

Canadian Mental Health Association Takes on COVID-19:

A review of CMHA's risk communication regarding mental health and the pandemic

By: Serena Heerema

Abstract

Over the past few years, the number of Canadians impacted by mental health disorders has increased and the care currently available is inadequate to address this concern. With the entrance of a global pandemic, the risks to mental health have gotten more serious. The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) has targeted risk communication efforts towards the government, calling upon leaders to make mental health as important as physical health. This paper reviews the current research regarding risk communication to guide the CMHA in strengthening its communication efforts. The trust, confidence and cooperation (TCC) model is utilized in conjunction with the findings from political science research, which suggest incorporating an emotional narrative and the right messengers. This paper contributes to the research regarding effective risk communication, particularly regarding public health concerns. Overall, this paper argues that by adopting an emotional narrative in its risk communication, CMHA can increase its influence on the Canadian Government to support mental health care.

Keywords: Risk Communication, Policy Changes, Mental Health

Research Question

How can the Canadian Mental Health Association strengthen its risk communication targeting the Canadian government to increase support for mental health care?

At the dawn of a new decade, the state of mental health in Canada was growing in its need for governmental support. In 2018, one in five Canadians reported needing mental health care, with only half saying their needs were met (Statistics Canada, 2019). During the 2019 federal election, the spotlight on youth's mental health came to the point of calling it a crisis, with calls upon the government to support programs and research that would properly address what was becoming a rising concern (CBC Radio, 2019). That spotlight became even brighter when COVID-19 quickly swept over the world. The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) has been targeting the Canadian government with risk communication efforts, imploring officials to consider mental health just as important as physical health. In this paper, I argue that incorporating an emotional narrative into CMHA's risk communication will strengthen its impact on government policy decisions regarding mental health coverage. This argument uses Siegrist and Zingg's (2014) trust, confidence and cooperation model TCC , alongside Weible et al.'s perspective on policy sciences, to direct CMHA in future risk communication efforts that would support its already strong messaging. Further support is provided through a comparative analysis of Greta Thunberg's United Nations (UN) Climate Action Summit speech, which acts as a strong example of applying effective emotional narrative, which CMHA can draw inspiration from when demanding the Canadian government's assistance in addressing mental health issues.

Literature Review

Public health has regularly been a focus for risk communication, typically centred on physical health instead of mental health. In recent years, there has been an increase in individuals diagnosed with mood and anxiety disorders, making mental health a rising concern across Canada (Weins et al., 2020). While the reason for this increase is unknown, the need for

accessible care remains clear. This section highlights various areas of research: firstly, the impacts of COVID-19 on the state of mental health; secondly, the findings regarding risk communication and public trust; and lastly, the current best practices to influence policy change.

Mental Health and COVID-19

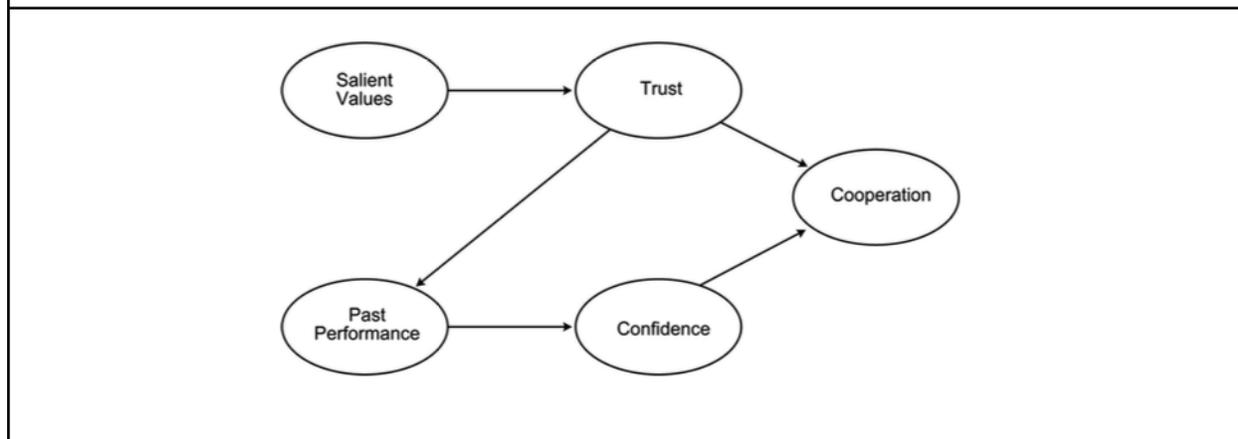
It is understandable that COVID-19 has impacted the well-being of many, as there has been increased worry and stress regarding the future. Research by Paredes et al. (2020) found that “the changes and uncertainty provoked by the pandemic and the measures implemented... have a profound psychological impact on the population's mental well-being, causing an increase in stress, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation” (p. 2). Paredes and his colleagues performed an online survey of college students and discovered supporting evidence that high resiliency, as a personality trait, “prepares individuals to cope with the pandemic's adverse effects” (p. 4). However, those with low levels of resiliency are more prone to have anxiety over the future. These individuals and others in the vulnerable population require additional support to manage the psychological effects of COVID-19. Additional support would require additional funding, which is usually inadequate to begin with.

