FAMILY SERVICE TORONTO
For People. For Change.

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FST Statement on Canadian Mental Health Week 2025

Canadian Mental Health Week (May 5-11) provides a focus on assisting those with mental health challenges to lift the mask they often hide behind to protect themselves from judgment and discrimination.

People living with mental health and/or addictions often feel the need to hide or suppress their emotions, personality traits, behaviours or symptoms from others. Known as “masking” this allows people to hide in plain sight, not drawing attention to themselves and “fitting in” to stay safe and socially accepted. It helps people protect themselves from judgement and discrimination.

It also helps people maintain their personal boundaries and privacy. Masking helps us to determine how we interact with others and lets us decide who gets to see what parts of us. The struggle to keep a “mask” on can be exhausting and mentally straining and can lead to other or worsening mental and physical health concerns. It can also result in people feeling isolated and alone in the world.

At Family Service Toronto we work with people to help them explore the impact of masking on their lives and support them to decide what parts of themselves they want to share with others and how they want to do this.

Examples of this include working with people to explore their gender identity or sexual orientation and the parts of their identity that they want to share with others, if they choose to do so, and how they can do this while remaining safe, both physically and psychologically. In other situations, we work with people who are living with an invisible disability, such as a mental health issue that they do not want others to know about because they don’t want to be seen as “weak” or different.

FST’s mental health programs work with people to assist them in exploring the impact of masking in their lives. Key to this work is practising compassion with those who seek our supports and listening carefully, while also gently probing and raising awareness of what masking looks like for an individual. Each situation varies and can express itself in different ways. Examples include physical health symptoms such as headaches or fatigue after socializing, having repetitive thoughts or overthinking situations, avoiding social situations, constantly self-monitoring and/or worrying about saying something wrong. Being present to listen and support people is a key to helping people in their journey to unmasking, at a level they feel comfortable, if they choose to do so.

Suggestions can include experimenting with sharing a small bit of self with someone they are comfortable and feel safe with and then reporting back and processing this with their counsellor. The importance of setting boundaries about who someone will open up to and what they will share with them can also be a part of this work.

Promoting self-care such as spending time with people in places they feel comfortable and safe to be themselves, balancing social time and alone time and finding ways to release and recharge after draining situations are all examples of various strategies that may be discussed. Through FST's peer support programs, meaningful connections are established with others who share similar experiences, creating opportunities for validation, safety, and the encouragement to explore unmasking.

Unmasking for individuals requires courage, patience, and trust in oneself.

Canadian Mental Health Week provides an opportunity for all of us to support environments which promote acceptance, tolerance, non-discrimination and recognition of everyone's gifts and talents. It also allows us the time to reflect on the changes to policies, systems, and societal attitudes which may be required. In the current environment, this has become more challenging than ever, but FST will not shy away from challenging the current narratives of polarization, us vs. them mentalities and attacks on equity, diversity and inclusion."

This **May 5-11**, we stand with the Canadian Mental Health Association in encouraging people across Canada to look beyond the surface and see the whole person. By embracing honesty and vulnerability, we open the door to deeper connections and the mental health benefits that come with it. In doing so, we can create a ripple effect of courage and understanding across the country.

SOURCE: CMHA Mental Health Week 2025 Tool Kit Fact Sheets