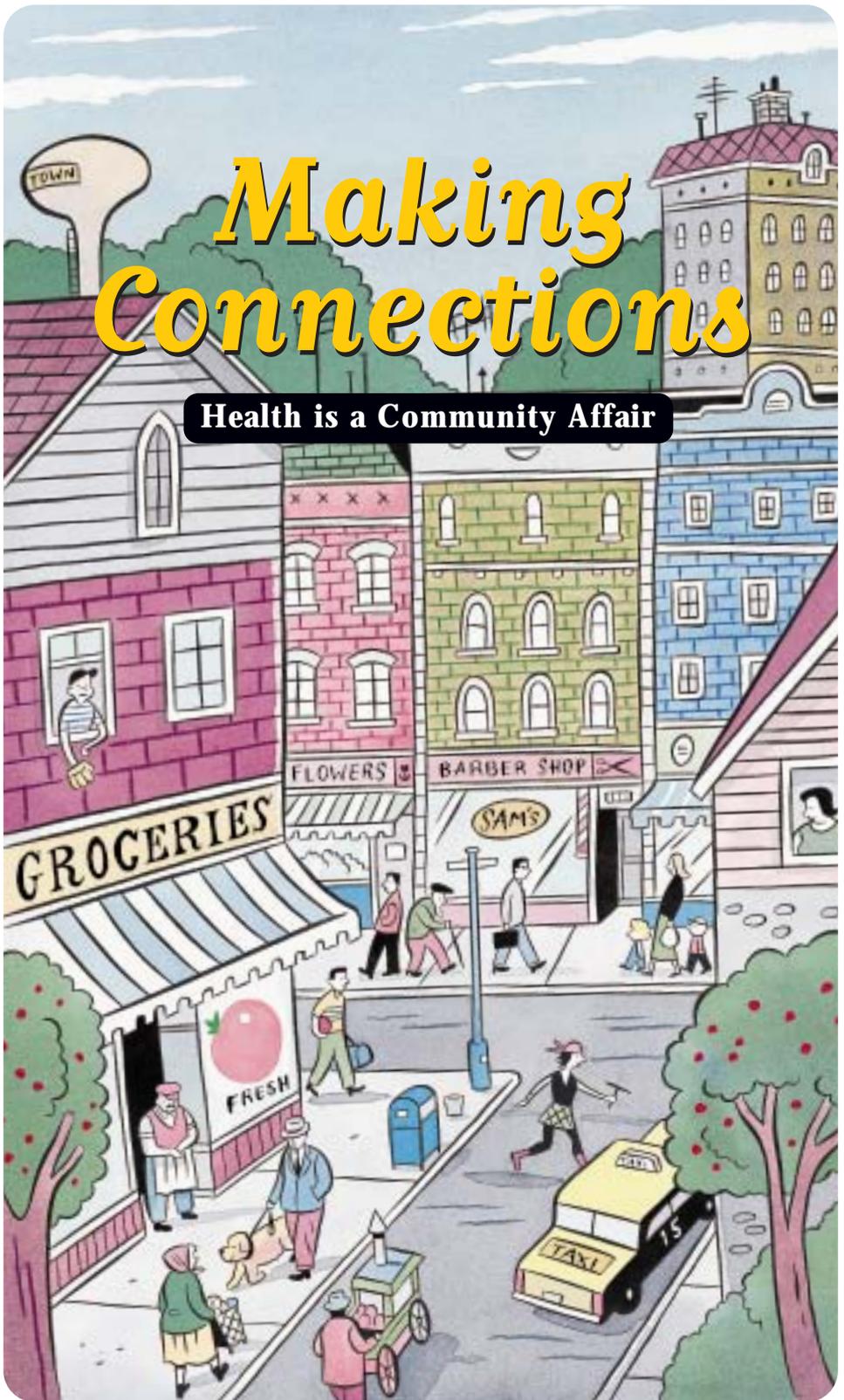


# Making Connections

Health is a Community Affair





# Making Connections

## Health is a Community Affair

CANADIANS HAVE always worked together to improve our health. And collective action is just as important today as it was many years ago.

Almost a century ago, citizens' groups took action and achieved reforms that greatly improved everyone's health. They pushed to eliminate crowded housing. They fought for safe drinking water and better sanitation. They lobbied to end child labour and overlong workdays. They pressed for health and safety laws, and they helped to set up day nurseries for the children of working mothers.

