



Minding Our Bodies

physical activity for mental health

Environmental Scan Online Survey Results

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www.mindingourbodies.ca

*Minding Our Bodies is an initiative of the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario,
in partnership with YMCA Ontario and York University,
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Context of the Environmental Scan

A literature review and environmental scan were conducted to compile evidence of effective practices in interventions for people with serious mental illness that involve physical activity, including both activities of daily living and structured exercise programs. The objectives were to locate and describe existing programs, understand their strengths and weaknesses, and identify both the challenges they faced and the successes they experienced. The scan also sought to understand the perceived barriers that prevent community mental health organizations from starting and maintaining physical activity programs. Finally, the scan also set out to identify physical activity resources already available within other sectors that could be used by the mental health sector. The findings are intended to support the development of the Minding Our Bodies toolkit, a resource to help community mental health service providers in Ontario promote active living and create new opportunities for physical activity.

Data collection for the environmental scan took two approaches.

The first was an in-depth telephone interview process with eight mental health service providers that currently run physical activity programs. Fifteen prospective agencies were identified through an online search for programs and through the researcher's network of contacts; the list was reduced to eight to accommodate time limitations. Phone interviews ranged from 1.5 to 2.5 hours in length.

The second approach was through the use of an online survey, developed using the tool Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). An e-mail invitation to participate was sent directly to more than 300 community mental health organizations, identified through listings provided online by Mental Health Service Information Ontario (www.mhsio.on.ca). The invitation was further distributed by the Minding Our Bodies advisory committee through their own communication networks, including the Physical Activity Resource Centre and Heart Health Resource Centre mailing lists. The survey was also advertised on the Minding Our Bodies website (www.mindingourbodies.ca) and in CMHA Ontario's e-newsletter, Mental Health Notes. Between November 13, 2008 and January 15, 2009, more than 140 surveys were completed. The online survey was intended for all community mental health service providers, both with and without physical activity programs. The response rate indicates a very high level of interest in the project. Indeed, many of the comments returned on the survey were highly supportive of the project aims.

A summary of findings from the online survey is included below. Findings from the literature review are published separately (see "Minding Our Bodies Literature Review," March 2009, at www.mindingourbodies.ca).

Strengths and Limitations of the Environmental Scan

Of the two survey methods (telephone interview and online data collection), the phone interviews provided more detailed information. The interviewer was able to probe respondents to get a better sense of the programs and the barriers and challenges experienced during implementation.

Although the limitations of the online survey must be taken into consideration, the data collected were strong and concise. The online survey allowed respondents the option of providing contact information for follow-up questioning, and most chose to do so. We were impressed by the interest and response rate considering that more than 140 surveys were completed from a field of approximately 350 community mental health service providers in the province. Most questions included an instruction to “check all that apply,” which allowed respondents to indicate multiple answers; this explains why some percentages below exceed 100%. A possible limitation of the online survey relates to the fact that some respondents either did not complete the entire survey or may have provided incomplete answers to some questions.

About the Minding Our Bodies Project

Minding Our Bodies: Physical Activity for Mental Health is an initiative of the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario in partnership with YMCA Ontario and York University’s Faculty of Health, with support from the Ministry of Health Promotion through the Communities in Action Fund.

The project builds on CMHA Ontario’s policy work in such areas as mental health promotion and chronic disease prevention and management. People with serious mental illness are at high risk for chronic physical conditions associated with sedentary behaviour, including diabetes and cardiovascular disease. At the same time, mental illness can influence a person’s health behaviours. Studies show that depression, for example, has a negative impact on one’s nutritional choices, commitment to exercise and adherence to medical therapies. Choices around diet, exercise, smoking and treatment adherence can all have a serious bearings on the state of one’s physical health. To compound the issue, psychiatric medications can cause serious weight gain. A high percentage of people with serious mental illness are smokers, often as a means to combat the side-effects of medication.

Research evidence also shows that increased physical activity can have positive effects in preventing chronic disease, improving chronic disease outcomes and supporting recovery from mental illness. Exercise can also alleviate not only the primary symptoms of depression and anxiety, but also secondary symptoms such as low self-esteem and social withdrawal. Yet despite the known benefits, physical activity interventions in Ontario are neither commonplace nor well integrated with other services delivered by community providers of mental health care.