According to Ransing et al. (2020), the “inadequate funding for mental health resources will affect mental health preparedness and the ability to mitigate against a surge of mental health related problems” (p. 7). In addition, Ransing et al. point out that while the stigma regarding mental health disorders is dissipating, it still remains in societies and therefore continues to be a barrier for developing resources and establishing mental health preparedness. Mental health has been impacted by COVID-19, as outlined by this past section. The next section will review the current research regarding risk communication and public trust.

Risk Communication and Public Trust

Ensuring there is a high level of public trust is crucial to the effectiveness of risk communication. Siegrist and Zingg (2014) found that, “if people lack knowledge, they do not directly assess the risks and benefits associated with a hazard but rely on trust to assess risks and benefits associated with a technology or activity” (p. 24). Siegrist and Zingg strongly emphasized the importance of strategically educating laypeople in a way that doesn’t overwhelm them or provide difficulties to understanding the information. Siegrist and Zingg determined that the trust, confidence and cooperation model (TCC) provides a way to understand the differences and similarities between various trust research (see Figure 1 below). The researchers indicated that the difference between trust and confidence is that trust is based on intentions and values, while confidence is based on the ability of others to perform something. Their review of previous research found that both trust and confidence influence an individual’s willingness to cooperate.

Figure 1: The trust, confidence and cooperation (TCC) model (Siegrist & Zingg, 2014)



Siegrist and Zingg’s (2014) provide a variety of suggestions based on their research. Firstly, “health agencies should aim to build a trusting relationship before a pandemic occurs” (p. 28). Both governmental and health groups are encouraged to communicate transparently, which

includes outlining what is known and what is not known so that individuals can make informed decisions. Lastly, Siegrist and Zingg highlight the importance of a message's source. The person that communicates the information is just as important as what is being said: "The more diverse the experts, the more people can be convinced to adopt the recommended behavior" (Siegrist & Zingg, 2014, p. 29). When fighting for policy changes, these tactics are even more important. The next section reviews the academic research on encouraging policy changes.

Persuading Policy Changes

Weible et al. (2020) utilized the vision of American communication researcher, Harold Lasswell, to guide them in their search for political science's role in managing a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the authors, Lasswell:

Envisioned the policy sciences as providing insights into such situations, challenging and informing ongoing processes and decisions, and foretelling of future scenarios, all with the intent of steering government and society toward greater human dignity for all.

(Weible et al., 2020, p. 226)

Public policies represent the values and priorities of society and can be seen in the form of "law[s], regulation[s], executive order[s], local ordinance[s], and court decision[s]" (Weible et al., 2020, p. 227). Of the various policy perspectives that shape public policy, Weible et al. indicated that elements such as emotions, narratives, messaging and learning can impact the outcome. The researchers indicated that governments have used the emotional tactic to legitimize policy responses and steer public perceptions. In addition, "the policy sciences focus attention on the messages and messengers that aim to influence decision-makers in government or the public, which often include elements of emotions" (p. 233). Lastly, in regard to learning, Weible et al. state, "in democracies, processes that facilitate learning, such as stakeholder dialogue, are often

valued for the potential to bring diverse forms of knowledge—whether scientific, experiential, or value-based—into policy decision making” (p. 234). The next section reviews the timeline surrounding mental health and COVID-19.