Today we know even more about what makes us healthy – and what harms our health. We know quite a bit about how the genes we're born with affect our health. We know that eating well and staying fit is important.

But, in fact, our social and economic environment is probably the most important influence on our health. Today's research shows that our health is strongly associated with our opportunities to work, play, learn and contribute to our community. Our health is linked to where we live, how we care for each other, how much love, attention and stimulation we can give to our children and to our sense of belonging.

The stories in this brochure point to some things we can do to create healthier communities for ourselves, our families and our neighbours and friends.





**"I wish my mom** didn't live so far away.

I never knew it would be this **hard juggling** work and the kids. And Cal

and I hardly see each other, what with him

working the overnight shift. **You're so lucky**

to be home with your kids ... I know, I know, but

really, **you're lucky!** I worry all the time.

**The sitter** lets them watch way too much TV.

**But it's so hard** to find someone. And my eldest,

J.J., is only in **kindergarten**, but

already the teacher wants to get him tested for

behaviour problems. **I try to do**

**everything but ..."**



early  
childhood

employment  
/working  
conditions

social  
support

## Putting families first

A LOT OF families are under stress these days. More than 66% of mothers with children under six years old were working outside the home in 1991. That's up from only 50% in 1981. It helps parents a lot to have workplace day care, job sharing, family leave and flex time – but few employers offer these options. Caring and stimulating child care helps children to grow mentally and emotionally – and it eases the worries of parents who have jobs. But it's hard to find. Meanwhile, parents who do stay at home may feel lonely, unsupported and undervalued, even though they do important work. And most families can't afford to have one parent stay home.

### DID YOU KNOW?

- > The genes we pass on to our children are big factors in their future health, but the quality of care that a child gets in the first three years of life is probably the single most important factor influencing that child's future development, health, mental health and productivity. A child's experiences up to age five have a direct impact on brain development.
- > Too often in Canada, we look at children as being the sole responsibility of their parents. That's not true in many other parts of the world. It's healthier to see children as a natural resource that we all share. Our children are our future.
  - > Poor child care harms development, while quality child care helps children develop well.

## what you can do

**Your community may already have some of the programs listed below. Think about how you could support them. If they don't exist, you could join a group to advocate for them.**

- > support groups for parents and care-givers
  - > parenting classes
  - > preschool programs for children in community centres and libraries
- > baby-sitter co-ops, where parents baby-sit for each other

**Some changes you might want to advocate for**

- > flexible workplaces, with sick-child leave, job sharing and benefits for part-timers
- > tax breaks for stay-at-home parents, just like the tax deductions that working parents get for child-care expenses
- > high-quality, affordable day-care

*“I don’t know what’s gotten into me. I just don’t feel like myself. For one thing, I know I’m jumpy. Maybe it’s living alone, although it’s been more than three years now. Maybe it’s worrying about the bills, with everything getting more expensive.*



*I suppose I could move into something smaller, but this is my home. I surely don’t want to go to some institution, and where else would I go? Anyway, I made an appointment with Dr. Jones, and maybe I’ll ask about those nerve pills.”*



social  
support

income

housing

## Getting connected with others

SOMETIMES WE turn to doctors for solutions to things that are not really medical problems. Our health can be improved by changing non-medical factors that have a measurable effect on our well-being. For example, isolation, loneliness and poverty can be harmful to our health. We can work in our communities to support each other and improve people's lives.

### DID YOU KNOW?

- > Women 60 to 69 years old with the least social contacts have a death rate of 3 out of 10. The death rate for women of that age with the most social contacts is only 1 out of 10. For men of the same age, the cost of isolation is higher: the death rate is 4 out of 10 for those with the least social contacts, and 2 out of 10 for those with the most social contacts.
- > Telephone follow-ups with senior citizens after clinic visits result in considerably fewer doctors' visits and hospital stays, and less use of medication; publicly funded health-care advice by telephone has a similar impact.
- > Older, single women are more likely to be poor than older, single men.

