

# Taking Care of Your Mental Health

Mental health is the state of well-being you experience when you are in harmony with yourself, others, and your environment.

IN THIS BROCHURE, YOU WILL FIND INFORMATION TO HELP YOU:  
Take care of your own mental health and that of your loved ones  
Better understand mental disorders and how to recover from them  
Know which professional and community resources you can count on in case of problems

In order to live life to its fullest and reach your full potential, it is just as important to take care of your mental health as it is your physical health. But in the bustle of daily life, we do not always make our well-being a priority. We let stress build up and we forget to take care of ourselves and of our relationships with others. In the long term, this neglect can lead to discomfort or uneasiness.

This could contribute to the development of certain mental illnesses, such as depression or anxiety disorders. Taking care of your mental health means seeking a **balance** in all aspects of your life: personal, family, social, and professional. It involves equipping yourself to cope with difficulties. And for people suffering from mental illness, it also means taking measures to promote recovery.

## ENDORSED BY:

Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux du Québec / Douglas Mental Health University Institute / Collège des médecins du Québec / Fédération des médecins omnipraticiens du Québec / Fédération des médecins spécialistes du Québec / Association des médecins psychiatres du Québec / Ordre des psychologues du Québec / Ordre des travailleurs sociaux et des thérapeutes conjugaux et familiaux du Québec / Revivre / Mental Illness Foundation / Canadian Mental Health Association / Société québécoise de la schizophrénie / Fédération des familles et amis de la personne atteinte de maladie mentale / Phobies-Zéro



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**espresso**

4521, rue Clark, Montréal (Québec) H2T 2T3  
t. 514.286.9696 f. 514.284.9152 [espressocommunication.com](http://espressocommunication.com)

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# / Do You Know Your Strengths?

Certain habits and ways of thinking or acting represent **strengths that you can develop throughout your lifetime**. They help you maintain personal balance and good mental health. They also promote recovery in cases of mental illness.

The test\* below helps you assess your current strengths and target those you might want to work on. For each of the statements below, check the box that best describes your general situation or lifestyle **in the past two months**.

MOST OF  
THE TIME

OFTEN

SOMETIMES

RARELY

## MY LIFESTYLE

I am physically active almost every day.				
I eat healthy foods.				
I sleep well and get enough rest.				
I cope well with stress.				
I am able to relax.				
I find my living environment pleasant.				
I consume alcohol in moderation (between 0 and 2 drinks per day).				
I avoid taking drugs.				

## MY OUTLOOK ON LIFE

I try to live in the present instead of dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.				
I tend to emphasize the good side of people and situations.				
I try to learn from life's challenges.				
I find creative ways to express myself and to solve problems.				
I have a good sense of humour.				
I feel that life is worth living.				

## MY REACTIONS

I try to adapt to situations that I cannot change.				
I try to change situations that I believe I can change.				
I am able to acknowledge my mistakes.				
I adapt well to change.				
I feel that I have power over my life.				

**\*Warning: this questionnaire is a tool to promote awareness. It should not be interpreted as providing a medical diagnosis, and should not take the place of consultation with a health care professional.**

MOST OF  
THE TIME

OFTEN

SOMETIMES

RARELY

### HOW I ORGANIZE MY LIFE

I am able to prioritize my responsibilities.

I set time aside for myself.

I spend quality time with family members and friends.

### MY RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

I have a good support network.

I ask for support when I feel I need it.

I am able to express my emotions.

I respect others, even when I do not share their opinions.

I am able to assert myself and earn the respect of others.

### MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MYSELF

I am able to take good care of myself.

I recognize and respect my limits.

I can do a good job without seeking perfection at all costs.

I appreciate compliments.

I am able to accept criticism without feeling demeaned.

I like myself the way I am, with all my strengths and weaknesses.

### CALCULATE YOUR TOTAL

## Interpreting Your Results

The statements for which you checked **Most of the time** or **Often** represent strengths you can count on. These strengths help you enjoy life and deal with day-to-day challenges. The statements for which you checked **Sometimes** or **Rarely** correspond to strengths you might want to work on in order to feel better.

If you checked **Most of the time** or **Often 20 times or more**, you are well equipped to cope with difficulties. However, you can still consult the following pages to learn more about improving the strengths you already have.

If you checked **Most of the time** or **Often between 15 and 19 times**, or if you found you had fewer strengths in a particular category, this may be an indication that you need to attend to your mental health before problems appear.