Minding Our Bodies is a two-year project (2008-2010). Our purpose is to increase capacity within the community mental health sector in Ontario to promote active living and provide new opportunities for physical activity for people with serious mental illness. The project will develop a toolkit, a one-day training workshop, and a website to support mental health service providers and their community partners in developing new programs and increasing access to existing resources. Project goals include the creation of opportunities for peer leadership development, the fostering of community partnerships, and an increased capacity to evaluate mental health promotion programs.

Ultimately, Minding Our Bodies is intended to support mental health promotion and recovery from mental illness through active living, access to resources and greater social inclusion, and reduced stigma and discrimination.

Summary of Findings from the Online Survey

Organization and client profile

The first six questions in the online survey gathered general information about the respondents and their organizations.

1. Contact information.

Survey respondents represented most areas of the province (including urban, rural and suburban populations) and a good cross-section of community mental health service providers and consumer/survivor initiatives, as well as a few hospital programs, provincial associations and universities.

The respondents also represented an array of positions, including social workers, public health nurses, crisis workers, program managers, executive directors and recreation therapists.

2. Which of the following disorders are most prevalent among your clients (check all that apply): anxiety, bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia, other.

Depression was indicated by 74% of respondents; schizophrenia, 66%; anxiety, 66%; bipolar disorder 54%; and other, 43%. "Other" disorders ranged from personality disorders through PTSD, substance abuse and ADD/ADHD.

3. How would you describe the majority of your clients with respect to their mental ability to participate in physical activity programs: high functioning, moderate, or low?

Among the respondents, 21% considered the majority of their clients to be "high functioning"; 61% said the majority had a "moderate" level of capacity to participate in physical activity programs; and 21% considered the majority to be "low functioning."

In their comments, the respondents pointed out additional barriers: “Many[clients] are homeless. Most are not working and not going to school. ... Many of my clients are cautious about joining things.” “Chronic pain and low energy and fear of ‘it will hurt’ are prevalent.” “Many do have chronic physical health issues such as hypertension, diabetes, chronic pain, overweight, arthritis.”

4. How do you typically interact with your consumers: individually, small groups (2–10), large groups over 10, drop-in/informal groups, scheduled meeting times, other?

The majority of mental health professionals who responded (49%) said they interact with their clients on an individual basis. Small group sizes (2–10 clients) ranked second, at 15%, and 9% worked with large groups (over 10). Fifteen percent meet at scheduled times, while 14% held informal drop-in groups. Many respondents said they interact in a variety of ways.

5. Do you feel that physical activity might be effective in improving the physical or mental health of your consumers?

Respondents indicated that physical activity would be effective in improving both the physical and mental health of their clients. Anecdotal comments were supplied that validated research in this area, saying that their consumer participants would and do benefit from physical activity.

6. Which of the following statements best describes your organization?

“We don’t have a formal physical activity program right now.” (44%)

“We do not have a physical activity program but we are thinking about starting one.” (15%)

“We do have a formal physical activity program in place.” (41%)

Organizations without a Physical Activity Program

Organizations that responded to question 6 in part one of the survey (above) by indicating that they had no physical activity program in place, or were thinking about starting one, were asked to answer the following 9 questions.

1. Which of the following factors would you expect to be a challenge to your organization when trying initiate and sustain a physical activity program in your organization (check all that apply): time, funding, staff knowledge about physical activity, clients’ interest in participating, liability, other?

Almost 76% of respondents indicated that funding would be a challenge to their organization when trying to initiate and sustain a physical activity program.

Clients’ interest was the second most commonly anticipated challenge (57%), followed closely by time (52%).

Staff knowledge was considered a potential challenge by 39%.

Liability was a concern for 34%.

2. Would you consider any of the following to be potential dangers or risks for your organization establishing a physical activity program: old or damaged equipment; inadequate space for programming; public stigma; unsafe walkways, roadways or paths; untrained program organizers; other?

Inadequate space predominated as a perceived risk for organizations wanting to establish a physical activity program: 88% expected that to be a problem.

Program organizers without training were also cited frequently (56%), indicating that training would be needed before staff would feel comfortable providing such programs to their consumer groups.

Stigma was considered by 28% to be a significant issue, while old or damaged equipment was rated by 19% to be a concern. Safety was identified as a possible issue by 14% of respondents.

3. Would you expect any of the following organizational challenges to be an issue that would affect a physical activity program's success (check all that apply): lack of support from management, lack of support from the board of directors, not directly part of the organization's strategic directions and mission, lack of interest from staff, lack of interest from participants, other?

Among respondents, 60% considered the absence of physical activity programming from the organization's strategic directions to be a barrier. In the "other" section, many survey participants wrote that it was not part of their current mandate.