Mental Health and the Global Pandemic

Prior to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), the state of mental health in Canada was on the cusp of being considered a crisis by the Canadian public (CBC Radio, 2019). Eight months after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, “two in five Canadians said that their mental health is currently worse than before the pandemic” (Neustaeter, 2020, para. 2). In June 2020, CMHA performed a survey that found 2.5 per cent of participants said they have had suicidal thoughts (Silver, 2020, para. 3). In October, five months later, this number had doubled to six per cent (para. 3). For a deeper review of the timeline regarding mental health, COVID-19 and CMHA’s efforts, refer to Appendix A. The following section reviews CMHA’s current risk communication efforts.

Addressing Mental Health in a Global Pandemic

According to CMHA’s website, the organization’s mission is: “As the nationwide leader and champion for mental health, CMHA facilitates access to the resources people require to maintain and improve mental health and community integration, build resilience, and support recovery from mental illness” (CMHA, 2020-a). Throughout the pandemic, and arguably before it, the CMHA has been calling upon the government of Canada to increase its support for mental health resources. In August 2020, CMHA released an article that highlighted the “mental health effects of a trauma like [COVID-19] can be profound and far-reaching, and last long after the pandemic is over” (CMHA, 2020-b, para. 5). In addition to multiple articles and suggested

policies, CMHA has been utilizing its social media to communicate the risks of the pandemic regarding Canadian's mental health.

A review of CMHA's social media platforms finds that the organization uses logic (i.e. statistics) in hopes of persuading the public and government to perceive the state of Canada's mental health as a crisis. In response to CMHA and other's efforts, the government has shown its support by providing funds for research and resources that would mitigate or address the mental health crisis (see Appendix A). Since 2018, CMHA has been specifically fighting to have mental health parity, meaning that mental health is on equal footing with physical health (CMHA, 2020-d). Throughout CMHA's various risk communication pieces, they all point towards removing this disparity, primarily using statistics to persuade the government and garner public support. Integrating an emotional narrative into CMHA's communication efforts would raise the impact of it on the government and public's priorities. Greta Thunberg's speech can be used as a demonstration of how emotion can influence government decisions and public participation.

Comparison: Thunberg's UN Climate Action Summit Speech

In September of 2019, Greta Thunberg delivered an emotional and powerful speech to the UN Climate Action Summit (Woodward, 2020). Emotionally charged phrases such as, "you have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words" and "for more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you are doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight" were covered by multiple news media and tweeted by many followers on Twitter (Jung et al., 2020). While the opinions of the public on Thunberg are split (see Jung et al., 2020), it is undeniable that her actions and words have brought climate change to the forefront of the public's mind and

pressure on government leaders to do something about it. When considering the side that agrees with Thunberg's opinion about climate change, we can apply Siegrist and Zingg's TCC model.

While there are a few ways to demonstrate the application of the TCC model, we can examine how Thunberg's speech influenced the youth around the world to cooperate with Thunberg's #FridayfortheFuture campaign. After her speech, around the world cities saw students skip class to stand in front of parliaments every Friday, demanding their government to take action on climate change (Woodward, 2020). This cooperation is a result of the trust and confidence the youth had in Thunberg. While her speech was emotional, it also included logical reasoning which bolstered their trust in her call for government action. Confidence was found in Thunberg's dedication to her cause, from her commitment to #FridayfortheFuture to her travel choices (i.e. trains and boats instead of planes). It is likely that seeing how Thunberg's speech and lifestyle resulted in public online debate and an increase in politicians discussing climate action (Watts, 2019), youth have hope that their support would result in something.

