

# Recovery College

## White Paper



APPROVED BY



Canadian Mental  
Health Association  
Calgary  
*Mental health for all*

PREPARED BY

**HABITUS**  
Consulting Collective Inc.

# Summary

Recovery College is a place where people seeking support for mental health and well-being work alongside their peers and staff. Here they learn skills to cope and reintegrate with everyday life. Students are encouraged to think about their own learning needs and choose from a suite of courses. In addition, some are involved in co-designing courses together with peers, facilitators, non-peers or community experts. This democratization of knowledge and learning opens opportunities for self-discovery, empowerment and creativity. This ultimately contributes to the betterment and health of students.

This white paper establishes the boundaries upon which CMHA Calgary has developed Recovery College and outlines evidence informed practices from the literature. The white paper makes three main points:

## **Principles led practice helps the program remain strong**

CMHA CMHA Calgary's Recovery College is recognizable for its adherence to principle-led practice, meaning strategic and operational decisions are guided by a set of principles. These principles were agreed to through a process of co-development and evidence gathering. They are used to inform how the work is carried out. As such, principles can also be used to measure the degree to which the program remains faithful to its intent throughout expansion and replication.

## **Adult experiential learning puts the person in control**

Adult and experiential learning approaches form the basis of Recovery College's learning platform. Here, personal development and skills building are key mechanisms for achieving a positive state of recovery and well-being. This approach to learning is strengths-based; people's resourcefulness and strengths are taken into account when deciding course length, integrated into the co-development and curriculum review processes, and competencies for learning. This represents a shift away from a treatment model of mental health and substance use where people with mental health concerns and addiction direct the course of their recovery learning.

## **Co-development informs teaching and course development, which benefits peers and students**

At CMHA Calgary's Recovery College, they blend the competencies of peers (people with lived experience of mental health concerns or addiction) with personal experience and trainers with expertise in adult learning. This is done in two ways: by including peers and trainers in the development of course development and in delivering courses together. In doing so, they leverage the expertise of people with personal experience of mental health challenges and substance use into strengthened course content and better course delivery. An additional benefit to this model is that peers gain additional support in their own recovery through their active participation in supporting others with their health and well-being.

# Background

**CMHA Calgary** is a community based mental health organization celebrating 60 years of service. It is part of a network of Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) branches located in over 120 communities nationally. In 2017, CMHA Calgary provided community support and HOPE (Housing, Outreach, Peer Support, and Education) to over 32,000 individuals impacted by mental illness and addiction living in Calgary and surrounding areas.



There is growing recognition that prevention, education and awareness play a key role in addressing the challenges of mental health and substance use. CMHA Calgary drew from the experiences of Recovery Colleges internationally to develop its own model of training. Focusing on effective health promotion, prevention, and early intervention, it chose to build supportive, inclusive communities, and coordinated, accessible services. These are recognised practices that support mental health prevention (WHO, 2009). Recovery Colleges enable people to become experts in their own self-care and recovery journey; it's a learning environment where people build skills, establish goals, and learn to recognize their own expertise. When attention shifts from the clinical model to an educational model, success moves from a measurement of symptom reduction to a measurement of how well people are assisted with their recovery journey.

# Rationale

Recovery Colleges highlight the value of ‘lived experience’ and the role it plays in supplementing treatment through support, care, and engagement. Mental health professionals continue to have a critical role in the health system but Recovery College encourages a more ‘bottom-up’ approach. It is one of the only current scalable interventions that can meet the needs of the 1 in 5 Canadians that will experience a mental health issue each year. Their strategies focus on engaging people, capitalizing on the strengths of individuals to develop solutions. This approach stands in contrast to prescriptive advice, focused on ‘fixing’ the problem.

Each of these items combined, including the scope of frustration in accessing mental health services, the evidence surrounding new paradigms of recovery support, and shifting roles of those with lived experience, all necessitated CMHA Calgary taking the bold action of building Recovery College on foundations of lived experience and education focused recovery.



