

# Social Prescribing and Mental Health

Mental health is essential to overall well-being, yet millions of Canadians struggle to get the support they need. The numbers are staggering:

- Mental health among Canadians is three times worse than before the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>
- The prevalence of major depressive disorder has doubled among adults.<sup>1</sup>
- Over 5 million Canadians (18%) met the criteria for a mood, anxiety, or substance use disorder in 2022.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this growing crisis, access to mental health services remains a challenge—long wait times, insufficient funding, and barriers like geography and income, prevent many from getting help. Social prescribing offers an approach to integrated care that can address these challenges.

## What is Social Prescribing?

Social prescribing enables health care professionals to refer patients to non-clinical community-based programs and services with the support of a dedicated connector/navigator. This approach enhances access to mental health and other supports, strengthens social connections, encourages community involvement, and empowers individuals to take an active role in their own health and well-being. By focusing on a co-creative, person-centred approach, social prescribing plays a vital role in promoting mental health and resilience across Canada.



## Social prescribing initiatives have shown positive impacts, including:

- 79% of patients referred to social prescribing services reported improvements in their mental health.<sup>1</sup>
- Among participants in a social prescribing pilot there was a 15.9% increase in self-reported community belonging.<sup>3</sup>
- Individuals who perceive that they have higher control over their life circumstances are 17 times less likely to screen positive for Major Depressive Disorder.<sup>4</sup>
- A systematic review assessing 77 social prescribing intervention studies found significant effects on mental well-being, physical activity and reduced social isolation. Overwhelmingly, studies report positive associations between social prescribing and both long- and short-term mental health and well-being outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

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## How Social Prescribing Improves Mental Health

- ✓ **Improves access to mental health and social support:** Individuals receive guidance in navigating community-based programs that promote mental well-being, such as peer support, arts and cultural activities, exercise classes, befriending services, and access to information and advice.
- ✓ **Supports mental health promotion and prevention:** Person-centred social prescribing services support both short- and long-term mental well-being by addressing loneliness, stress, and mild to moderate depression and anxiety. They also help build self-confidence, self-esteem, and a stronger sense of purpose and belonging.
- ✓ **Reduces loneliness and social isolation:** Social prescribing connects individuals with social activities and community groups, helping those with mental health-related challenges feel more engaged and supported. Socially connected individuals are more likely to report better self-rated mental and overall health.
- ✓ **Fosters community engagement:** Stronger community networks help create a deeper sense of belonging and mutual support, enhancing mental health at both the individual and community levels.
- ✓ **Empowers individuals and builds resilience:** Social prescribing navigators work closely with participants to explore their skills, interests, and needs. Through a co-creative, tailored approach, they help identify activities that build self-confidence, self-efficacy, and long-term resilience, giving individuals greater control over their well-being.
- ✓ **Reduces health care utilization:** By connecting people to activities that support mental health and address social determinants of health, social prescribing can help prevent mental health issues from escalating. This can ease pressure on community mental health services and reduce acute care visits.



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4. Shields M, Tonmyr L, Gonzalez A, Weeks M, Park SB, Robert AM, Blair DL, MacMillan HL. Symptoms of major depressive disorder during the COVID-19 pandemic: results from a representative sample of the Canadian population. Health Promot Chronic Dis Prev Can. 2021. (move to 4)

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