Tools for Youth

Family Navigation Project

at Sunnybrook

10 things

You Should Know About Accessing Mental Health and Addictions Care

Learning about mental health and addictions (MHA) care can help you feel prepared for transitions. Here's what we learned from our research participants (including youth) can be helpful to know when accessing MHA care.

1 Seeking help early is important.

Sometimes it can be complex and difficult to recognize signs or symptoms of MHA concerns. Even when signs are recognized, some youth and caregivers believe that MHA symptoms will resolve on their own. Fear, doubt, past negative experiences, and/or stigma also stop some youth from sharing their concerns. These can call cause delays in seeking help. Delaying help can worsen MHA concerns and impact your life negatively.



This is why accessing help as early as possible is important to learn how to manage your concerns and achieve your MHA-related goals.

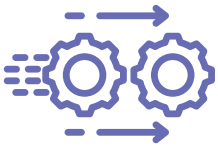
> "It's very isolating to not actually open up about it."
> *- Navigator*

2 Interruptions in care can happen.

You may experience interruptions in MHA care, especially when you turn 18 and have to transition from the child MHA system to the adult MHA system. Care can also be interrupted if you choose to end an unhelpful service in order to find something better for your needs. Sometimes, you might not receive enough information and support, leaving you confused and frustrated. Planning ahead and asking for support from your circle of care can help prevent interruptions.



3 Transitions need to happen when you are prepared and ready.



Many transitions into the adult MHA system happen based on age. This might not be helpful to you because it does not consider when you are ready to move to the adult MHA system. You might not feel ready because these transitions are complicated and they did not get help with planning for transitions. Service providers might not have the time or resources to plan ahead of time. However, to help you get the right support, it is important for service providers to prepare you to make your own decisions and start transitions when you are ready.

> "Maybe starting to say, 'we only have one year left, here's how we can start preparing you for adult services.' That would definitely have been appreciated. It would have saved me a lot of headaches." – *Youth*

> "When I was in high school there was a counsellor at the school that we were able to go see. Once I graduated, I was no longer able to access that service… That transition was difficult." - *Youth*

4 MHA care and information needs to be youth-appropriate and accessible.



Youth told us that they sometimes get support that is not appropriate or specialized enough for their unique needs and goals. Some youth might feel out of place because of their age. Some services might feel unwelcoming or unappealing.

> "The environment's very child-like and it's like, I'm an adult, but I'm being treated like a child because that's the only group that they know how to work with." - *Youth*

It can be difficult to find helpful and organized MHA information, which prevents understanding and awareness of the adult MHA system. The structure and language of many websites can also seem outdated or overly professional. Lack of accessible MHA information can lead you to search for options online or ask family and friends, which unfortunately can cause you to rely on information that is inaccurate or unreliable.

Some barriers in the MHA system make it difficult to access care that is right for you. These barriers may include –

- Long wait times
- Costly services
- Inconvenient locations
- Restrictive eligibility criteria (requirements for age, diagnosis, referrals, etc.)
- Lack of culturally responsive resources

These barriers can cause you to feel stuck and hopeless. Due to these barriers, some youth are only able to access services when they are experiencing a crisis, meaning they are not connected with support from day to day. While there may be different solutions to deal with these barriers, we heard that youth want MHA services to be more friendly, appealing, and accessible.



5 Continuous support allows you to have stability in care.

Some MHA services tend to be short-term (i.e., 2-3 months), meaning that youth often start over and bounce between services. To access new supports, you might have to repeat your story to multiple service providers, which can be stressful. In short-term services, it can be difficult to build meaningful relationships with service providers. These experiences can be overwhelming and demotivating. Long-term, continuous support is needed for you to have stability in MHA care.

> "When I was accessing a new service, the service provider was very conscious that sometimes people used services before and that having to repeat yourself and go over things again can be a difficult thing. So just the fact that these service providers acknowledged it, I found them to be helpful." - *Youth*

6 Appropriate skills and approaches of service providers are essential.

Youth need and appreciate choice, participation, and independence in care. Skilled professionals can guide you in the right direction, help you make decisions, and understand MHA information. Proactive and compassionate service providers are essential to help you transition through MHA care.

When accessing MHA care, some youth encounter unhelpful service providers. Service providers told us that roles and responsibilities can sometimes limit them in providing meaningful support. Some service providers are not able to provide long-term support or learn about other services for you because of the divided nature of the MHA system. Service providers also need specific training to better understand and address youth needs and help guide you to what is next for you.