Guidance for Future Communication Efforts

The current risk communication by CMHA has been strong, as evidenced by the funding and actions of both provincial and federal levels to mitigate and support mental health (see appendix A). However, there is more that can be done. It is recommended that CMHA continues to ride this momentum by pushing for policy changes regarding mental health coverage. To do this, an emotional narrative can be implemented into CMHA's messaging, targeting both the public and the government. While the government is the primary audience for CMHA's risk communication, garnering public support for the policy change is necessary:

Addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on society requires more than the actions of healthcare and medical professionals alone. It calls for engagement of citizens,

governments at all levels, and a diverse array of organizations and individuals involved in policymaking processes and policy implementation. (Weible et al., 2020, p. 226)

The Canadian Mental Health Association's goal to dissolve the disparity in mental health care can be strengthened through a deeper emotional connection with the public, which we saw Greta Thunberg achieve in her passionate speech at the UN. In the same breath, finding credible and impactful messengers can further the Canadian Mental Health Association's key messages.

Currently, the Canadian Mental Health Association isn't taking full advantage of having a key spokesperson. Siegrist and Zingg (2020) stated, "From the perspective of the TCC model, not only what is communicated but also who communicates the information is important" (p. 28). While Margert Eaton, the CEO of CMHA, is a credible and trustworthy source, the Canadian Mental Health Association can expand its reach by encouraging influential individuals, such as social media influencers, celebrities or politicians, to speak on the importance of mental health parity. By garnering public support, the Canadian Mental Health Association would successfully make mental health coverage a priority to society, which influences government decisions (Weible et al., 2020).

Conclusion

After a review of the current literature and a comparative analysis, the Canadian Mental Health Association has performed effective risk communication but there remains room for improvement. At the moment, the Canadian Mental Health Association heavily uses a logical appeal to persuade its listeners, but the key messages can be strengthened through emotional narratives and utilizing appropriate messengers. Greta Thunberg was able to garner public trust and confidence, especially after her speech at the UN Climate Action Summit, which resulted in public discussion and cooperation. The public demonstrated to government officials the

importance they place on proper climate action. With the Canadian Mental Health Association's goal to remove the disparity in mental health, the organization must establish its priority in the public agenda. This can be done through emotional messaging and narratives that connect with the audience. This paper demonstrated the argument that an emotional narrative is needed in CMHA's communication efforts if it wants to influence the Canadian government's prioritization of mental health care.

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Appendix A

Timeline: Mental health, Covid-19 and CMHA's risk communication efforts

October 2019 – Statistics Canada releases a report on Canada's state of mental health in 2018, which indicated one in five Canadians needed mental health care (Statistics Canada, 2019)

October 2019 – CMHA releases a blog about fighting for mental health parity

December 2019 – CBC Radio (2019) discusses the public's concern that there is a youth mental health crisis

March 2020 – World Health Organization (WHO) declares COVID-19 a pandemic (Ransing et al., 2020)

April 2020 – Government of Canada launches mental health portal, Wellness Together Canada (Health Canada, 2020)

April 2020 – Government of Canada provides funds for research regarding evidence that there is a connection between substance abuse and mental health in response to COVID-19 (Silver, 2020)

April 2020 – National CEO of CMHA, Margaret Eaton, speaks to parliament's Standing Committee of Health regarding the state of Canadian's mental health during COVID-19 and the need for government support (Our Commons, 2020)

May 2020 – Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announces \$240.5 million allotted for Canadians to access virtual services for their well-being

June 2020 – CMHA reports on a survey that indicated 2.5 per cent of people surveyed experiences suicidal thoughts (Silver, 2020, para. 3)

July 2020 – Abacus Data releases survey results that show 37 per cent of Canadians say the pandemic has had a negative effect on their mental health (Anderson & Coletto, 2020, para. 3)

August 2020 – CMHA releases a policy brief regarding mental health, COVID-19 and the need for more government support, especially for the unmet mental needs that were present before COVID-19 (CMHA, 2020-c)

August 2020 – CMHA submitted a list of recommendations to the federal government regarding Canadian's mental health, including a long-term recovery plan (Silver, 2020)

October 2020 – iPolitics release report, citing CMHA calling upon the government for additional support as mental health needs rise (Silver, 2020)

October 2020 – Provincial government gives \$220K to CMHA Medicine Hat to increase suicide prevention supports (Brown, 2020)

October 2020 – CMHA releases its 2020 Impact Report