


Self Advocacy Toolkit

The logo for Recovery College YVR features a stylized orange sun with rays to the left of the text. The text 'Recovery College' is in black, and 'YVR' is in blue.

Advocacy for your own and others' mental health and/or substance use

This toolkit aims to reduce the stigma associated with asking for support and equip British Columbians with the tools needed to be the best advocate for their own or a loved one's mental health and/or substance use journey. This is particularly important given the significant service and transitional gaps across the mental health and substance use system, making it difficult for individuals to receive appropriate care.

What is self-advocacy for mental health and/or substance use?

Self-advocating for mental health and/or substance use challenges involves speaking up about your feelings and symptoms, asking for what you need and ensuring your rights are respected, all of which can help healthcare providers treat you more effectively.

Self-advocacy refers to actively managing your care and advocating for your needs and preferences within the mental health, substance use, and healthcare systems. This may involve developing strategies for managing symptoms, accessing appropriate treatments and services, and communicating effectively with healthcare providers.



Tips for self-advocating for your mental health and/or substance use

Dr. Donald Cegala has developed the PACE framework:

P Preparing and presenting detailed information about how you are feeling

Prepare ahead of time: Before your appointment, take some time to prepare your questions and concerns. Write them down so you don't forget anything important during the appointment. When doing this, it's essential also to identify your needs, e.g. medication, therapeutic conversations, support networks, cultural healing practices or workplace/school adjustments.

Educate yourself: Educating yourself on symptoms, triggers, and potential treatment is essential to improve your understanding of your mental health and/or substance use challenges and enhance communication with your healthcare professional(s). Gathering information about what you are experiencing will help you better comprehend your experiences.

Be specific: When stating your concerns, be as specific as possible. Give examples of symptoms, when they occur, and how they affect your daily life. This will help your healthcare practitioner understand your concerns and develop an appropriate treatment plan.

Use plain language: Avoid medical jargon or technical terms that may be unfamiliar to your doctor. Use simple and direct language to describe your symptoms and concerns.

A Asking questions if the desired information is not provided

Ask questions: Don't be afraid to ask questions or ask for clarification if you don't understand something. This will help you better understand your condition and treatment options.

Be assertive but respectful: It's essential to be assertive and speak up for yourself and remain respectful and professional during the appointment. Express your concerns as clearly and calmly as possible.

C Checking your understanding of the information given to you

Pause: It's common to feel rushed during a healthcare visit. Before you leave, take a moment to pause and consider whether you understand everything that your healthcare practitioner is advising and telling you. If you don't, take this moment to clarify anything you do not understand.

E Expressing concerns about the recommended treatment

Set boundaries: It is important to establish boundaries and not hesitate to decline things that do not benefit your mental health and/or substance use concerns or go against your cultural beliefs. If a situation is causing stress, anxiety, or any adverse effects, it is crucial to prioritize your well-being and set limits to safeguard it.

Advocate for yourself: If your mental health and/or substance use needs are not being addressed, acknowledged or respected, it is vital to speak up for yourself. This could include talking to your physician, getting a second opinion or registering a grievance with the College of Physicians and Surgeons of B.C. It is crucial to advocate for yourself.

Beyond this, we recommend three additional considerations for effective self-advocacy for mental health and/or substance use:

Bring a support person: If possible, bring a family member or friend to your appointment for support. They can help you remember important details and ask questions on your behalf.

Follow up: Follow up with your healthcare professional after the appointment if you have further concerns or questions. It's important to actively participate in your healthcare and advocate for yourself to ensure you receive the best possible care.

Practice Self-Care: Self-care is a crucial aspect of self-advocacy. It involves taking care of oneself by ensuring adequate sleep, making dietary changes, increasing physical activity, participating in cultural healing practices, and engaging in enjoyable activities.

Example questions to help you prepare to discuss your mental health and/or substance use challenges.

About conditions:

- Will this condition affect my normal activities? If so, how?
- How will I know if the condition is improving or getting worse?
- Are there support groups for this condition? If so, where may I contact them?

About medications:

- Why am I taking them?
- How will I recognize adverse reactions or effects? If I react to medication, what should I do?
- How will this medication interact with other medications, vitamins, or supplements I am taking?
- What will happen if I don't take the medication?

About other treatments:

- What are the benefits of this treatment?
- When will I see the results?
- What are my other treatment options?



Understanding your rights when advocating for mental health and/or substance use support

Awareness of your rights can boost your confidence to speak up for yourself and receive better care.

1 Right to informed consent: As a client, you have the right to be fully informed about your mental health and/or substance use treatment options, including the risks and benefits of each. This means you can ask questions about your treatment plan and feel confident in making informed decisions about your health. Learn more: mindmapbc.ca/articles/the-mental-health-act/

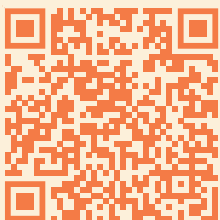
2 Right to healthcare professional/client confidentiality and the limitations of confidentiality: Your mental health and/or substance use records and conversations with your healthcare professional are private and protected by Canadian law. However, there are limits to confidentiality: learn more at bcmentalhealthrights.ca/

3 Right to a second opinion: If you are unsure about your diagnosis, or proposed treatment plan, you have the right to a second opinion. This can help you feel more confident in your treatment decisions and ensure you receive the best care.

In what situations should you advocate for your mental health and/or substance use, and where can you do so?

It's important to advocate for your mental health and/or substance needs during times of stress, anxiety, depression or other mental health and/or substance use challenges. Advocating can be done in various locations, such as healthcare professional offices, mental health and/or substance use services/organizations, support groups, at work, school or in your personal life.

Who to ask for help? Resources and essential links:



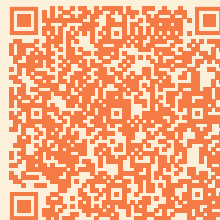
Family Doctor/
General Practitioner



Mental Health
Clinics



Community Mental
Health Centres



Online Mental
Health Services



Crisis Lines in BC



Employee Assistance
Programs (EAP)

Sign up for **Recovery College YVR's free Talking With Your Doctor Course** for a 1.5-hour interactive workshop to empower individuals to actively participate in their healthcare journey. recoverycollegeyvr.ca/course/talking-with-your-doctor/

For more Recovery College YVR courses, tips, and resources on self-advocacy for mental health and/or substance use, visit recoverycollegeyvr.ca/self-advocacy-toolkit/