



a place of mind
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



Cancer and Mental Health Across the Lifespan

LEAF Clinic Education Day 2025

Clara Westwell-Roper, MD PhD
Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist
BC Cancer Supportive Care
BC Children's Hospital Medical Psychiatry Clinic
Coastal Early Psychosis Intervention Program
Clinical Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, UBC

Land acknowledgement



Disclosures

- I will share my personal perspectives.
- No relevant financial interests.
- I have received research funding from the International OCD Foundation, BC Children's Hospital Research Institute, and the UBC Department of Psychiatry.

WHAT IS A PSYCHIATRIST?

AMERICAN
PSYCHIATRIC
ASSOCIATION



For more information on
psychiatry visit [psychiatry.org](https://www.psychiatry.org)

Psychiatry is the branch of medicine focused on the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental, emotional and behavioral disorders.



A psychiatrist is a **medical doctor** (an M.D. or D.O.) who specializes in mental health, including substance use disorders.

Psychiatrists are qualified to assess both the mental and physical aspects of psychological problems.

Psychiatrists - some common myths

- They are “crazy”
- They will tell you that you are also “crazy”
- They can read your mind
- They will always find something “wrong” with you
- They always want you to take medications
- They will make you stay in hospital
- Seeing a psychiatrist means you have “failed”
- Medications will change your personality
- They can “fix” your problems for you

The reality – fellow humans (+ a lot of school)!

My training:

- Bachelor of Science - Microbiology and Immunology, 5 years
- Combined MD/PhD (clinical and research training) - 8 years
- General Psychiatry Residency - Research Track, 5 years
- Child and Adolescent Psychiatry subspecialty fellowship - 2 years

Currently: Staff psychiatrist at BC Cancer, BC Children's, and the Coastal Early Psychosis Intervention program



Objectives

1. To define “mental health”
2. To identify common disorders of mental health
3. To understand what treatments work
4. To identify how to get help as an adult in BC

Objectives

- 1. To define “mental health”**
2. To identify common disorders of mental health
3. To understand what treatments work
4. To identify how to get help as an adult in BC

What is mental health?

World Health Organization:

A state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community

- Not just the absence of mental illness
- Includes how you feel, think, and relate to others
- Influenced by biology, environment, social context, spirituality, and culture
- Exists on a continuum: doing well → struggling → illness (“disorder”)

What is mental health?

“The good life, not just the asymptomatic life”