**One-on-one  
Medical Model**



**Group Education  
Model**

The broader literature surrounding approaches to Recovery Colleges explores in greater depth the physical space and mode of delivery as well as the systemic consideration of integrating Recovery College and educational approaches within systems of care. ImROC is a national leader in the United Kingdom and holds a wealth of further reading. (<https://imroc.org/recovery-college-action-learningset/>)



# Measuring Change

There are a number of practical ways to measure change in any program. However, social innovators are also being guided by principles in order to “improve the chances of making progress on complex issues.” Organizations often align their professional norms and standards of behaviour with principles, which can affect the operation of the agency itself. Another function of principles is to support organizations discerning what is “important for the effectiveness of their interventions.”

CMHA Calgary has developed a set principles useful when assessing the strategic direction of the College and making operational decisions. For example, as a principle, CMHA Calgary defines co-production as a process of working together where each stakeholder, be they peer, staff, facilitator, or student, has an equitable responsibility and opportunity to developing ideas, programs and projects for the Recovery College. The extent to which CMHA Calgary fulfils this principle forms an objective measurement of their overall success. Without principles, other assessments could be developed, but perhaps not give the same robust sense of overall accomplishments towards the goals of the organization.

Another strength of the principles approach is the transferability of ideas and beliefs into new sites. An aspiration of the College is expanding into a network of Recovery Colleges province-wide. Principles support this by:

- Being operationalized into evaluation frameworks to assess progress towards common goals and measure overall impact.
- Creating the foundation to assess the extent to which new sites, new programs, new courses are a faithful reflection of the intended Recovery College approach.
- Being expanded into operational protocols and quality assurance standards that enable new sites to function in the absence of existing programs.

## WHO PARTICIPATES?

Most students will participate in multiple components of Recovery College over time. A sense of belonging and the development of social connections facilitates ongoing access and engagement.



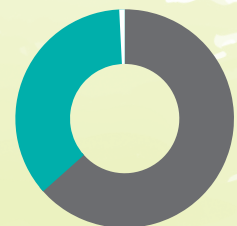
### Average Age: 40.2

<18	1.3%
19-24	12.9%
25-29	12.6%
30-39	19.1%
40-49	17.2%
50-59	22.8%
60-69	12.5%
70-79	1.7%



### SEX

Female 63.4%  
Male 35.8%  
Other 0.8%





# Assessing Student Progress

While courses at CMHA Calgary's Recovery College do not have assessments or exams, there are other means to demonstrate student learning. Peer Facilitators and Recovery Trainers participate alongside students during in-class activities and discussions giving them insight into how people's behaviours and thinking has changed. They complete post course reflections and participate in focus groups, offering their insights into the strengths of the course and how students are being impacted. In-class observations have also taken place, focusing on how student participation demonstrates learning.

- Emancipatory adult education focuses on empowering students and utilizing critical reflection to develop strengths and competencies. Examples of critical reflection include class discussion, reflective journaling, arts-based learning, and physical expressions such as dance or movement.

---

*"I always leave with a better perspective and strategies to help my own mental wellness."*

## Recovery College Student

---

- Transformative learning aims to utilize critical reflection and discourse to help adult learners deconstruct negative thoughts, actions or feelings they may have about themselves (for example, due to oppressive assumptions about mental health) or others.

---

*The Personal Recovery Outcome Measure (PROM) scores for individuals show positive increases notably for symptom management, confidence, hope and reliance on others.*

---

- Situated learning is embedded within the Recovery College ethos and is underpinned by students actively contributing to a social learning process. In other words, they draw upon their culture, contexts, and experience to proceed "through co-construction and making meaning together". In a Recovery College setting peers use these skills to 1) engage with students at the level they are comfortable and 2) to draw out the lived experiences necessary to create shared meanings and social learning.