> "Being able to have someone to act as a waypoint, a signpost, whatever you want to call it, to be able to put you in the right direction, and say here are the options, I think would be incredible." - *Youth*

7 Coordination and collaboration can help you transition through the MHA system.

You may find that it takes a lot of time to understand the different ways to access MHA care. Some youth find it confusing and difficult to understand the pathways even if they are familiar with the MHA system. Some youth find services by chance. Youth often feel overlooked and lost due to unclear pathways or because their providers do not talk to each other. Disagreements between youth, caregivers, and service providers also make it difficult to navigate the MHA system. More coordination and collaboration among you, any involved caregivers, and your service providers can help everyone understand how to access and transition through MHA services.



8 Flexible MHA services can be helpful to access care.

Youth told us that flexibility is important when receiving and accessing MHA care. Youth find it valuable when MHA services offer different options to connect in-person and/or virtually (e.g., text, email, etc.) Some youth also need support in the evenings or on weekends but they note that many services are offered when they are busy with school or jobs. Youth also told us that having flexible age criteria would be helpful instead of starting or ending service abruptly at age 18. Some youth benefit when MHA services are flexible with including caregivers in their care.

9 Holistic approaches can help you address different goals and needs.

Along with transitions through the MHA system, you may experience multiple changes with school, housing, relationships, employment, etc. Trying to get support for each of these transitions separately can be exhausting and overwhelming. MHA services that use holistic approaches (ones that provide psychoeducation, peer support, support for schooling, support for housing, etc.), can help you address different goals and needs. Holistic approaches that provide family support can also help your family members understand and support you through the MHA system.

10 Involving caregivers requires communication.

Some youth involve caregivers because they provide practical support (paying for care, transportation, etc.) and/or emotional support (validation, reassurance, etc.). Some youth may feel that it is not appropriate or beneficial to involve caregivers because of problematic family dynamics (poor relationships, trauma, abuse, etc.). If you choose to involve caregivers, it is important to keep in mind that it can also be difficult to involve caregivers in your care due to confidentiality issues. Confidentiality-related barriers can cause some youth to feel alone, especially if they were relying on their caregivers to support them. Caregivers can also feel stressed and "left out of the loop." In these cases, peer support and psychoeducation could be helpful to your caregivers, to help them manage their stress and support you in the best way possible. Communicating with your providers about the ways you wish to involve your caregivers in your care can be helpful.

> "I think also that had I not been in a household where seeking mental health was encouraged, and where I spent much time knowing and practicing looking for services and having that experience growing up, I don't think I would be nearly as comfortable being able to do it myself."
> *- Youth*

What Can Help When Transitioning between Child and Adult Systems

Upon turning 18, you may transition into the adult mental health and addictions (MHA) system from the child MHA system. Here is what you can look and ask for to support an optimal experience.

Note – Information for this tool was obtained from Study 1. Citations are available upon request if you are interested in learning about the academic articles cited in this study.



- **Look for these qualities in service providers:**
  - **Supportive, motivating, approachable, and flexible**
  - Focus on building **meaningful relationships**
  - Actively involve **you** and **caregivers** (if you choose) in planning and decisions
  - Focus on your **strengths and preferences**
  - Help with **other needs** such as education and housing
  - **Clearly talk to you** about transitions at the beginning of treatment or at least six months before ending the service
  - Invite you to have **conversations** about transitions
  - Encourage **independence** while being available to you
  - Ask for your **feedback** and **opinions** (especially because your perspective may be different from others)
  - Focus on **development** rather than age

- **Ask for information and resources such as:**
  - **Types of supports** available and what to **expect** from them
  - **Peer support**
  - How your **family** can support you
  - What **policies** are in place to manage transitions
  - **Changes in confidentiality policies** as you transition into the adult system.
  - **How to manage** MHA concerns and other issues such as problems with finances and/or housing
  - **Barriers** to care you might come up against, such as strict eligibility criteria, long wait lists, and unclear information
  - **Differences** between the child and adult MHA system you might encounter



- **Ask for transitions to take place:**
  - When you are **ready**
  - **Slowly, proactively**, at **your pace**, and at an appropriate **time** decided together with your service provider
  - With **parallel care**, which means both child and adult service providers provide care leading up to, during, and for some time after transitions
  - With **roles and responsibilities** of everyone involved determined from the beginning
  - With opportunity for **tours** of services and **meeting with potential service providers** to make transitions easier

- **Ask services to:**
  - Consider using an **age window** (e.g. ages 18-30) when possible instead of an age cut-off (e.g. service ends at age 18)
  - Involve diverse service providers and ensure all providers take part in **cultural sensitivity and safety training**
  - Create opportunities to **learn from** and **share your experiences** with other youth
  - Have a **designated transition worker** to prepare you and make sure that you receive care without interruption and/or loss of support
  - Have programs that are **appropriate for your age** and use treatment models that are the **right fit and intensity level**
  - Create a **youth-centred model of care** to support transitions for youth specifically
  - Have a commitment to and/or focus on **equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility**
  - **Share information** with you in a way that's appealing to you, such as through social media
  - Promote **MHA awareness and reduce stigma**



What to Expect when Working with Navigation Teams

As youth, you may experience many changes or **"transitions"** after reaching a certain age and/or after completing a service. These transitions can interrupt your mental health and addictions (MHA) care. You may need more support during this time. **Navigation services**, like the Family Navigation Project at Sunnybrook, can support you during these transitions and help you find a MHA service that meets your needs. Successful navigation can help you feel and function better.

