



# MENTAL HEALTH IN FRENCH

Understanding the Issues  
and the Urgent Need for  
Collaboration in the NWT



Réseau  
TNO Santé

[reseautnosante.ca](http://reseautnosante.ca)

# WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

## Mental Health in Canada

Mental health affects thousands of Canadian families. In any given year, one in five Canadians will experience a mental health issue or a mental illness; this represents more than 200,000 French-speaking Canadians living in a minority setting.\*

Anyone can be affected by mental health issues, regardless of place of residence, age or social status. Mental disorders and mental illnesses occur because of a complex set of social, economic, psychological, biological and genetic factors. These phenomena are even more worrying since they are subject to significant social stigma.\*

### Did You Know? In Canada...

- While symptoms may not always follow a specific pattern, some mental disorders and mental illnesses can cause strong feelings of hopelessness and low self-esteem which can lead to suicide.\*
- Of the 4,000 suicides that occur in Canada each year, most involve people with a mental illness or a mental disorder.\*



**Up to 50% of mental disorders or mental illnesses in adults appear before the age of 14.\***

## Getting Mental Health Care: A Challenge

- Only one in three people with a mental illness or disorder say they have sought and obtained services and treatments.\*
- Only 40% of Canadians reporting a mental illness choose to consult a health care professional. The lack of resources, the fear of stigmatization and the lack of accessibility of services are cited as obstacles explaining this phenomenon.
- Canada's Mental Health Commission reports that in 2018, funding for mental health care in Canada was about 7% of health care expenditures; this is well below that of its counterparts such as the United Kingdom, which invests nearly 13% of its health care budget in mental health.

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## Accessing Services in French: An Even Greater Challenge

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- Francophone communities in Canada are socio-demographically diverse. Overall, Francophones in minority situations are older, less educated, and have a lower income average than Anglophones, three risk factors for mental disorders and mental illnesses.\*
- Language barriers reduce the use of preventive health services, extend the length of consultations, increase the likelihood of going through diagnostic tests and increase the likelihood of errors in diagnosis and treatment.\*
- Communication is an essential tool for health care providers, whether it is to promote, prevent, evaluate or treat mental disorders and illnesses. It is important for a person to be able to express themselves in their preferred language when talking about their health; this plays a critical role in their experience and safety and it promotes their recovery.
- A clinical interview conducted in a language other than the patient's mother tongue may lead to an assessment of their mental state that is incomplete or distorted. Furthermore, the use of medical interpreters has greater clinical impacts in mental health than in other areas of health care. These situations present increased risks by compromising the accuracy of the diagnosis as well as the detection of disorganized thoughts or delusions.\*



*I asked for service in French and I was given a dirty look by the attendant behind the counter. She turned around and asked: 'Anybody here for French?' I felt that I was bothering her and that I was not welcome.*



*When you're sick, it's even more important to be able to express yourself in French.*



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# THE ISSUE IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES



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One in five Canadians experiences a mental health or substance abuse problem each year. In the N.W.T., that's 8,894 people a year who struggle with mental health issues. Every month, nearly 900 people use community counseling services in the N.W.T.\*

According to the public consultation conducted in the Spring of 2018, the provision of mental health services does not meet the dire needs of Northerners. Challenges include lack of resources, lack of continuity in the care provided due to lack of employee retention, and a population scattered throughout the territory.

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## Little to No Mental Health Services in French

For those Francophones, the N.W.T. Official Languages Act requires the government to offer its services in French “where there is significant demand”. The regions designated for the delivery of French-language health services by the GNWT are Yellowknife, Inuvik, Fort Smith and Hay River. Despite this law, mental health services in French are currently limited or even sometimes non-

existent. The Child, Family and Community Wellness Branch coordinates all requests for mental health services in French. N.W.T. residents who want to use French-language mental health services must access the system’s navigation resources through their physician, mental health and addictions counsellor, and/or the French Language Services Coordinators in their region of the N.W.T. To date,

no position for a mental health care professional has been designated as bilingual in the N.W.T. It may be the case that certain services are provided in French, but these come about by chance rather than as a result of intentional planning of services in the French language. Interpretation services are available but, for the time being, they are not provided by trained medical interpreters.

