion-based articles or posts—they can be a good way to think about different sides of an issue. However, helpful sources identify opinion pieces as opinion pieces. Be wary when it seems like opinions are being used as facts or news.
- **Ask yourself who benefits from sharing the information.** Who is paying for the site? What products or services are being advertised? What links or other sites do they promote? Are you learning something from a story or experience, or are you simply being directed to buy a product or service?
- **Information should be respectful.** If a site, account, or story uses negative stereotypes or hurtful language to talk about people who may be experiencing mental health or substance use problems, it may not be a reliable source of information.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can be a great way to connect with others and seek different perspectives or experiences. Social media also helps people connect with health experts and find information about accessing quality resources.

Like any other source of information, it's important to use good critical thinking skills when you use social media. Studies find that searching for health information on social media generally has very mixed results. You'll see both very poor-quality sources next to good-quality sources, and it's up to you to decide which is which. In addition, social media posts tend to be short and rarely capture everything you need to consider. They are generally useful as a way to start learning or exploring different points of view rather than a place to gather all information.

It's important to be aware that there is evidence that looking for health information on social networks can result in being exposed to fewer points of view. Different platforms use "filter bubbles" that show you more of what they think you're interested in seeing rather than a true cross-section of posts from other media. Filter bubbles are a problem because they validate the biases or assumptions that we already have—whether those biases or assumptions are based on real evidence or not. It's just as important to be as diligent in thinking critically about statements we agree with as it is to think critically about statements we disagree with.

In some cases, the distinction between information and advertising may be blurred. Many companies pay or offer



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other incentives to people with large social media followings to talk about certain products or share reviews. This doesn't necessarily mean that you should ignore all sponsored (also called "promoted" or "boosted") content, but it does mean that you should view any claims or statements about the product or service with the same critical eye as you would any other advertisement. Responsible social media users identify sponsored posts or ads as such.

If you use social media to connect with others and find support, it's important to think about privacy. No social media channels are truly private, so it's important that individual users understand that posts made to one group or individual may be shared with others outside the group without their consent or even their knowledge.

## MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE INFORMATION IN THE MEDIA

News stories and other media pieces often can't explain the full story when it comes to mental illnesses, substance use problems or recovery options. Space or airtime may be limited, and news stories might opt first for excitement over balance.

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, a story about a link between depression and bone loss may simply be reported as, "Depression causes bone loss." People who write or present news stories aren't as cautious as researchers when they state conclusions.

No news story is completely unbiased, and no news story can be so detailed that the journalist or organization can discuss all sides or major topics. When you read or hear news media, ask yourself the earlier questions to help you think critically about the story you've read or heard.

## 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 you have concerns or questions about a medication or treatment you currently use, definitely talk to your doctor before you make any changes or stop treatment. Be aware that supplements and other health products or treatments can change the way medications work, so talk to your doctor or a pharmacist before you start taking something new.

If you need help looking for information, talk to a librarian at your local library. They can help you identify trustworthy sources and access quality information.

## 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 Substance Use Information**

You can find info sheets on medications and different mental illnesses and substances, workbooks, personal stories and resources at [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://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](http://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 at [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca) or call 1-800-O-CANADA (1-800-622-6232). The phone service is available Monday to Friday from 8 am to 5 pm local time.

### **Public Health Agency of Canada**

Visit [www.publichealth.gc.ca](http://www.publichealth.gc.ca) for reliable information on mental illnesses and other health problems.

### **MediaSmarts**

Visit MediaSmarts at [www.mediasmarts.ca](http://www.mediasmarts.ca) for resources and tips on digital and media literacy.

### **HealthNewsReview.org**

HealthNewsReview.org, based at University of Minnesota Public Health, reviews health stories and press releases for accuracy and bias so people can make good, informed decisions about their health. HealthNewsReview.org's blog discusses issues in health reporting and marketing, and they have toolkits for readers, journalists, and marketers. Visit [www.healthnewsreview.org](http://www.healthnewsreview.org).



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Founded in 1918, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is the most established, most extensive community mental health organization in Canada. Through a presence in hundreds of neighbourhoods across every province, CMHA provides advocacy and resources that help to prevent mental health problems and illnesses, support recovery and resilience, and enable all Canadians to flourish and thrive.

**Visit the CMHA BC website at [www.cmha.bc.ca](http://www.cmha.bc.ca).**

CMHA BC is proud to be affiliated with HeretoHelp. HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information, a group of non-profit agencies providing good-quality information to help individuals and families maintain or improve their mental well-being. The BC Partners are funded by the Provincial Health Services Authority.

**For more information, visit [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)**