

# The SMART Fund *The Links between Social Support and Improved Health Outcomes* – Report Highlights January 2011



Social support has been identified by the Public Health Agency of Canada as one of the key factors determining the health of individuals. Members of vulnerable populations are often isolated and experience small and unstable social support systems. The SMART Fund\* supports community-based programs that foster social support networks among vulnerable populations. Below are some of the highlights from the SMART Fund report *The Links between Social Support and Improved Health Outcomes*, which presents current research linking social support to positive health outcomes among senior, homeless and street-involved, and mental health consumer populations. Please refer to the full report for further information and for a complete list of references: [www.smartfund.ca](http://www.smartfund.ca)

## SOCIAL SUPPORT

**Social support encompasses social networks and the functional support that they provide. Social support works to strengthen existing network relationships and extend network ties; to reduce isolation and promote connectedness; to increase self-esteem and coping abilities; to develop new skills and encourage productive participation; and to promote and enhance collective problem solving and reciprocal support.**

### SENIOR POPULATIONS

SMART funded programs reduce isolation and enhance engagement of senior populations through a variety of program initiatives including neighbourhood outreach to isolated seniors, training of peer volunteers through mentorship and leadership programs, the provision of one-on-one support, and the coordination of social activities.

Current research shows that:

- Increased social engagement and frequency of social contacts are linked to decreased risk of dementia, positive impact on disability status, increased self-rated health, and increased longevity
- Higher levels of emotional support are linked to better cognitive function and reduced risk of disability in activities of daily living
- The magnitude of the association between aspects of social support and overall health are comparable to those for biological and behavioural risk factors for poor health, with the impact of social and productive activities on health just as significant as that of physical activity

### MENTAL HEALTH CONSUMERS

SMART funded programs enhance social support networks of mental health consumers through activities that encourage social engagement, by training peer volunteers through mentorship and leadership programs, and by improving self-esteem and self-confidence through the development of social skills and coping abilities.

Current research shows that:

- Higher levels of perceived social support is associated with fewer hospitalizations for individuals with severe mental illness (SMI), a lower incidence of SMI episodes, better overall functioning in individuals with SMI, and recovery from mental illness

- Increased social network size is associated with increased self-esteem, increased satisfaction with social relationships and social activities, increased social skills and cognitive function, and greater satisfaction with health
- Recurrence of illness is predicted by lower levels of perceived social support, but protected against through the development of strong informal (non-professional) relationships

**HOMELESS AND STREET-INVOLVED POPULATIONS**

SMART funded programs enhance social support networks of homeless and street-involved populations through a variety of services and activities including outreach to isolated individuals, the development of social skills and coping abilities, training of peer volunteers through mentorship and leadership programs, the coordination of social events and activities, and through employment promotion activities.

Current research shows that:

- Perceived access to social support is associated with better physical health in adult populations and good subjective health in youth populations
- Among youth, stronger social support networks are associated with decreased odds of using illicit drugs, having multiple sex partners, and engaging in survival sex, as well as better sexual self-concept, intention to use condoms, self-efficacy to use condoms, and assertive communication
- Employment among the street-involved and homeless populations is significantly associated with cessation of injection drug use, and youth are 80 percent less likely to have traded sex if they have some form of employment

**Peer Support**

Peers are able to provide experiential knowledge, which is both unique and pragmatic, and to provide validation and promote self-determination among those seeking support (Solomon, 2004).

Peer support is more likely to lead to positive behaviour change, as peers are seen as more credible role models, sharing their confidence building and coping techniques (Solomon, 2004). It has been shown that referrals to self-help groups are more effective when made by a peer, suggesting that peer support services could be effective in linking individuals to a variety of necessary health services, that if not utilized would result in exacerbated health problems. Peer support services work to enhance the benefits of traditional health care services (Solomon, 2004).

**The Impact of *Giving* Social Support**

The benefits of the reciprocal aspects of social support are evidenced through the positive health impacts that acting as a peer-supporter, a volunteer, or simply as a productive supporter within the social networks of others has on the health of the support provider.

In group-level peer-led health interventions it is seen that bidirectional supporters report better overall wellbeing than those who are simply givers or receivers of support (Hogan, 2002). A review of studies on mental health peer-supported interventions reveals that mental health peer supporters experience similar benefits to those of the support receivers, including reduction in hospitalizations, and personal growth through increased confidence, coping skills, self-esteem and sense of empowerment (Solomon, 2004). This creates a feedback loop where peer supporters are then even better able to assist others in their recovery (Solomon, 2004).

\* The SMART Fund is a Vancouver Coastal Health granting program that invests in innovative, community-based population health promotion initiatives. These initiatives work towards alleviating health inequities caused by systemic disparities encountered in society, by responding to the health needs of vulnerable populations using proven community capacity building strategies.