If you checked **Most of the time** or **Often 14 times or fewer**, this does not mean that you have a mental illness. However, it would be a good idea to check for signs of certain disorders (see pages 7 to 9 of this brochure) and, if there are any signs, **discuss the situation with a health care professional**. As well, if you wish to obtain additional information, try consulting one of the community resources listed at the end of this brochure.





# / Developing Strengths for Good Mental Health

It is reassuring to remember that **you can have an impact on your health**. By working to improve your strengths, you can maintain or recover your balance in life, and thus contribute to your mental and physical health.

## STRENGTHS

### One Step at a Time

Lifestyle habits or ways of thinking and acting can be changed! You can start by setting realistic goals and then progressing at your own pace. The most important thing is to have confidence in yourself, and to remember that:

- small changes can make a big difference.
- change is a personal undertaking that requires **time** and **perseverance**. It is normal to make several attempts before adopting a new habit. Even moments that you consider to be failures can bring you closer to a goal.
- there are **things you can do to help** increase your chances of successfully reaching your goals. They can be as simple as signing up for an activity that helps you get more exercise or relax.
- sometimes the support of a **health care professional**, such as a psychologist, can make things easier. Even if you are not suffering from a mental disorder, working on building your strengths with the support of a professional and learning to know yourself better can help you cope with the troubles of life more easily.



## Your Lifestyle

- Physical activity has a positive impact on mental health. It results in improved mood, better sleep, renewed energy, a sensation of well-being, and reduced stress and anxiety. Doing **30 minutes of moderate physical activity every day**, which can be broken down into blocks of 10 minutes or more (e.g. 2 x 15 minutes, 3 x 10 minutes), is recommended. The secret to sticking to it is to find an activity you enjoy and to make room for it in your schedule.
- **Getting enough quality sleep** is fundamental to health and has a positive effect on mood, stress, motivation, concentration, and memory.
- The energy and nutrients needed for good overall health come from **healthy eating**, including:
  - plenty of fruit and vegetables
  - a variety of whole-grain breads and cereals
  - fish, poultry, lean meats, legumes, and eggs
  - low-fat dairy products
  - sources of "good" fats in moderate quantities (e.g., olive or canola oil; non-hydrogenated soft margarine made of olive or canola oil; nuts and seeds, including ground flax seeds)
  - between 6 and 8 glasses of water a day
- It is to your advantage to **be careful with substances that act on the nervous system**: alcohol and caffeine should be consumed in moderation, medication should be taken only as prescribed, and illicit drugs and tobacco should be avoided completely.
- Over the long term, high levels of stress can become toxic. **Managing stress** involves determining what is causing it and seeking ways to reduce it. Stress can arise when facing new, unpredictable, or threatening situations (for example, a new job, an exam, or an overwhelming workload). It is also caused by your way of seeing things: the less you believe you are able to handle a situation, the greater the stress. A word of caution, however: insufficient stress can also be harmful and de-motivating.
- Your well-being increases when you find yourself in a **pleasant living environment**. To ease your mind, it is often enough to reduce certain irritants by making small gestures, such as turning off the television during meals or putting away clothes that are lying around. Feeling comfortable in your external environment and workplace also have a positive effect on your health.

## Essential Fats!

**Omega-3** fatty acids are essential to your health. They support, among other things, proper body and brain functioning. Fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel, sardines, herring, and trout are excellent sources of these fats, so it is a good idea to eat these kinds of fish at least twice a week, either fresh or canned — but not smoked. Canola oil and ground flaxseeds also contain omega-3s, but in smaller quantities.

## Your Relationship with Yourself

**Self-esteem** is key to mental health. To foster it, you must develop your ability to:

- love yourself just as you are, with all your strengths and weaknesses;
- respect your own needs;
- appreciate both compliments and constructive criticism;
- take satisfaction in what you do;
- find ways to fulfill your dreams; and
- see yourself in a positive light.

## Your Outlook on Life

**Life is happening here and now.** Dwelling on the past and worrying about the future are the worst thing you can do for your psychological well-being. You can learn from the past, but living continuously in your memories, good or bad, prevents you from taking advantage of the present. And while it is good to have projects and make plans, you waste your energy when you worry constantly about the future.

**Creativity** is the ability to imagine things in a different light and picture new possibilities. It can be called upon in all kinds of situations, and not only in the realm of the arts! For example, creativity can be very useful to see your problems from different angles. The use of **humour** can also help you gain perspective on events and play down certain upsetting situations. As well, **feeling connected to others** and to nature allows you to broaden your perspective and gives meaning to life in general.