Concern about lack of consumer interest also ranked high, at 57%. This is consistent with indications from the literature review that addressing motivation is essential in this target audience. Lack of motivation on the part of staff was also a concern (17%).

Perceived lack of support by management (12%) and the board of directors (5%) was less of an issue.

Some said "none of the above" was considered to be a challenge. One person commented, "All the fundamental support and commitment is in place, what is missing is resources."

4. What might help you to run a physical activity program (check all that apply): business case, literature review, environmental scan of existing resources and programs, do not know?

An environmental scan of existing resources and programs was indicated as helpful by 55% of the respondents. Identifying and highlighting some existing programs would permit organizations whose participants have similar needs to obtain ideas and to begin evaluating them as promising practices.

Having a business case to present to boards, staff and management was thought to be a good idea by 49% of the respondents.

A literature review was indicated by 33% to be important.

Mentioned under “other” suggestions of help were considerations for:

- Decreased fees for participants
- Funding for community instructors to come to the organization to provide programs
- Transportation and equipment purchases to help run a physical activity program

5. Would additional training (workshops) in physical activity promotion make you more successful in helping you run your physical activity program?

This was considered a good idea by 72% of respondents.

“Other” suggestions included training on motivation, safety, how to organize a program, programming, and basic physical activity information.

6. Through the Minding Our Bodies program, CMHA Ontario is creating a toolkit for mental health organizations to assist them in implementing physical activity programming. What tools would you like to see within this resource?

Responses to this open-ended question included:

- Assessments and screening tools
- Best practices
- Community resources and supports
- Community fitness groups
- Contests
- Checklists or calendars to chart individual progress
- Evaluation tools
- Funding information and how to apply for funding
- How to motivate clients
- How to motivate staff
- How to run programs
- Pedometers
- Posters and communication materials to show how to strengthen different muscle groups
- Safety issues
- Sample programs that already exist
- Stepping out on the Bruce Trail Virtual walk
- Website information on the project

7. Do you feel that partnerships with other health promotion organizations, either in your local area or on a provincial basis, would help strengthen your program to make it more effective and sustainable?

Ninety-six percent of respondents agreed that having partnerships would strengthen the programs.

In the “comments” section, it was mentioned numerous times that public health associations, community health centres, local community fitness facilities, local YMCAs and similar organizations would be great partners. In some cases, the respondent’s organization had already partnered with one more of these agencies.

8. Are you aware of any other organizations that provide physical activity programming for people with mental illness?

Almost 60% of respondents said they not aware of any other programs. Among the 40% who knew about other programs, many cited the YMCA. Others had heard of walking groups, a yoga program, and a couple of hospital-based programs.

9. Is there anything you would like to add?

Seventeen responses were collected. They ranged from congratulations and encouragement for the Minding Our Bodies project to reiterating the importance of funding.

Organizations with a Current Physical Activity Program

Organizations that responded to question 6 in part one of the survey (above) by indicating that they do have a physical activity program in place were asked to answer the following 17 questions.

1. Please describe your program.

This was an open-ended question that garnered replies from 86 respondents. It is apparent that many respondents defined “program” loosely in that very few provided anything structured or formal.

Many collaborated with existing physical activity organizations (such as a local YMCA or equivalent) and were provided with reduced-rate passes to their facilities. Some mental health service providers created opportunities informally by talking to their clients about programs in the community and by encouraging daily physical activity. Many appeared to engage in activities that are ad hoc, such as a group that goes walking together on an informal basis without a specific time. Some had members of the fitness and yoga community offer classes at the mental health organization, although space was considered a problem. Other activities included relatively unstructured excursions that incidentally provided some form of physical activity but which was not necessarily their sole purpose, such as a walk to and from a planned visit to a different site or an outside event.

2. Do you feel that exercise has led to any observable impacts upon participants' mental and/or physical health?

Ninety-six percent of the respondents said "Yes."

Supplementary information given in the comments section overwhelmingly supported the importance of exercise to improve mood, concentration, self-esteem, confidence, friendships, motivation, and energy.

Many indicated that consumers felt better about their health and to be doing something to improve themselves. Reduced side-effects from medications were also mentioned, such as less lethargy, better sleep patterns, reduced rumination and brighter affect.

Other benefits cited were reduced isolation, increased social networks, improved physical fitness, new learning opportunities for skills (bowling, for example) and higher interest/motivation.

3. Has your physical activity program ever had any negative outcomes?

Among respondents, 82% indicated that there had been no negative ramifications.