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## Supply Boosts Demand

It is important to offer health care services in French and to inform the community of the availability of these services in order to stimulate demand. A study has shown that francophones in minority communities do not necessarily dare ask for services in French out of fear of not receiving them as quickly or based on their conviction that such services are impossible to receive. All of the N.W.T. respondents who requested services in French reported having faced multiple barriers. With these difficulties adding to the vulnerability associated with their mental health problems, some eventually opted for services in English, others resorted to private services, while some put an end to their consultation process.

Other factors mentioned by respondents suggest the number of requests does not reflect the needs:

- As there is uncertainty about what is offered in French, few people ask for services in French
- The great closeness of the Francophone community and the small number of French-speaking service providers limit the possibilities of a neutral therapeutic relationship and discourage some people from using the service
- Interpreters are not specialized in mental health care, which can compromise the treatment.



French is now the mother tongue of **3.1%** of the population.

## The Chicken before the Egg

To implement services in French, the Territorial Administration bases its decisions in part on the demand for these services, but both this demand and the real need are difficult to evaluate. The demand perceived by the Administration is weak, however, the needs of the community go largely unmet.



## Francophones of the N.W.T.

While access to mental health services can be difficult for the general population, the situation becomes more complex when the patient requires those services to be provided in French. The Francophone population of the N.W.T. has tripled since the mid-twentieth century. French is now the mother tongue of 3.1% of the population (1,267 people) and 10.3% (4,275 people) can speak both French and English. While the largest concentration of Francophones (76%) is in Yellowknife, there are Francophones in all other regions served by the N.W.T. Health and Social Services Administration.

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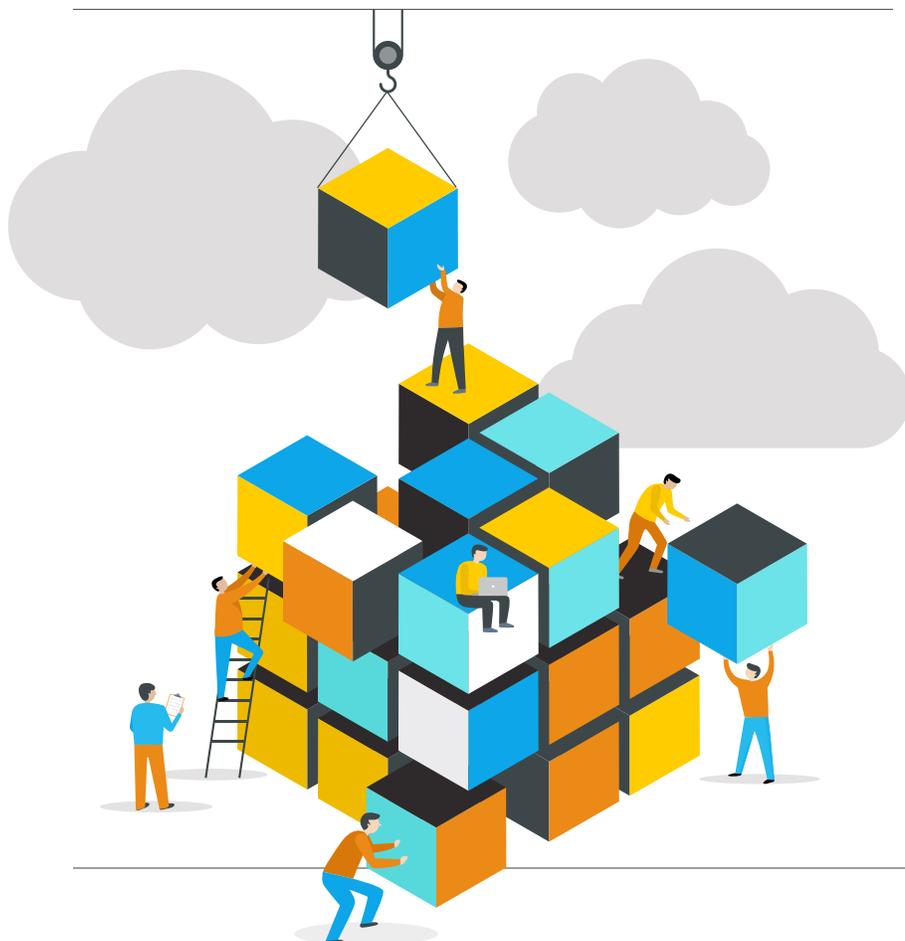
# POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