**Your outlook on life** greatly affects your mood and emotions. If you are inclined to “see the glass as half-empty,” then you probably tend to dwell on problems. You likely imagine that things will turn out badly, that people are ill-intentioned, or that everything always goes wrong. If this is the case, it is a sign that you could benefit from a more optimistic outlook. It is not a question of having an unrealistic view of life, but rather of adopting a perspective that is:

- more accurate, acknowledging the positive as well as the negative aspects of a situation;
- more flexible, taking into account the perceptions of others; and
- more realistic, allowing you to set realistic objectives that you can meet.

**By rising to life's challenges and making use of your strengths,** rather than seeing them as injustices or strokes of fate, you gain a greater sense of control over your life.

## Your Reactions

When faced with challenging situations, it is a good idea to step back and give yourself time to think them through. If you encounter a **situation over which you have no control**, there is no use in fighting it. Instead, you are better off finding ways to adapt to it. If it is a **situation you can change**, you can always ask yourself whether it is worth it or whether you would rather save your time and energy for other things. This attitude gives you power over your own life.

**Being able to acknowledge that you made a mistake or were wrong** is a sign of flexibility and maturity. But acknowledging your mistakes does not mean fostering feelings of guilt or shame, which drain your self-confidence and energy. Instead, it gives you the opportunity to learn. After all, everyone makes mistakes and it is important not to define yourself through your imperfections!

Another sign of flexibility is **knowing how to adapt to change**. Life is always in motion, so you might as well get used to it. This sometimes means having to leave behind an old reality in order to welcome a new stage of life and all of its possibilities.

## How You Organize Your Life

Organizing your time is very useful if you want to maintain a **balance between all aspects of your life** (your relationships, leisure activities, and work). You can make it a habit to:

- rank your responsibilities by order of priority, putting things that are urgent and important to you at the top of the list
- plan your schedule in advance, allowing time for each thing on your list
- say no to certain requests or put them off until later

## Your Relationships with Others

**Having a network of people** with whom you enjoy spending time and whom you can count on when things are not going so well is a precious asset in life. Small pleasures are more enjoyable and problems less serious when they are shared with others. And being there for others in return can also do you good.

**In order to create harmonious relationships** with others, it is important to learn to clearly **express your emotions, needs, and limits**. As well, it is important to learn to listen to others in return, avoiding accusations or judgments, cultivating respect, and being open to differences.



A woman with dark hair, wearing a bright red quilted jacket, is smiling and looking down. She is sitting in a field of tall, dry grass. The background shows a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

## / Understanding Mental Disorders

Each year, thousands of Canadians are affected by one form or another of mental illness. **One in every five people will experience a mental-health problem at some time in their lives. These are individuals of every age and from all backgrounds.**

Mental disorders are **caused by a set of diverse factors** (biological, psychological, social, economic, and environmental). They can be triggered by a situation such as a conflict at work or at home, a high level of stress or a physical illness.

## ILLNESSES

### Signs to Watch For

People who go through an episode of mental illness experience **changes** in their moods, emotions, behaviour or relationships with others. They may also suffer from **various physical problems**, making it difficult to learn, work, make decisions, have fun, communicate, or take care of themselves. Some people have such intense suffering that they withdraw from others, and may even think about suicide.

## Depression

Here is a summary of a few mental disorders and the signs or symptoms they may produce.

Depression is the most commonly diagnosed mental health disorder in Canada. **If some of the following symptoms are present for at least two weeks**, it could be a case of depression:

- **Feelings of sadness or emptiness**
- **Irritability**
- **Loss of pleasure or interest in usual activities**
- Fatigue, lack of energy
- Insomnia or oversleeping
- Changes in appetite
- Weight loss or gain
- Feelings of worthlessness, negative self-image
- Withdrawal from others
- Appearance of physical symptoms, such as headaches, backaches or upset stomach
- Agitation, difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Feelings of despair and/or suicidal thoughts: **in this case, consult a health care professional immediately.**