Among the 18% of respondents who did indicate a concern, a few specified injury (sprained ankles, blisters, or "People getting injured while playing some of our more challenging activities").

4. Do you evaluate your program?

Most respondents (62%) indicated that their existing programs are evaluated. Judging by the additional comments, however, the evaluation methods are not standardized. Formal evaluations are sometimes part of the regular ongoing evaluation of all programs run by the agency; some respondents have done evaluations online by using tools such as Survey Monkey. A few organizations keep attendance records, but not apparently as part of a formal process for consumer feedback. Some brainstorm with their clients for ideas, informally.

Almost 38% of respondents with physical activity programs are not conducting any evaluation. Reasons given for not evaluating programs included time constraints or the perception that a given program is effective and therefore did not need evaluation.

5. What challenges and successes have you experienced in terms of attracting consumers into your physical activity program?

This open-ended question elicited 71 responses. Time and funding were restrictive, just as they were in organizations without a formal physical activity program.

The challenges cited include:

- Lack of time
- Scarcity of funding, financing and resources such as equipment

- Insufficient motivation or lack of interest among participants
- Other providers (some consumers have their own gym or club membership or do activities on their own)
- Lack or cost of transportation to and from programs
- Self-consciousness among clients with issues about weight and body image

Among the successes identified:

- “The program is popular. We get a lot of repeat customers.”
- “Weather was an issue, but has been solved by replacing walking outside with physical activity in a gym for the winter months.”
- “Motivated clients, supportive staff, good patient rapport.”
- “A client who rarely went out now joins regularly.”
- “Initially transportation was a barrier, we decided to provide rides which is the major factor for the success.”
- “Success has been that every single client from the first group returned for the next 6 weeks.”
- “Successes are members getting their own YMCA cards to continue going on their own. Social contacts, stress and depression reducer.”
- “Improvement in overall fitness level, clients are more mentally alert. Other clients are asking to be part of our fitness program as they see the results from other clients and want to improve their fitness goals.”

6. What challenges and successes have you had in keeping your participant group motivated and engaged?

Of the 64 responses, the most prevalent challenges were:

- Lack of staff
- Lack of time to help consumers stay motivated and engaged
- Weather, which sometimes caused clients to miss scheduled activities or participation in a group

Successful motivation techniques included the following:

- Taking time to go through work plans individually helped keep clients motivated and engaged
- Clients have formed very supportive groups amongst themselves and support each other
- Fun and variety were important to keep people motivated and engaged

7. Which of the following challenges have group members faced in taking part in physical activity programs?

- Social anxiety (71%)
- Lack of transportation (64%)

- Inadequate clothing (59%)
- No benefit perceived by clients; lack of motivation (58%)
- Improper footwear (55%)
- Lack of physical activity equipment (43%)
- Scheduling conflicts (46%) among clients who work or assign little priority to being active (i.e., lack motivation)
- Family demands (16%)

Only one respondent said group members faced no challenges in taking part.

8. Please describe how you overcame some of the challenges indicated above.

Sixty-one people responded. Following are some of the solutions identified:

- Transportation as a barrier was overcome by giving out bus tickets or coordinating volunteer drivers
- Other tools used to offer health information and activity guidelines and schedules, such as online multimedia or DVDs of activities
- Team support and hard work
- Went with clients to provide support if they were feeling anxious
- Some indicated they were still struggling to overcome challenges

9. Did you find any of the following organizational challenges to be an issue when initiating and maintaining the physical activity program (check all that apply): lack of support from management, lack of support from the board of directors, not directly part of the organization's strategic directions and mission, lack of interest from staff, lack of interest from participants, other?

Motivation is a concern for many organizations: 70% indicated there was a lack of client interest, with 32% citing a lack of motivation among staff.

Buy-in from management and board members was cited as a challenge by only 6%, while 30% found it a challenge that physical activity programming was not an explicit part of the organization's mission .

One respondent commented that "Government has a habit of rushing in and rushing out with no clear direction or mandate that is effective in addressing physical activity." Another observed that "Because it's not part of the mainstream program, it just gets pushed aside. Although everyone agrees it is important, sometimes it's not important enough."

10. What factors do you feel would make the program more effective (check all that apply): more time for planning; additional funding; designated staff member, volunteer or peer champion; workshop to build [staff] skills; physical activity toolkit for staff?