Sense of safety and trust

Sense of agency

Sense of continuity

Self-esteem

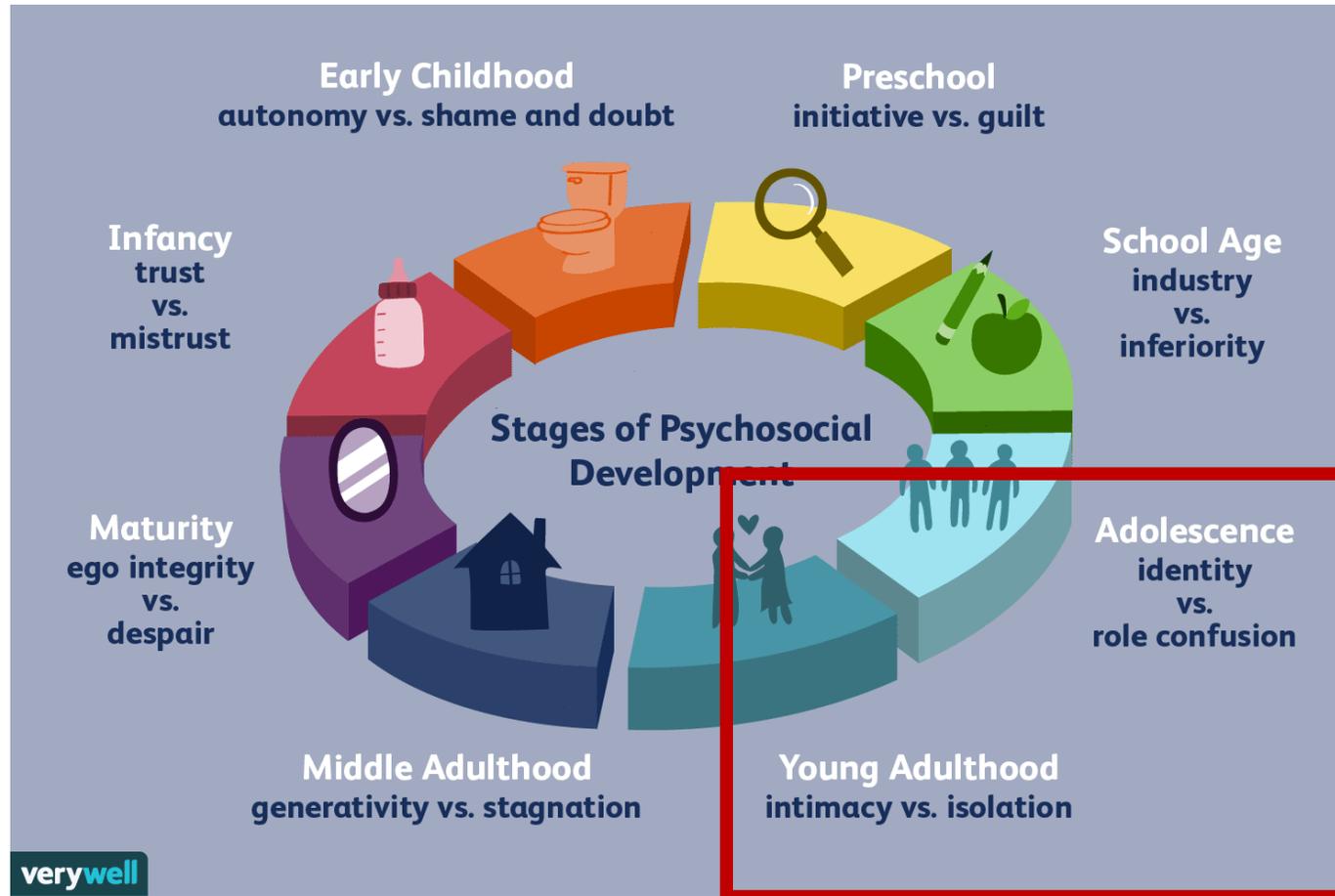
Affect/emotion tolerance

Self-preservation and altruism

Acceptance

Capacity to love, work, and play

Mental health and life stages

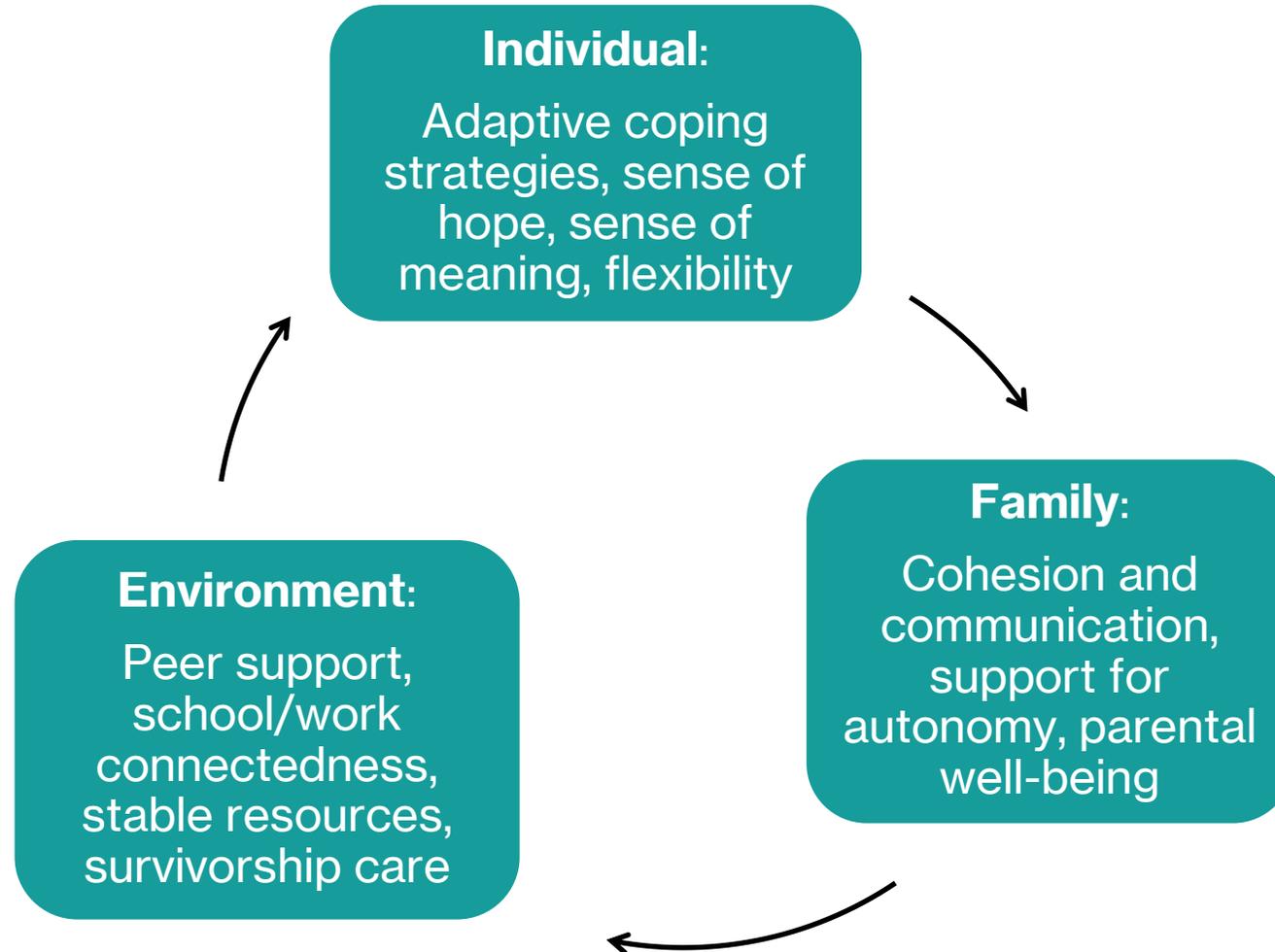


Survivorship-specific stressors

- Trauma associated with diagnosis and treatment (procedures, hospitalizations)
- Fatigue, pain, impacts on other body systems, neurocognitive changes
- Fear of recurrence and secondary cancers
- School/work disruption
- Bullying; feeling “different”
- Body image and identity
- Financial strain, employment concerns
- Impact on family system
- Losses

→ Not all suffering is “mental illness” – but often benefits from support!