---

*"I feel less alone when I come here.  
I feel validated and genuinely welcome."*

## Recovery College Student

---

- Problem posing dialogue acknowledges the student's authority and the requirement of the 'teacher', or in this case Recovery Trainer or Peer, to engage in discourse with the student and raise 'critical consciousness'. In other words, the style of in-depth discussion between Recovery Trainers, Peers, and students, should draw on the strengths and the collective lived experience of the group to identify strategies and tackle problems. In this case, the 'teacher' treats students as equals, deciding together what to learn and how best to do so.

Reflection and self-assessment encourage students to gauge their own learning, set new goals with respect to courses, and advance them as learners in the College. Some students voluntarily repeat courses, with the understanding their learning did not go deep enough, and concepts covered in the course are important to repeat or refresh. Students also demonstrate their learning through recovery focused language and practice. During in-class observations, peers have been observed peering one another, using language that is recovery and not illness focused. They share and critically engage with different perspectives. Each of these is a demonstration of learning and evidence of an educational model that is strengths-based, and where people are experts in their own learning.

---

*"I've walked by the window, cleaning up after the course, and I see two guys, one I know doesn't like men, the other hasn't been out of the house in two years, and they're standing there talking to each other. They are peering each other."*

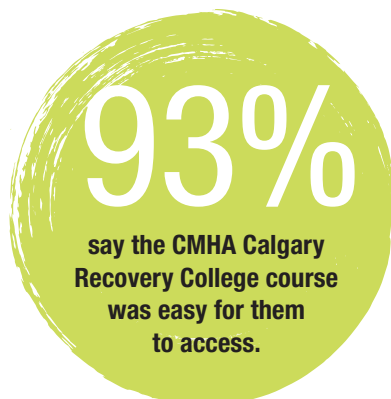
## CMHA Peer Supporter

---

# An Education Approach

A key aspect of CMHA Calgary's Recovery College is the educational focused approach that aims to reinforce and develop people's strengths, understand their own challenges and manage their lives. Within a traditional therapeutic paradigm, the person is often (in a group or individual setting) focused on fixing problems, with the therapist/social worker/psychologist as the expert in the relationship. **In CMHA Calgary's Recovery College model, peers are considered experts by experience and participate equally in choosing the areas they want to gain expertise in** and even help to co-develop the content of these courses. Recovery College recognizes the equal value of both professional expertise and the expertise of lived experience and recognizing the importance of peer support in the recovery process. Using peer support increases well-being and health outcomes, an ability to cope, a sense of community, belonging, and self-care. By bringing together the expertise of lived experience and professional expertise through co-production and shared decision making, it reflects **a new type of care context**.

Through such an approach CMHA Calgary's Recovery College offers its students greater choice, control and self-determination. Students are active participants in generating knowledge, not passive recipients of the prescriptions of experts.



For instance, all courses are co-developed by a team comprised of peer trainers, community experts, mental health practitioners and peers visiting CMHA Calgary or registered in Recovery College.

Peers have also been hired to provide additional support to students and visitors at the CMHA Welcome Centre (drop-in support) and in classes. Their role is not restricted to program implementation but also extends to strategy, administration and supporting public engagement. Choice, control and self-determination permeates all Recovery College activities and programs.

The courses themselves vary in length, **mirroring other strong practices in global Recovery Colleges**, they include courses that introduce basic concepts, can be targeted towards a specific wellness strategy, or advance a person's understanding of recovery.

A broader review of Recovery Colleges highlights that for most Recovery Colleges, the course content is grouped into the following categories:

**1**  
Understanding mental health issues and treatment options and their rights

**2**  
Life skills: managing money, problem solving skills, making and keeping connections

**3**  
Family and friends: supporting recovery and looking after yourself as a carer

**4**  
Capacity building amongst the peer workforce: the strengths model in practice, skills for educators

**5**  
Rebuilding life with mental health challenges

## Students at Recovery College reported the following:



Broadly speaking, the Recovery College approach to education adapts to the needs of the community. Following international best practice, courses are influenced by student demographics, location of the Recovery College and the co-production process. For instance, in one Canadian Recovery College, delivering courses based on student need caused the content to be tailored to issues of housing and mental illness. The benefit of the Recovery College model is that Colleges can decide to offer courses where content varies across subjects or offer courses based that meet niche content. For example, the Brighton Recovery College had developed courses for members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) community. Courses can include a short single session or longer spaced out courses delivered over several weeks.