## Bipolar Disorder

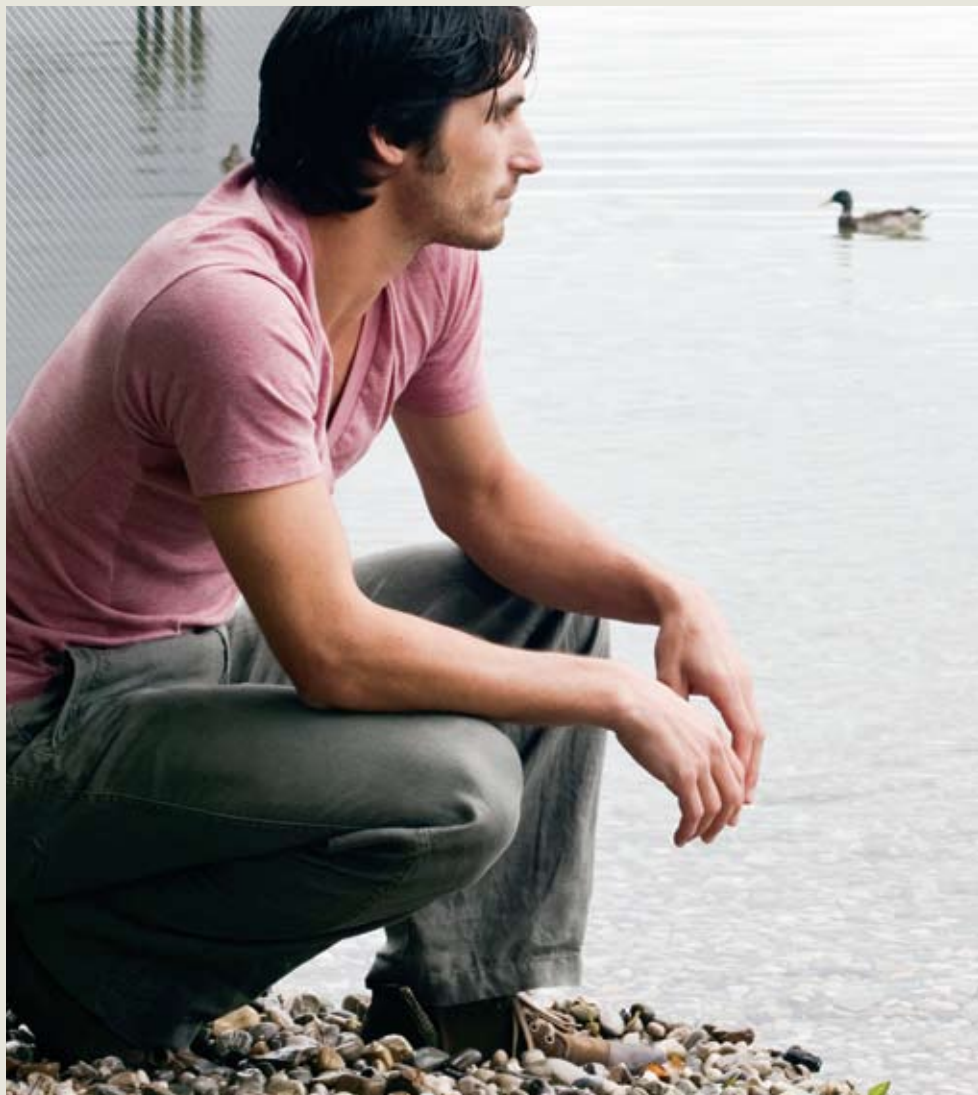
This disorder causes intense mood swings: manic and depressive episodes follow one another at a rate that varies depending on the individual. These episodes may be characterized by the following signs:

### Manic episode

- Feeling of euphoria
- High self-esteem or delusions of grandeur
- Reduced hours of sleep
- Increased energy
- Agitation
- Increased rate of speech
- Racing thoughts
- Difficulty focusing or concentrating
- Increased activity (social, professional, etc.)
- Reckless behaviour (financial, sexual, etc.)

### Depressive episode

The signs are similar to those of depression





## Generalized Anxiety Disorder

An anxiety disorder may be involved in cases where the following signs have been present for several months:

- Constant or excessive worry about real events
- Insomnia or tendency to oversleep
- Agitation, difficulty concentrating
- Physical disorders (muscle tension, headaches, stomach aches, difficulty breathing, etc.)

## Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

People suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder are troubled by a persistent idea (obsession) and, in order to calm down, repeat a behaviour (compulsion). For example, they may wash their hands constantly to avoid germs or check that the door is locked dozens of times before leaving the house. When such behaviours interfere with the personal, family, and professional lives of those affected, it is best to consult a professional in order to regain a state of well-being.

## Phobias

A phobia is an intense and uncontrollable fear of a situation, an element of nature, an object, or an animal.