Protective factors

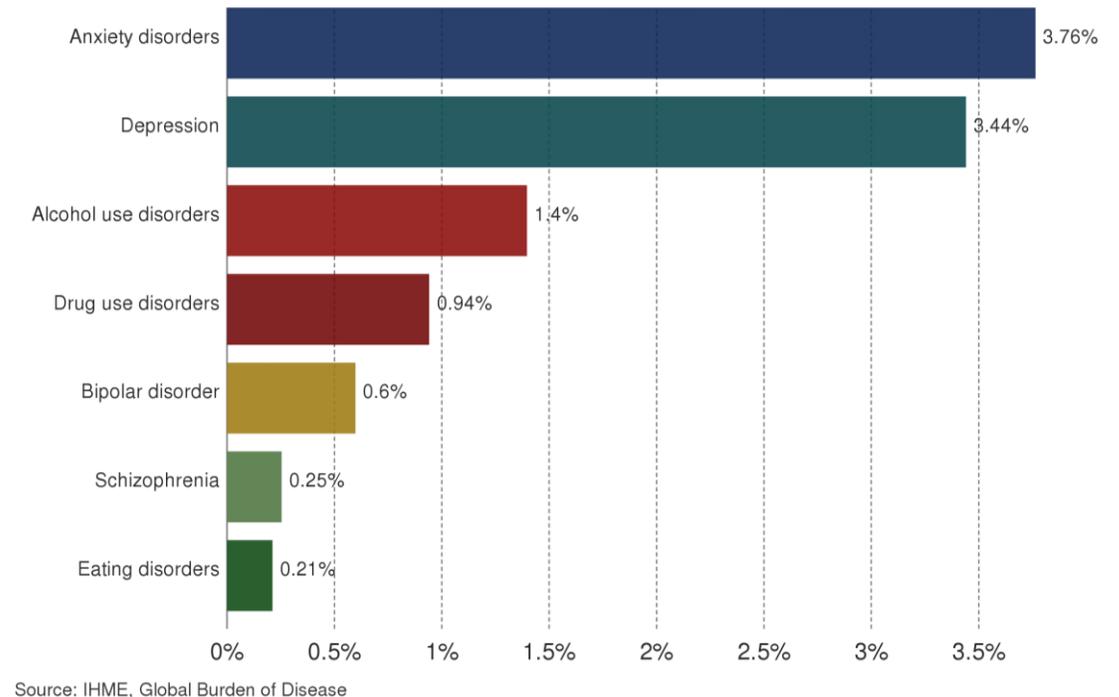


Objectives

1. To define “mental health”
2. **To identify common disorders of mental health**
3. To understand what treatments work
4. To identify how to get help as an adult in BC

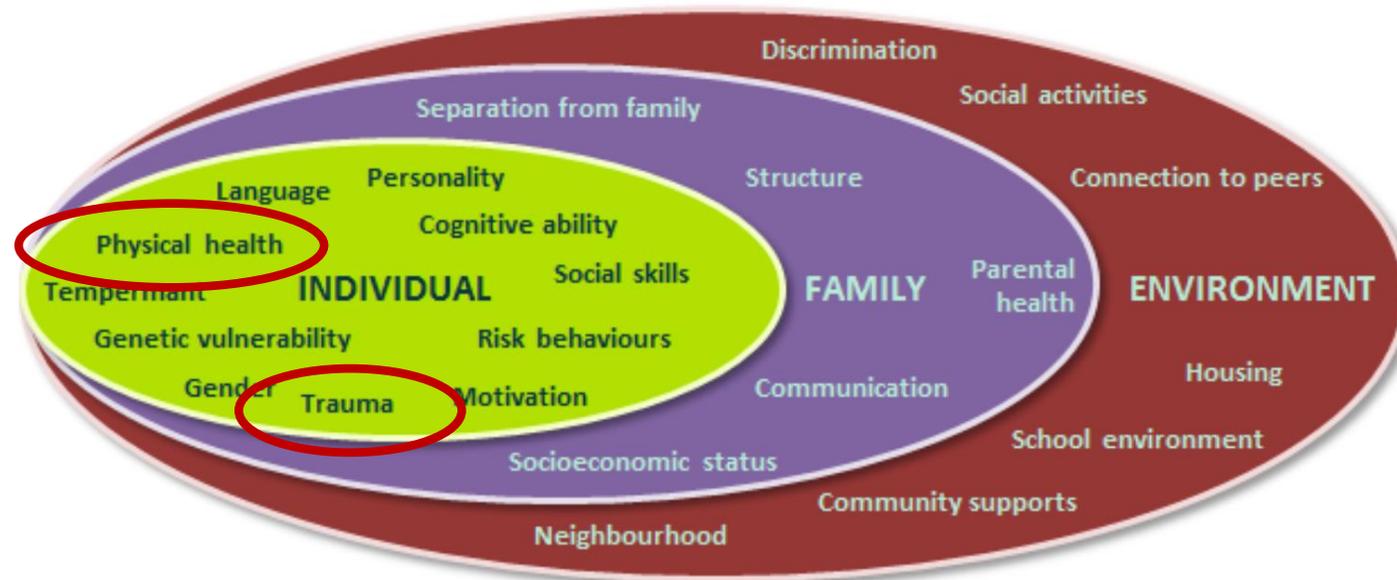
What is a mental health disorder?

- Mental illness involves **significant disturbances in thinking, emotional regulation, or behaviour**
- In a given year, 1 in every 5 Canadians experience a mental illness
- More prevalent among young people ages 15-24
- Effective prevention and treatment options exist



What causes mental health disorders?

Everyone has a unique combination of protective and risk factors
These include biological, psychological, and social factors



Mental health & cancer survivorship

Childhood cancer survivors at higher risk of mental health problems as adults



Researchers say that additional awareness, screening and mental health supports should be targeted for this higher-risk population.

Study looked at the risk of mental health problems among more than 4,000 adult Ontarians who had survived a diagnosis of childhood cancer between 1987-2008. It compared their patterns of mental health care use to those of more than 20,000 matched peers who did not experience cancer in childhood.



