

Protocol for Responding to Mental Health Concerns during Peer Support Sessions

Purpose

To establish clear, consistent procedures for researchers and trained peer supporters to follow when participants express or demonstrate mental health concerns, thereby ensuring safety, ethical responsibility, and access to appropriate support.

1. General Principles

- Respect, empathy, and non-judgment must guide all interactions.
- The study staff and trained peer supporters' role is **not to provide counseling**, but to **listen non-directively** and **refer appropriately**.
- Documentation must be factual, non-diagnostic, and securely stored (e.g., noting "participant disclosed distress related to..." without interpretation).

2. When Mental Health Concerns Arise

A. Low to Moderate Distress (e.g., participant becomes tearful, mentions stress or sadness):

- Pause the peer support session
- Offer a break or the option to reschedule.
- Acknowledge their feelings (e.g., "Thank you for sharing that—it sounds like things are difficult right now.").
- With consent, study staff to provide mental health resources (see section 4).
- After the session, study staff to debrief with the PI or designated team member.

B. Signs of High Distress or Crisis (e.g., talk of hopelessness, suicidal ideation, self-harm or harm to others):

- End the peer support session and engage psychiatrist on the study team
- Remain calm and present. Speak slowly and clearly.
- Do **not leave the participant alone** if in person.
- Proceed to follow the steps in section 3.

3. Emergency Response Procedure

If participant is at risk of harm (to self or others):

A. In-Person Session

- If there is **immediate danger**, call **911** or ask participant if they would like you to assist in getting emergency help.
- If participant consents, assist in contacting:
 - 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (call or text)

- CAMH 1-800-463-2338 toll free
 - Local crisis lines (see section 4)
- Remain with the participant until help arrives or safety is confirmed.
- Notify supervisor or PI immediately after safety is ensured.

B. Remote Session (Zoom)

- Ask for participant's **location and phone number**
- Stay on the call.
- Encourage them to call **9-8-8** or offer to call together.
- If they hang up and you're concerned, contact emergency services using provided location.
- Debrief with the PI immediately.

4. Crisis and Mental Health Support Resources

General Mental Health and Wellness Resources

Visit the Canadian Emergency Response Psychosocial Support Network (CanEMERG) Website at <https://canemerg-urgencecan.com/>

- For fact sheets that provide insights on stress, trauma, resilience, and well-being with practical strategies to navigate crises and improve your daily life follow this link: <https://canemerg-urgencecan.com/category/fact-sheets/>
- To find local mental health resources in your area follow this link: <https://canemerg-urgencecan.com/category/mental-health-resources/>

National (Canada-wide)

- 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline – Call or text 9-8-8
- Wellness Together Canada – 1-866-585-0445 / Text WELLNESS to 741741
- Canada Suicide Prevention Service – 1-833-456-4566 / Text 45645
- Hope for Wellness Helpline (Indigenous Peoples includes: First Nations, Inuit and Métis) – 1-855-242-3310 or chat: [Hope for Wellness Chat](#)

Provincial

British Columbia

- Crisis Centre BC: 1-800-784-2433

Ontario

- Distress Centres of Greater Toronto: 416-408-4357 / Text 45645

Alberta

- Mental Health Hotline: 1-877-303-2642
- Edmonton: 780-482-4357
- Calgary: 403-266-4357

5. Post-Incident Protocol

- Complete a secure incident report including:
 - Date, time, participant ID (no names), nature of concern, action taken.
- Notify the Principal Investigator.
- Participate in debrief session.
- Seek internal peer support or professional debriefing as needed.

Sample Email that can be sent to participants:

Subject: Follow-Up and Support Resources

Dear [Participant's First Name],

Thank you again for your participation in our research study. We appreciate your willingness to share your experiences, especially when doing so may be difficult.

We understand that some of the topics discussed can bring up emotional responses. If you are feeling overwhelmed or in distress, please know you are not alone and that support is available. We want to ensure your well-being is prioritized.

Below are some resources that may be helpful:

Immediate Crisis Support (Available 24/7):

9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline: Call or text 9-8-8

Canada Suicide Prevention Service: 1-833-456-4566 / Text 45645

Wellness Together Canada: 1-866-585-0445 / Text WELLNESS to 741741

Hope for Wellness Helpline (support for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples): 1-855-242-3310 or chat online

Regional Resources:

British Columbia: Crisis Centre BC – 1-800-784-2433

Ontario: Distress Centres of Greater Toronto – 416-408-4357 / Text 45645

Alberta: Mental Health Hotline – 1-877-303-264

Edmonton: 780-482-4357

Calgary: 403-266-4357

You can also visit the Canadian Emergency Response Psychosocial Support Network at canemerg-urgencecan.com for fact sheets and local support listings.

If you would like to reschedule or pause your participation in the study, please let us know—your comfort and safety are our priority.

Take care, and don't hesitate to reach out if we can assist further.

Sincerely,

[Your Full Name]