## Panic Disorder

A panic attack is an episode of intense anxiety that strikes brutally, without any apparent reason, and causes symptoms of physical distress such as:

- racing heart
- sweating
- difficulty breathing
- trembling

People may also believe that they are having a heart attack or that they are dying. Panic disorder is the term applied when someone experiences multiple panic attacks that interfere with their ability to function normally.

## Schizophrenia

A person with schizophrenia may:

- have difficulty distinguishing between what is real and what is not
- hear voices, smell or see things that do not exist
- withdraw from others
- behave in a strange manner
- feel persecuted or believe that those around them are hostile toward them
- speak incoherently
- lack motivation
- appear to not feel any emotions

The condition may sometimes start very progressively, but may also appear suddenly.

## What about Young People?

Note that the symptoms may be a bit different in young people. For example, adolescents may express their suffering through alcohol or drug consumption. In children, repeated stomach aches may reveal separation anxiety or school phobia.

**"We take great trouble and impose privations on ourselves to heal our bodies; we can surely, I think, do as much to heal the soul."**

George Sand



## / Toward Recovery

With help and appropriate treatment, it is possible to recover from illness and regain your balance. In many cases, this means being cured. For individuals living with a mental disorder that requires long-term treatment, recovery means resuming a balanced and satisfying life in spite of the presence of illness.

## RECOVERY

### Multi-Faceted Treatment

If you are concerned about your mental health, do not hesitate to **consult a health care professional** such as a doctor, a psychologist, or a social worker. He or she will assess your situation and, if needed, recommend suitable treatment and an approach to help you recover.

The treatment of mental disorders varies depending on the illness and the individual, but it is generally based on a **combination of psychotherapy, medication, and other strategies to help you regain your balance.**

All aspects of treatment are important and complement one another. Research shows, for example, that medication is more effective in preventing the risk of a relapse of illness when it is combined with psychological care.

### The Key to Recovery

In order to regain your balance, it is useful to:

- participate actively and faithfully in your psychotherapy;
- ensure regular follow-ups with your health care professionals;
- respect the dosage and duration of your medication;
- adopt and maintain a healthy lifestyle;
- work as a team with the people who support you; and
- always consult a health care professional before changing or discontinuing any component of your treatment, even if you are feeling better.

## Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is an essential component to recovery. It helps you determine the emotions, thoughts, and behaviours that are harmful to your mental well-being. As well, psychotherapy helps you become aware of your injuries, develop your strengths, regain your balance, and enjoy a more satisfying life.

Getting involved in treatment and establishing a relationship of confidence with your therapist are the keys to successful psychotherapy. From the very first meeting with the professional you have chosen, you should be sure that you find the suggested approach and treatment plan suitable.

To find a recognized professional, you can ask your doctor or consult the resources on the last page of this brochure.

The cost of private consultations is not covered by Quebec's health insurance plan, but most private insurance plans will pay part of these services. Psychological services may also entitle you to income tax credits.

## Medication

Like physical illnesses, mental disorders sometimes require medication for effective treatment. Medication works by re-establishing the chemical balance of the brain. Various types of medication may be used.

### Antidepressants

In cases of depression, they help restore appetite, sleep, energy levels, and feelings of enjoyment. Contrary to popular belief, antidepressants do not create dependency.

### Mood stabilizers

They may be used to treat mood disorders, such as those experienced by people with bipolar disorders.

### Anxiolytics

They are sometimes needed to treat certain anxiety disorders.

### Antipsychotics (or neuroleptics)

They are used in cases where a patient experiences psychotic episodes: loss of contact with reality, confused thoughts, delirium, etc.

## Strategies for Regaining Your Balance

Mental illness has an impact on all aspects of life. In order for you to overcome its consequences, regain a better quality of life, and prevent relapses, you may find it helpful to make use of certain strategies.

- Often, an illness is an opportunity for you to realize that you have not taken proper care of yourself and your health. If this is so, it is important to make yourself a priority and work on **developing the strengths** that are described on pages 4 to 6 of this brochure!
- It is also important not to withdraw from others. You can find help and comfort among your loved ones, as well as by joining a support group or a self-help group to **talk with others who are experiencing similar things**.
- Even if you are affected by an illness, **you are so much more than just someone who is sick**. You are a whole individual with unique interests, skills, and qualities. It is wise to focus on these healthy parts of yourself rather than fixating on the illness. Focusing on what is going well helps you get better!
- Even if your heart is not always in it and you are short of energy, **keeping up a certain level of activity**, while respecting your limits, helps you feel better. For example, you can set small, realistic objectives during the day, beginning with activities that make you feel good.