34% higher: Chance that an adult survivor of childhood cancer will **seek mental health support** from a family doctor or psychiatrist, compared to his or her peers.

Factors associated with higher risk:

- being female
- being a teenager at cancer diagnosis (age 15-17.9 years)

13% higher: Chance that an adult survivor of childhood cancer will experience a **severe mental health event** (ER visit or hospitalization), with the highest risk among people who were diagnosed with cancer under the age of five.

Nathan PC et al. *Cancer*. 2018.

Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences
ices.on.ca

SickKids®

Mental health & cancer survivorship

- **Depression:** Up to 30% of childhood cancer survivors report significant depressive symptoms or disorder; versus ~10% in general youth
- **Anxiety:** Survivors are ~30% more likely to develop anxiety disorders versus peers
- **PTSD / Cancer-related traumatic stress:** Studies report 6–44% of children with cancer develop significant post-traumatic stress symptoms; parents 22–54%
- **Substance use disorders** are also more prevalent
- **Other conditions:** OCD, bipolar disorder, psychosis

Depressive disorders

Persistent low or irritable mood or loss of interest

Common symptoms:

Low mood or irritability most days

Loss of interest

Guilt

Sleep/appetite/concentration changes

Hopeless or “what’s the point?” thoughts

Principles of treatment:

Therapy: Cognitive behavioural or interpersonal therapies, behavioural activation, others

Medications: (e.g. SSRI, SNRI, others)

Anxiety disorders

Persistent fear, worry, or anxiety that gets in the way of doing things

Common symptoms:

Difficulty controlling worries

Worrying impacts sleep, physical body

Common themes: health, work, money, relationships, recurrence

Panic attacks

Avoidance or other impact on function

Effective treatments:

Lots of evidence for cognitive behavioural therapy

Generally involves gradual exposure to feared situations

Medications (e.g. SSRI, SNRI)

Post-traumatic stress

Your nervous system gets activated by reminders of past threat(s)

Common symptoms:

Related to traumatic events: distressing procedures, fear of death, isolation, pain

Intrusive memories: flashbacks, memories, nightmares

Feeling on guard, jumpy, or irritable in relation to these memories

Avoidance of thoughts or reminders

Changes in mood or the way you think about yourself/others

Effective treatments:

Therapy to build skills for coping with distress

Trauma-focused therapy (e.g. trauma-focused CBT, EMDR)

Sometimes medications

Cognitive difficulties

Difficulty with attention, focus, memory, or other aspects of thinking

Common symptoms:

- Memory lapses
- Slower thinking or word-finding issues
- Fatigue making everything harder

Approach:

- Treat depression, anxiety, ADHD if present
- Optimize sleep and nutrition
- Neuropsychology or psychoeducational assessment if available
- Strategies for cognitive remediation
- School or work accommodations

Coping strategies

Adaptive Coping



- *Active: problem-solving, reaching out for support*
 - *Accommodative: changing expectations*
 - *Emotional: regulating emotions*
 - *Behavioural: taking actions to reduce stress*
 - *Cognitive: changing how we think about the stressor*
-

Maladaptive Coping



- substance use
- rumination
- physical escape
- mental escape
- procrastination
- self-injury
- binge eating
- risk-taking
- self-criticism
- safety behaviours
- avoidance

mentalhealthathome.org

Objectives

1. To define “mental health”
2. To identify common disorders of mental health
- 3. To understand what treatments work**
4. To identify how to get help as an adult in BC

What treatments work?

Often a combination of tools works best:

- Psychotherapy / counselling
- Medications when appropriate
- Social support
 - Connections with family and friends
 - Peer support groups
 - Setting healthy boundaries
- Lifestyle and self-care
 - Regular sleep, nutrition, and exercise
 - Graded exposure to feared situations
 - Pacing your energy
 - Doing activities that are meaningful to you



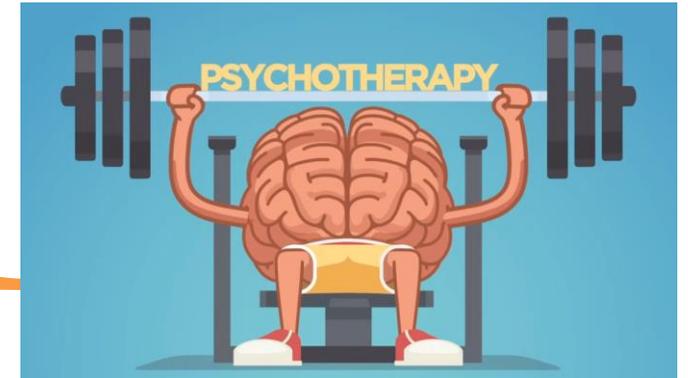
What treatments work?

