


UNITED WAY

PARTNER CONTENT

# Promoting mental health and well-being

By **Tanya Enberg** Special to the StarSun., Dec. 5, 2021 |  5 min. read Article was updated 6 hrs ago

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a spike in mental health issues among Canadians, yet the challenges and responses vary from community to community. According to Toronto's 2021 Vital Signs Report, 28 per cent of Canadians showed persistent levels of high anxiety during the pandemic, while reported rates of depression are higher in Toronto than nearly anywhere else in the country.

Here is how three different United Way-funded agencies serving diverse communities in the GTA are responding.

## Social Services Network for the York Region

When Ontario faced widespread closures due to COVID-19 lockdowns, the Social Services Network for the York Region (SSN) found itself tasked with a new challenge: How to keep the South Asian seniors it serves socially engaged, empowered and healthy from a distance.

The organization quickly responded by offering virtual workshops to clients, who live primarily in Markham, Richmond Hill and North Scarborough.

Reducing Isolation and Social Exclusion (RISE) is an online program offering workshops on exercise, education, cooking and virtual field trips to places such as The Smithsonian and the Aga Khan Museum. As well, a culturally sensitive mental health initiative, Taking Care of Selfie, aims to break down mental health barriers, while promoting self-care, self-esteem, compassion and addressing grief.

Alykhan Suleman, chief executive officer of SSN, said while many in the community have experienced trauma before immigrating to Canada, addressing mental health issues is often considered taboo.

"People who come here for whatever reason — civil war, conflict, trauma in their own homeland, economic, social reasons, safety — with that sometimes comes baggage," said Suleman. "They don't leave their memories when they come to Canada. They don't leave their social upbringing or the context of their life."

He said some seniors are grappling with a shift in identity. They may no longer be the primary caregiver; the dynamics of decision-making may have changed, and language and cultural barriers can be challenging, while trying to find "a nice middle ground to retain their cultural identity, social identity, and at the same time trying to find a purpose."

Since pivoting to virtual, the demand for RISE keeps growing. It started with two weekly workshops and 20 participants and now runs six days a week with a daily average of 65 participants. "Even though they're not physically together, they're coming together. There's a community to go to," Suleman said.

The plan is to move to a hybrid model, offering virtual and in-person workshops throughout the city. Visit [ssnon.com](http://ssnon.com) for more information.

## Hong Fook Mental Health Association

For many Asian youth already experiencing mental health issues, the pandemic worsened symptoms said Kennes Lin, the lead of youth and family services at the Hong Fook Mental Health Association.

During the 2020/21 academic year, many students no longer had access to in-school social workers, teens were disconnected from friends, they spent long hours at home with family members, all while anti-Asian sentiments were escalating.

Hong Fook, which provides counselling to Asian youth ages 12-25 and their families in the Greater Toronto Area, adapted quickly to help prevent young people in the community from falling through the cracks. During the summer of 2020, as demand for virtual counselling escalated, the United Way-supported agency responded by expanding its roster of clinicians from one to three. It now has seven.

"People are coming in with depression, anxiety, family relationship issues, peer relationship issues, academic stress, and we also saw an increase in OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) cases," said Lin.

She said younger generations were experiencing anti-Asian sentiments for the first time. "Youth were coming to us saying they were being targeted at school. Some in the Asian community were being joked at in micro-aggressive ways, being told to go back to their own country," Lin said. "One student had hand sanitizer thrown at him."

Meanwhile, Lin said that stigma surrounding mental health exists in the community. "It wouldn't be unheard of that the youth themselves are quite aware they're experiencing symptoms of depression, but a lot of parents might have a more traditional sense and see depression maybe as weakness or laziness," said Lin. "And that, in addition to mental health being such a verbal weight you have to express ... makes it especially hard for youth to explain how they're feeling to their parents." For information visit [hongfook.ca](http://hongfook.ca).

**The 519**

For many in 2SLGBTQ+ communities, the impacts of COVID-19 have proved devastating, according to The 519 community centre. Facing increased isolation, unemployment, evictions, homelessness and a rise in mental health issues, The 519 responded by providing hot meals through its ongoing food program, hygiene supplies, clothing, virtual legal clinics, crisis counselling and support to newcomers and refugees.

“Even though the building was physically closed, we were still able to deliver on-the-ground services to our community,” said Yasmeen Persad, coordinator of Trans People of Colour Program (TPOC), a project integral to The 519’s support of BIPOC, trans and non-binary community members.

Disrupting access to in-person counselling, the pandemic “heightened the levels of mental health needs in our community,” Persad said, adding it reaffirmed the need for mental health services, social outlets and access to food, clothing and affordable housing.

Programs such as Breaking the Ice, a peer-led outreach initiative that focuses on supporting LGBTQ2S meth users, and the Friendly Check-in program, created to provide support and a confidential chat, proved especially important. For those unable to speak over the phone, The 519 arranges ongoing in-person appointments. “The 519 Friendly Check-in program gave me a space to talk about the anxiety I was experiencing due to the pandemic,” said one participant.

Meanwhile, the TPOC program launched “**Cooking with Trans People of Colour**,” a cookbook filled with meaningful recipes and sections about cooking on a budget, hormones, healthy eating and sexual health promotion. For more info visit [the519.org](https://the519.org).

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#### STAT BOX OR LARGE NUMBER

##### By the Numbers

7,000+: Number of mental health calls in York Region in 2020, a 40 per cent increase over five years ago

Source: York Regional Police

58: Percentage of Torontonians who reported feeling depressed in April 2021

Source: Vital Signs, 2021

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