

## Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance

### *Pre-budget consultation in advance of the 2021 federal budget*

#### Recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** That the Government of Canada support Anxiety Canada in meeting the increased demand for mental health supports as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic by filling in the resourcing gap for its online mental health tools, and by including their active MindShift app in the Wellness Together Canada Portal.
- **Recommendation 2:** That the Government of Canada develop a national strategy for mental health.

## Introduction

Anxiety Canada is pleased to submit recommendations for consideration in the upcoming federal budget. The trusted national voice on anxiety disorders, Anxiety Canada understands how important it is for credible and trusted information about anxiety to be freely accessible regardless of location, background, or socioeconomic status, particularly in light of the current public health crisis. The following recommendations are offered in critical support of strengthening Canada's mental health response, resources, treatment and prevention.

## About Anxiety Canada

Anxiety Canada was established more than twenty years ago to raise awareness about anxiety, and to support access to proven resources and treatment. Our mission is to promote awareness of anxiety disorders and support access to proven resources and treatment. We have many volunteers from coast to coast who bring expertise to Anxiety Canada, including a Scientific Advisory Committee, a Youth Committee, and a Board of Directors.

A registered charity and non-profit organization, Anxiety Canada is a leader in developing free online, self-help, and evidence-based resources based on the principles of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) that assist individuals in coping with and treating anxiety.

We are the developers of the award-winning free Mindshift CBT app, a made in Canada innovation that helps Canadians manage and reduce anxiety using scientifically proven strategies. We launched MindShift Groups, a virtual therapy program based cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) in January 2020 because Canadians told us they needed affordable, accessible, scientific treatment for anxiety. We also serve millions of Canadians by developing services and programs they can trust, including our online directory (Finding Help), and our two online anxiety courses (My Anxiety Plans) for parents and adults.

## Background on recommendations

### Mental health and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has substantially increased the prevalence of mental health challenges in individuals across Canada. In April and May, Statistics Canada investigated the impact of COVID-19 on Canadians, finding that 88 per cent of participants reported at least one symptom of anxiety. Based on the effects of the SARS outbreak in 2003, Health Canada estimates that roughly 11 million Canadians will experience "high levels of stress in family and work settings," and close to two million Canadians are predicted to show signs of "traumatic stress."

However, many obstacles continue to stand in the way of getting help. With physical distancing measures continuing, the accessibility of evidence-based health and mental wellness programs and tools is critically important.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 began, Anxiety Canada has experienced extraordinarily high demand for our award-winning free anxiety management MindShift CBT app by Canadians across the country. To give a sense of order of magnitude, the MindShift CBT app has 342,000 account users worldwide, with 70,000-81,000 monthly active users. These statistics alone call for more action and a mental health strategy for Canada. We are already working with select provinces to implement our tools and services, and we are eager to scale up and to support the wellbeing of all Canadians in need.

### Recovery and mental health

Anxiety Canada believes that Canada's economic recovery is heavily dependent on its mental health recovery. From front line workers who have been working over-time in high-stress settings, to individuals who have lost their jobs and are battling financial stress, and parents working from home during this crises while also caring for their children and loved ones, Canada's recovery and economic wellbeing will only be as healthy and strong as the mental health of its citizens.

In 2016, The Conference Board of Canada said in the report that anxiety costs the economy at least \$17.3 billion a year in lost productivity. As such, Canada's economic recovery is more likely to be successful if tools like MindShift CBT were incorporated and sustained as part of a national prevention and care mental health model.

Canada must act now to ensure its mental health sector – which already lacked capacity before the pandemic began – is prepared for the inevitable surge in demand as a result of COVID-19. Without access to mental health services, people will continue to struggle. The deterioration of their mental health could cripple Canada's capacity to emerge from this crisis.

### Recommendations

We are asking that the Standing Committee on Finance include recommendations to government that support Anxiety Canada in meeting the increased demand for our online tools. With the Government of Canada's support, we are ready to expand MindShift Groups in Quebec with the translation of our materials, develop and deploy Indigenous and Northern mental health programs and deploy MindShift within youth and older adult populations.

To that end, we are also recommending that the Government of Canada include the MindShift App in the Wellness Together Canada portal to expand its reach. Launched in response to the growing mental health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, Wellness Together Canada would benefit immediately from Anxiety Canada's ready-to-use, free and accessible online resources and programs.

Further, to ensure that mental health continues to be at the forefront of public health considerations, Anxiety Canada is calling on the Government of Canada to establish a national strategy for mental health to address the extraordinary mental health challenge that COVID-19 is presenting, as well as address the chronic shortage of mental health supports for Canadians preceding this pandemic. As the trusted national voice on anxiety disorders, Anxiety Canada is poised to contribute to the development of such strategies for mental wellness.

## Conclusion

This is the time, more than ever, for the Government of Canada to expand and sustain access to mental health services for Canadians. As the trusted national voice on anxiety disorders and the creator of free evidence-based, digital mental health resource, which are already in use, Anxiety Canada is ready and eager to scale up and support the government with this critical task.