Youth, caregivers, service providers, and navigators told us the benefits and limitations of navigation services. Here's what you can expect when working with navigation teams.

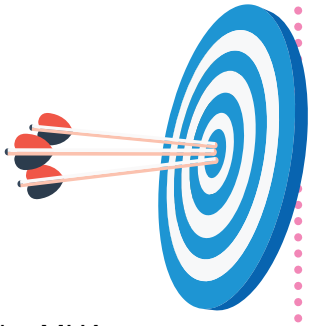




Benefits of Navigation

Navigators…

1. Work well with youth and caregivers experiencing **complex concerns** (i.e., multiple service needs, multiple diagnoses, complicated family dynamics, etc.).
2. Ask for **different types of information** to make a plan of care (i.e., goals, needs, challenges, etc.).
3. Commit to finding a **good service match** to address your unique goals.
4. Apply knowledge from **different perspectives** (e.g., psychiatry, social work, etc.) and offer **training** to help understand and access the MHA system.

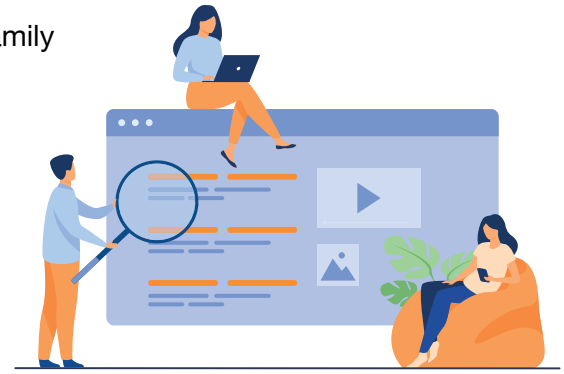


5. **Advocate** for your needs by acting in your favor and supporting you throughout the MHA system.
6. Work with you to create, understand, and follow a **care plan**.
7. **Collaborate** with you to make plans and **adjust** options provided based on your preferences.
8. **Continuously support** you during your journey. They check-in often and are **open to reconnecting** after service has ended.
9. Find **creative solutions** if you are facing challenges (such as with finances, school, work, etc.).
10. Provide **emotional and moral support** (they actively listen, offer advice and encouragement, etc.)



11. Help **save time** and **reduce burden** by finding information and services for you.
12. **Work with other providers** (such as therapists, family doctors, etc.) to prevent you from repeating your "story" or experiences.
13. Can also **support your family** which can improve relationships and help deal with conflict.





Limitations of Navigation

1. Navigators might not always be able connect you to the right supports because of **challenges in the MHA system** such as long wait lists and lack of resources.
2. If you like to talk to service providers in person, you may find **virtual navigation supports** limiting.
3. Navigation services **do not provide direct services**, which can be difficult if you are looking for immediate therapeutic support (such as 1:1 counselling, family counselling, etc.)
4. Some services are only available once the internal staff of an organization have completed their own assessments (this is called "**centralized access**"). Navigators may not always know information about wait times and services offered at organizations with centralized access.

"I found it a lot easier since meeting my Navigator. I found it a lot easier to connect with different services because part of what my issue was is I didn't necessarily know where to look. [Online searching] only does so much. So a lot of the services that my Navigator introduced me to and that I have started accessing I don't think I would've ever found by myself." – *Youth*



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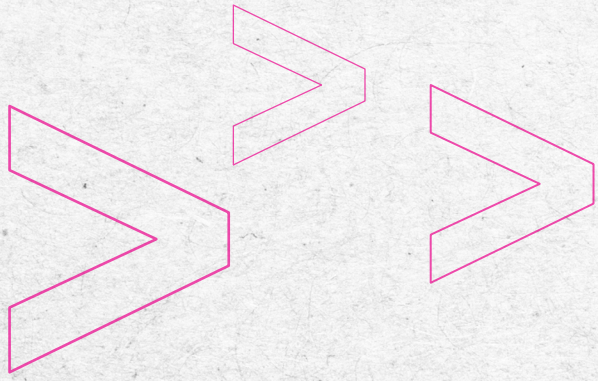

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