Often a combination of tools works best:

- Psychotherapy / counselling
- Medications when appropriate
- Social support
 - Connections with family and friends
 - May include peer support groups
 - Setting healthy boundaries
- Lifestyle and self-care
 - Regular sleep, nutrition, and exercise
 - Graded exposure to feared situations
 - Pacing your energy
 - Doing activities that are meaningful to you



Treatments - Psychotherapy



A form of treatment that involves “talking work” done with a therapist.

General goal is to improve emotional and psychological well-being.

Depends on a supportive and collaborative relationship.

Can range from a few sessions to longer-term, individually or in a group.

Treatments - Psychotherapy

A common goal for therapy: “To feel better”

Some goals from a psychiatrist’s perspective:

- To increase awareness and tolerance of a range of emotions
- To better understand our patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaviour
- To enhance mind-body integration/awareness
- To develop a sense of agency, mastery, and belonging
- To better understand our values and sources of meaning in life
- To develop assertive communication skills and healthy boundaries
- To process trauma and long-term effects

***Within a safe relationship
→ decreased symptoms***

Treatments - Psychotherapy

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

The six core processes of acceptance and commitment therapy are:



Accepting your emotions.



Detaching from negativity.



Being present.



Seeing yourself completely.



Creating values.



Reaching goals.

Treatments - Psychotherapy

Other examples of therapies that are effective:

- CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy)
- Behavioural therapy
- Dialectical behavioural therapy
- Interpersonal therapy
- Trauma-focused therapies (e.g., TF-CBT, EMDR)
- Psychodynamic therapy
- Family/couples therapy
- Combination of modalities

Treatments - Medications

- Helpful when symptoms are moderate-to-severe or longer-lasting
- Goal is to help you function and engage in life – to feel more like yourself
- All medications can be seen as a trial – you are not committing forever
- Examples: antidepressants (e.g. SSRIs, SNRIs), antipsychotic medications, sedating medications, mood stabilizers, stimulants

Objectives

1. To define “mental health”
2. To identify common disorders of mental health
3. To understand what treatments work
4. **To identify how to get help as an adult in BC**

How do you access care in BC?



Oncology/medical subspecialist: Screening and referral

Primary care provider: Family physician or nurse practitioner

Counsellors: Social workers, registered clinical counsellors

Psychologists: PhD-trained clinicians with a focus on assessment or therapy

Psychiatrists: MD-trained physicians

Therapist: Can be any of the above, or others

How do you access care in BC?

1. Family doctor or nurse practitioner
2. Adult community mental health services (MHSU teams or centres)
3. If you're 12–24: Foundry BC
4. Private counselling/psychology – if financial means
5. LEAF clinic team – referral to LEAF counsellor (and/or psychiatrist)
6. Emergency: 911 or emergency room



A few resources

Anxiety Canada: <https://www.anxietycanada.com>

Bounce Back online (CBT): <https://online.bouncebackonline.ca>

Wellness Together Canada: <https://www.wellnesstogether.ca/en-CA>

Mind Health BC: <http://www.mindhealthbc.ca>

Foundry Resource Library: <https://foundrybc.ca/resource-library/>

Mind Space (virtual skills groups – requires referral): <https://mind-space.ca/>

Emergencies/crisis lines:

- Call 9-1-1 if you or someone you know is trying to end your or their own life or drug overdose.
- 9-8-8 (call or text): National Suicide Crisis Helpline
- 310-6789: BC Mental Health & Crisis Response
- 1-800-SUICIDE / 1-800-784-2433: BC Suicide Prevention and Intervention Line

Summary

- Mental health (like physical health) involves a continuum of wellness.
- Mental health disorders are common, and survivors of early life cancer and blood disorders have some specific vulnerability factors.
- There are lots of effective treatments including psychotherapy and medications.
- Help is available!

Questions, comments?