### Examples of adaptability

- In one Canadian Recovery College, delivering courses based on student need caused the content to be tailored to issues of housing and mental illness.
- Courses can be modified for broader audiences, to meet specific learning needs, or reflect niche content. For example, the Brighton Recovery College had developed courses for members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) community.

- Depending on learning needs or scope of course materials, courses may be short single sessions or longer spaced out courses delivered over several weeks.

At CMHA Calgary's Recovery College, course content helps to meet students' needs around self-care and skills building. And the accessibility of courses help address systemic health care issues such as long wait times. There is also expansive coverage of peer practice through Art of Friendship and Road to Recovery (see current course catalogue for full offering). Courses are tailored through co-development, become niche to the extent they are unique offerings, and fill a true gap because the content they cover is unavailable through other service providers (such as Alberta Health Services or other community based mental health group or clubhouses). They are as close to a real time reflection of the specific learning needs of students as possible.



# Co-Production & Co-Development

The CMHA Calgary Recovery College approach to co-development explicitly recognizes the expertise of community and subject matter experts, mental health professionals and the expertise of lived experience. Their workforce, including Recovery Trainers, Peers, mentors, administrators and staff, come together through a process of 'co-production'. This is a critical element of the CMHA Calgary Recovery College and its approach. There is a mix of lived and non-lived experience staff involved in supporting strategy, operations and administration. Students are part of the co-production process and learning is seen as a two-way process, where both the facilitators and peer staff are employed on equal terms.

Barriers between 'them' and 'us', are also broken down within the student group. People with lived experience and those who provide support as informal carers and mental health practitioners, learn together and from one another. The transformation from 'service user' or 'client' to 'student' affords a positive identity

## Key Features of Co-production and Co-development

- **Building hope.** Co-produced, co-delivered courses enable students to see what people facing mental health challenges and substance use can achieve.
- **Peer trainers and students become an extension of peer support.** The peer support offered by peer trainers and fellow students enables people to feel less alone, offers models of hope and possibility, allows people to learn from others who have faced similar challenges and use their lived experience to help others.
- **Group learning builds community and relationships.** Group learning and mutual support replaces isolation engendered by a sole reliance on individual work. Recovery Colleges create networks of social opportunities among peers and the general community which can reduce the social isolation that so many people experience. Like any students, people attending Recovery College courses often form relationships that extend beyond the classroom.



# Conclusion

## Principles-led practice supports strong outcomes

CMHA Calgary's Recovery College follows a principles-led practice that challenges the traditional therapeutic model in the mental health and substance use field. Principles have become a foundational piece in the operations and decision-making of Recovery College, enabling an objective measurement of success and forming a scaffolding for expansion while adhering to the overall vision and ethics of the work.

## The democratization of learning empowers students

Principles also underpin the Recovery College's educational methods. Through their educational model, based on co-production and lived experience, Recovery College empowers students by encouraging active participation in course design and course delivery. Course development and delivery rely on a strengths-based, participatory and inclusive approach. This is a shift in traditional treatment, giving power back to students through self-determination, control, and greater choice in their recovery journey. Students actively participate and contribute to knowledge generation.

## Co-production and co-delivery help close the expertise gap

CMHA Calgary's Recovery College also dismantles barriers through co-development and co-delivery. This demonstrates their commitment valuing the expertise of students and peers. Recovery College leverages the expertise of lived-experience to strengthen course content and delivery; participants move between roles as student and expert, encouraged to generate knowledge, design courses, and participate critically in the courses themselves. As a result, CMHA democratizes the production of knowledge resulting in the breakdown of barriers between "them" and "us" within courses and the student group. By co-producing and co-delivering, the divide between conventional experts (psychologists, therapists, social workers) and clients is closed.

---

*"Promoting recovery is everyone's business."*

---