- Not surprisingly, 84% of respondents thought additional funding would be of help (one commented, “An exercise facility on site would be nice to have!”)
- Toolkit for staff (72%)
- Training to build skills around physical activity promotion (65%)
- Having a designated person to do the programming and associated tasks (54%)
- More time for planning (38%)
- One respondent recommended that psychiatrists prescribe physical activity

11. Do you feel that there is sufficient information available for organizations to start physical activity programs for people with mental illness? If not, what specific types of evidence and knowledge are still necessary?

Overall, 46% of respondents that already have a physical activity program in place indicated that available information was sufficient, while 54% did not feel there was sufficient information.

12. Was there any special training that staff had to undergo in order to implement your physical activity programs for people with mental illness? If so, please describe it.

Many respondents (65%) indicated that no training was required or taken prior to implementing their program.

The remainder (35%) said that staff had some form of training. In one case, staff "shadowed" an existing program. The range of staff qualifications included a fitness leadership program (YMCA), certification in wellness and nutrition (Canadian Fitness Professionals Association), yoga, Pilates, and Nordic walking certification, CPR, and Weight Watchers training. Some staff are personal trainers, while others are health promoters with a kinesiology background. One program has two recreation therapists, a registered nurse, and a registered dietitian, all “overseen by a GP.”

13. Through the Minding Our Bodies program, CMHA Ontario is creating a toolkit for mental health organizations to assist them in implementing physical activity programming. What tools would you like to see within this resource?

There were 57 responses to this question. Following are the most commonly requested resources:

- Information about other organizations
- Information about and ideas for finding funding sources
- Strategies to motivate consumers

- Material on lifestyle management, nutrition, stress reduction, and prevention of chronic disease
- Information about/instructions for stretches
- How to maintain a program

14. Do you feel that partnerships with other health promotion organizations either in your local area or on a provincial basis would help strengthen your program to make it more effective and sustainable? If so, who and how?

The overwhelming majority of respondents (94%) felt that partnerships would be of benefit. included 100% of those from organizations without a program.

Public health units, YMCA/YWCA, local fitness facilities and community health centres were listed as important partners, as were diabetes programs, healthy heart programs, cancer societies, arthritis programs, and family health teams.

15. Where does funding for your physical activity program come from at present (check all that apply): external stakeholder, existing program, other community partners, private program, ministry funding?

- An existing program within the organization (70%)
- Ministry funding (27%), including the ministries of Health Promotion (Communities In Action Fund), Education, Training, Colleges and Universities, Health and Long-Term Care, and Local Health Integration Network
- Community partners (27%)
- External stakeholders (7%)

16. What advice would you give to an organization that is planning to start a physical activity program for people with mental illness?

- Start small
- Stress how important having physical activity is
- Contact groups that have an existing program
- Partner with other agencies
- Involve consumers in the planning
- Be flexible and adaptable to consumers
- Try to have a focus to the program, to keep consumers on track and have a goal
- Get buy-in from staff members (“Staff need to be committed, otherwise [the program] will not be successful”)
- Recruit teams for sustainability
- Use green space (parks, hiking trails, outdoors)
- “Always do a screening so that you know who your clients are. Then do your research about how to provide these clients with the best physical activity

experience possible. Provide an educational component during your physical activity and address topics that your clients are interested in. Always ask your clients what they would like to see in the group.”

- “Go for it. Needs to be inclusive and allows people to participate at the level they feel comfortable. Ensure it is voluntary and supports choice.”

17. Is there anything else you would like to add?

There were 25 replies to this question, many of which stressed the importance of this project and the need for trained staff.

One person commented, “Making people feel good about themselves physically and mentally through physical activity may be difficult to measure clinically but is still extremely worthwhile!”

Conclusion

The Minding Our Bodies project is addressing a need clearly identified by its target audience. The environmental scan confirmed that community mental health professionals are ready and willing to learn how they can promote active living and develop new physical activity programs for consumers. Some organizations are already doing it, despite the many challenges, and they are prepared to share the knowledge and experience they’ve gained.

Information valuable to the preparation of the toolkit and training day was collected via the online survey and interviews. Specific barriers and challenges were identified that are preventing community mental health service providers from implementing physical activity programs. Program descriptions, success stories, and words of advice from agencies that have already begun to provide physical activity opportunities have been gathered and will be shared through the toolkit and other resources created.

During the pilot project and into the future, the Minding Our Bodies website (www.mindingourbodies.ca) will allow staff and volunteers within both new and existing physical activity programs to connect, communicate and continue sharing knowledge and resources with one another as they develop creative implementation strategies.

CMHA Ontario would like to acknowledge the almost 150 individuals and organizations that took time to participate in our environmental scan. Thank you!