## what you can do

**Your community may already have some of the programs listed below. Think about how you could support them. If they don't exist, you could join a group to advocate for them.**

- > visiting programs, with volunteers making regular, friendly telephone calls and home visits to isolated, elderly people
- > programs that help older people to share housing, so the "house poor" can take advantage of extra, unused space and get help with household expenses
- > Meals on Wheels and lunch programs at community centres, to help those who live alone and may not be eating balanced meals

**Some changes you might want to advocate for**

- > solid funding for community and public health programs that help people stay in their communities
- > higher, stable incomes for the large number of older people who live below the poverty line
- > fairer tax policies for older low-income people

“Things are **changing so fast** at work. We’re all doing the best we can, **but** it seems I’m working **longer hours** and **juggling**



so many things. All this work, but we’re not hiring any new people. And I’m not so **sure** my job is secure, so I’m feeling less and less able to say ‘**no**’ to extra work. I used to be able to talk to my supervisor, but now she’s **under a lot of pressure**, too. I want to tell her that with dad in hospital right now, I need some time to help him sort things out. But I think I might be putting my job in **jeopardy**.



On top of that, they just announced **layoffs** where my wife works. We’re both so caught up with just trying to survive. I’m **not sure** I’m doing a good job **here – or at home.**”



## Work speed-up

FOR MANY people, a job is the key to feeling like a useful member of society. Job loss through government and private-sector downsizing and restructuring has taken a big toll. And those who have jobs often experience a double whammy: They have an increased workload and they have less job security. As a result, workers may suffer from depression and anxiety. Employers can, in turn, be harmed by absenteeism and lower productivity.

### DID YOU KNOW?

> Safety measures to prevent physical injury in the workplace are important, but recent research shows that psychosocial factors – the things that make us mentally healthy – are equally important to workers' health. These factors include: how much control employees have over their work, the degree of support they get from co-workers and supervisors, the flexibility of their work schedule, and the pace of work. These factors are linked to rates of absenteeism, or how much time off workers take. They are also linked to illnesses like repetitive-strain injury, low-back pain and problems with high blood pressure.

## what you can do

**Your community may already have some of the programs listed below. Think about how you could support them. If they don't exist, you could join a group to advocate for them.**

- > If you're caring for an older or disabled family member, think about joining a care-giver support group to help you deal with the issues you're facing.
- > Many workplaces have a joint worker/management health and safety committee. It can help you find ways to improve workers' health, safety and productivity. If there is no committee at your workplace, think about helping to set one up.
- > Talk with your co-workers and show your boss what has been written on "best

practices" in the workplace that bolster health and the bottom line. (Start with Health Canada's Workplace Health division. Provincial workers' compensation agencies also have good information.)

### Some changes you might want to advocate for

- > Workplace policies and programs that recognize the demands on working people and that support families. These could include measures like flexible hours, work sharing, family-care leave and unpaid leave.
- > Join with others who are pushing for full employment policies. Full employment means shorter work weeks and job sharing, so more people have jobs and people have time to take care of their families and communities.



**“Things haven’t been so great, so I was glad to find out about this place. I left school pretty early – always had trouble with reading – so I’m taking classes here to upgrade. And after lunch, I get to play a little basketball and let off a bit of steam. They’re hoping to start up a retraining program again, and the staff here say for sure I’ll qualify for it. My life sure has changed. I got work right after I dropped out of school – on the assembly line. Not a union job, but still pretty good, and I put in 16 years there. But six months ago, the place closed down. A year ago, I remarried, and we had planned to start a family. But now I wonder how we’ll manage.”**



## Community supports are vital

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE and the “globalization” of the economy have led to huge changes in the job situation in Canada. In many areas, unemployment is high. There is a widening gap between “good” jobs (skilled, high-paying) and “bad” jobs (part-time, temporary, low-wage, service industry). Many issues like job creation and retraining must be addressed at national and provincial government levels, but local communities can help support those who have lost work.

### DID YOU KNOW?

- > People who are unemployed are at greater risk of mental and emotional distress and physical ill health. They use the health-care system more.
- > Physical activity improves people’s self-esteem, lessens depression and lowers levels of anxiety and stress.
- > A 1995 survey of adult Canadians found that only 58% are skilled readers, yet reading skills are required for 98% of Canadian jobs. Children of parents with reading problems are more likely to have those problems themselves.