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## At the National Level: Promote recovery in French

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1. Raise awareness among Francophone communities.
  2. Strengthen community-based capacity.
  3. Promote research, transfer and use of knowledge.
  4. Strengthen French-language services along the continuum in mental health.
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*We must continue to work to fill the historical gaps in funding and services if we want mental health to be fully integrated into the universal access to health care in Canada.*

Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2018



*I appreciated that the nurse was doing her best to talk to me in French.*

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## At the Territorial Level: Promote Awareness, Leadership and Collaboration

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The data from the Spring 2018 public consultation highlights potential solutions to make mental health care services in French more accessible and equitable.

### **Equip and raise awareness amongst healthcare providers and the community.**

- Educate staff and service managers as to the impact of language barriers on the quality of services and patient safety.
- Make staff and service managers aware of the importance of actively offering French-language services to stimulate their use and demand.
- Promote the use of an empathic approach by

hospitality staff and health care professionals.

- Inform the community of the availability and access to health services in the French language.

### **Increase the offer of mental health care services in French.**

- Designate mental health professional positions as bilingual.
- Target bilingual health professional recruitment pools.
- Work with the community to

recruit bilingual mental health professionals.

- Hire or train medical interpreters.
- Offer mental health services through telemedicine.
- Establish a mobile team of caregivers who can serve the community in French, wherever people are located.
- Develop mental health care resources for the community.
- Collect systematically patients' preferred language.

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### **The goal for Réseau TNO Santé:**

To be part of the dialogue and join in the planning of French-language mental health services to support the Government of the N.W.T. in its efforts and ensure that they meet the needs of the Francophone community.



*My experience over the years tells me that there are staff members who could offer us services in French, but I wonder: Does the Health and Social Services Administration know its human resources? Are Francophone staff members organized to support active offer?*

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**Réseau  
TNO Santé**  
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**Network, mobilize and empower  
for French-language health care  
in the Northwest Territories**

Réseau TNO Santé is one of 16 French-language health care networks in Canada, grouped under the Société Santé en français (SSF) and funded by Health Canada. Its mission is to promote access to health care in French by bringing together, mobilizing and empowering government entities, health care and training facility managers, health care professionals and the community. Its mandate is to define

and prioritize health care needs in French, participate in and support service planning, implement structuring health care initiatives in French, ensure the dissemination of information and the mobilization of knowledge, increase number of human resources able to offer services in French, raise awareness and promote health and well-being in the French language.

## Sources

- Canada's Mental Health Commission (mentalhealthcommission.ca)
- Société Santé en français (santeenfrancais.com)
- Université Laval (axl.cefan.ulaval.ca/amnord/tno)
- Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (officiallanguages.gc.ca)
- Statistics Canada 2016 (statcan.gc.ca)
- The Administration of Health Services and Social Services (hss.gov.nt.ca)
- Accessibilité et offre active. Santé et services sociaux en contexte linguistique minoritaire. Drolet et al., 2018.

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**LA FÉDÉRATION  
FRANCO-TÉNOISE**



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