## A Note about Natural Products

It is always wise to check with a pharmacist before taking natural products. Some of them may cause undesirable effects or dangerous interactions with medication. In certain cases, there may also be contraindications.





## Fighting Prejudice

People touched by mental illnesses often face the greatest suffering as a result of prejudice. The best way to fight prejudice is to have the **COURAGE TO GET INFORMED** about mental illnesses.

## Helping a Loved One

If someone close to you seems to be suffering from a mental health problem, do not hesitate to share your concern with him or her. Without judgement, encourage him or her to consult a health care professional. You can also suggest he or she read this brochure.

If his or her behaviour (such as withdrawal or giving away significant possessions, for example) or statements (such as, "I'd rather not be here") lead you to fear that he or she is considering suicide, **do not hesitate to ask directly** whether this is the case and whether he or she has a plan to do so. Note that **for teenagers**, the interval between the suicidal thought and the decision to act on it is often much shorter than for adults.

## Preventing Suicide

The vast majority of people who take their lives or attempt to do so suffer from a mental disorder.

**If you are considering suicide or if you are afraid that someone around you is thinking about taking his or her own life, it is urgent that you seek help at once.**

- **Association québécoise de prévention du suicide, 1 866 APPELLE (277-3553)**
- **9-1-1 in the case of an emergency**

## Resources Available to You

### HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

- Your **doctor** or **pharmacist**
- The **CLSC** or **CSSS** in your area  
[www.msss.gouv.qc.ca/en/repertoires/csss](http://www.msss.gouv.qc.ca/en/repertoires/csss)
- **Ordre des psychologues du Québec**  
[www.ordrepsy.qc.ca](http://www.ordrepsy.qc.ca) / 1 800 561-1223
- **Ordre des travailleurs sociaux et des thérapeutes conjugaux et familiaux du Québec**  
[www.optsq.org](http://www.optsq.org) / 1 888 731-9420
- Professional services at **school or work**
- **Info-Santé**  
Dial **8-1-1**  
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- **Douglas Institute**  
[www.douglas.qc.ca](http://www.douglas.qc.ca)

### COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- **Fédération des familles et amis de la personne atteinte de maladie mentale**  
(Federation of families and friends of people with mental illnesses)  
[www.ffapamm.com](http://www.ffapamm.com) / 1 800 323-0474
- **Mental Illness Foundation**  
[www.mentalillnessfoundation.org](http://www.mentalillnessfoundation.org)  
1 888 529-5354
- **Canadian Mental Health Association**  
[www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)
- **Revivre**  
Quebec Anxiety, Depressive and Bipolar Disorder Support Association  
[www.revivre.org](http://www.revivre.org) / 1 866 REVIVRE (738-4873)

### • Phobies-Zéro

Support and help group for young people and adults suffering from anxiety disorders  
[www.phobies-zero.qc.ca](http://www.phobies-zero.qc.ca) / 1 866 922-0002

### • ATAQ

Association Troubles Anxieux du Québec  
[www.ataq.org](http://www.ataq.org)

### • Help Online

[www.aideenligne.ca/en](http://www.aideenligne.ca/en) / 1 866 766-5620

### • Société québécoise de la schizophrénie

[www.schizophrenie.qc.ca](http://www.schizophrenie.qc.ca) / 1 866 888-2323

### • Association québécoise de prévention du suicide

24 hours a day, 7 days a week everywhere in Québec  
[www.aqps.info](http://www.aqps.info)  
**1 866 APPELLE (277-3553)**

- In case of an **emergency**: dial **9-1-1**.

### PASS THIS BROCHURE ON!

The series «Taking Care of Your Mental Health» was developed by **Louis Gagnon**, M.D. and by **Annik Léveillé** and **Danièle Prévost** of the ACTI-MENU Health Program, in collaboration with: **Huguette Bélanger**, M.D., Direction de la santé publique de la Montérégie; **Hani Iskandar** and **Mimi Israël**, Psychiatrists, Douglas Mental Health University Institute; **Isabelle Queval**, Psychologist; **Louise Latulippe**, Nurse, D.E.S.S., Direction de la santé mentale, Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux; **Jean-Rémy Provost**, General Manager, Revivre; **Jean-Luc Taschereau**, President, Mental Illness Foundation; **Francine Dubé**, General Manager, Société québécoise de la schizophrénie.

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