## what you can do

**Your community may already have some of the programs listed below. Think about how you could support them. If they don’t exist, you could join a group to advocate for them.**

- > community-based literacy programs, with volunteer tutors
  - > a self-help group for the unemployed that offers support and encourages employment opportunities in the community
- > recreation programs for adults and children, without high user fees
- > co-op buying clubs for fresh produce
  - > community vegetable gardens that provide social support and encourage organizing skills, as well as providing access to less expensive, good food.

**Some changes you might want to advocate for**

- > adult education programs
- > an active labour market adjustment policy, for people who have lost jobs
  - > a comprehensive national approach to income security for those who can’t work
- > full employment policies, including shorter working hours and job sharing
- > quality, accessible, affordable child care, so that all children have access to a stimulating environment in the early years, before they start school.



“Do I like cleaning windshields for a living? Except for the

dirty looks, it's okay. And sometimes

drivers are really nice. But do I like it? Look, I'm 16. **I don't live at home** and I need the money. I'm not into trading sex

for money – my best friend just found out she has HIV – and I won't deal drugs. **Getting a straight job is hard,**

**really hard** – especially when you don't have a permanent address. I've been staying with a bunch of kids and everybody comes in at all hours. I'm not sleeping much and I've got a really bad cough. If I had a **place of my own,**

I'd probably feel a whole lot better about everything,

but I doubt I'll ever be able to **afford that.**”



# Opportunities for youth

WITH TODAY'S high unemployment rate, young high-school dropouts have few opportunities for decent jobs. Teens who leave home often live in frightening circumstances. But too often, "going home" is not an option. Depending on their age, they may not be eligible for social assistance. What's really needed are opportunities for these young people to get real job experience and a chance to return to school.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- > Teens (16 to 19) in low-income families are far more likely to drop out of school, and be unemployed, than teens in higher-income families.
- > Young people, aged 16 to 19, are at increased risk of death from car crashes and suicide, and more likely to have unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.
- > Stable housing is a basic requirement for health, yet social-housing development has stopped in most of Canada, in spite of the great need for affordable housing, especially in cities.

## what you can do

**Your community may already have some of the programs listed below.**

**Think about how you could support them.**

**If they don't exist, you could join a group to advocate for them.**

- > community-service programs which help young people to serve others, develop as people, and gain experience for a future career
- > peer counselling programs and transition programs for young people who are in distress; for example, because of a family breakup or substance abuse
- > alternative schools for young people who have difficulty with more traditional high schools
- > mentoring programs which offer children and teens a friend and guide as they struggle with the issues of growing up

**Some changes you might want to advocate for**

- > drop-in and recreation centres that give young people another chance to learn and grow through study, sports and arts
- > job banks, so street youth can get some real work experience or training programs tailored to their needs
- > special education and training programs for youth who drop out of school
- > social assistance payments for young people who are shut out of the job market
- > more mental-health services for children and adolescents.

# Health is a Community Affair



“BEING HEALTHY requires clean, safe environments, adequate income, meaningful roles in society, and good housing, nutrition, education, and social support in our communities,” according to the final report of Canada’s National Forum on Health.

Some of the changes needed to improve health will happen only with broad public agreement and changes to laws and public policy.

But as the stories and ideas in this brochure show, there are steps we can take to foster our own health, our neighbours’ health and the collective health of our communities.

A lot of us are already active in our communities through, for example, our faith groups, sports and cultural organizations and volunteer work. Now we can see that our actions help to improve not just the quality of our lives, but also the health of all of us.

We can make connections with others in ways that help everyone. And we can join with others to advocate for better, healthier public policies.



## Health Determinants Partnership

Association of Ontario Health Centres  
(AOHC)  
5233 Dundas Street West, Suite 410  
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[www.aohc.org](http://www.aohc.org)

Centre for Health Promotion  
at the University of Toronto  
100 College Street, Suite 207  
Toronto, ON M5G 1L5  
[www.utoronto.ca/chp/](http://www.utoronto.ca/chp/)

Innovaction  
180 Dundas Street West, Suite 1900  
Toronto, ON M5G 1Z8  
[www.innovaction.com](http://www.innovaction.com)

Ontario Public Health Association  
(OPHA)  
468 Queen Street East, Suite 202  
Toronto, ON M5A 1T7  
[www.opha.on.ca/opha/](http://www.opha.on.ca/opha/)

Registered Nurses Association of  
Ontario (RNAO)  
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Toronto, ON M5G 2K8  
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en français.

For more information, please call

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