

# Mental Health, Substance Use and 9-8-8: Suicide Crisis Helpline – Advertising Concept Testing

## Health Canada

Executive Summary

December 2023

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## **Mental Health, Substance Use and 9-8-8: Suicide Crisis Helpline – Advertising Concept Testing**

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This public opinion research report is based on 24 online focus groups that Quorus completed between November 27 and December 5, 2023. Focus groups spanned the country and consisted of a variety of target audiences. The sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes. All participants were informed the research was for the Government of Canada. A total of 169 individuals participated in this study.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Santé mentale, consommation de substance et 9-8-8 : ligne d'aide en cas de crise de suicide – Test de concepts publicitaires

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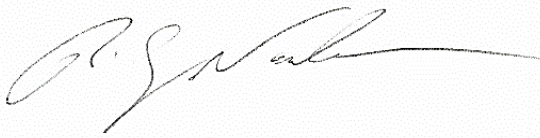


## Political Neutrality Statement

I hereby certify as Senior Officer of Quorus Consulting Group Inc. that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the [Policy on Communications and Federal Identity](#) and the [Directive on the Management of Communications - Appendix C](#).

Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rick Nadeau", is written over a light gray, textured rectangular background.

December 22, 2023  
Rick Nadeau, President  
Quorus Consulting Group Inc.

# Executive summary

## Background

Adverse mental health outcomes, substance use related harms, and death by suicide are significant public health issues affecting peoples of all ages and backgrounds across Canada:

- **Mental health and substance use:** while recent data suggests that 69% of Canadians believe the country is in a mental health crisis, historical data has found that the mental health of Canadians has been in decline before the pandemic, as well as after.<sup>1,2</sup> In early 2023, about four in 10 people in Canada rated their mental health as bad and at least 64% report having friends/family with experiences related to mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, thoughts of suicide, etc.).<sup>3,4,5</sup>
- **Suicide and self-harm:** everyday, an average of 12 people die by suicide in Canada.<sup>6</sup> As of 2020, this translates to over 3,800 intentional self-harm (suicide) deaths in Canada.<sup>7</sup> Earlier research also found that suicide was the ninth leading cause of death among people in Canada and the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 15 to 34, notably 2SLGBTQI+ youth.<sup>8,9</sup>

A national ad campaign is planned to address this growing public health issue. It will aim to generate awareness and interest among people in Canada in various stages of seeking mental health, substance use, and suicide prevention support to interact with free resources, services, and supports compiled on [Canada.ca/mental-health](https://Canada.ca/mental-health), including the new 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline.

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<sup>1</sup> Canadian Mental Health Association (2023). [New data reveals that 87% of people living in Canada want universal mental health care.](#)

<sup>2</sup> HC and PHAC. SPB data – internal.

<sup>3</sup> 30% rated their mental health as average, while 12% rated their mental health as bad or very bad. The “average” rating is placed in the bottom three as part of a standardized scale in academic research. Together, average, bad and very bad make up the “total bad” rating.

<sup>4</sup> HC (2022). COVID-19 tracking survey: Wave 18. Health Canada. COVID-19 Tracking Survey: Wave 20. Data collection from Jan. 12 to 30, 2022, p. 19

<sup>5</sup> CAMH, Talk Suicide Canada, and Innovative Research Group (2023). Talk Suicide Canada brand awareness and 988 research – Survey results June 2023 Draft Report.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada (2022). <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/suicide-canada-key-statistics-infographic.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada (2022).

<sup>8</sup> PHAC (2023). [Suicide in Canada.](#)

<sup>9</sup> Statistics Canada (2022). <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1310039401>.

## Research objectives

The objective of the research was to test the creative concepts for the advertising campaign to determine, based on the following specific goals, which concept resonated most with the target audiences.

Specifically, the goal was to:

- Determine if the content is:
  - clearly understood by the audiences;
  - credible, relevant and of value to the audiences;
  - appealing and appropriate to the audiences;
  - memorable in the minds of the audiences;
  - able to motivate the audiences to take intended actions.
- Compare content options to select the best language and presentation of key messages to the target audiences
- Elicit suggestions for potential changes to ensure the messages and products resonate with the target audiences
- Identify preferred sources and methods of receiving information on the subject of mental health, substance use, and suicide prevention supports from the Government of Canada

## Methodology

The research methodology consisted of 24 online focus groups with individuals in Canada (“participants”). The focus groups were held between November 27 and December 5, 2023, and included individuals from across the country. Focus groups were segmented by six target audiences: parents and caregivers of children between the ages of 10 and 18, youth and young adults aged 15 to 34, Indigenous peoples, members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community, members of racialized communities, and men aged 35+. Each focus group session lasted approximately 90 minutes. Participants were informed upfront that the research was being conducted on behalf of Health Canada and they each received an honorarium of \$125 for their participation. In total, 169 individuals participated in the research.

## Research results

Three advertising concepts were tested with participants:

- A. “Out of frame,” featuring a social media post or image in the foreground, while in the background, a person who appears to be struggling with mental health is shown. Different variations of this concept were shown across target audiences.
- B. “Honest answer,” featuring a common response to the question “how are you” while a more honest answer revealing mental health struggles is “read between the lines.” Different variations of this concept were shown across target audiences.
- C. “Bigger,” an ad showing the sentence “Left untreated, mental health issues can grow” written in a balloon-style font. One variation of Concept C (Bigger) was tested with all target audiences.

The concepts are available in the detailed results section of the full report.

The order in which the concepts were shown was randomized. Details on the order of concepts shown per session are available in the appendix in the Moderator’s Guide.

Before seeing the concepts, participants were provided the following information:

- The concepts are draft versions and not yet finalized.
- If the Government of Canada decided to move forward with any of the concepts, they would be professionally produced. The concept would be the type of advertising one might see on digital or traditional media such as social media, websites or television.
- Although the concepts presented are static images, the finished version would include animation. When presenting each concept, the moderator explained what the animation would be and, depending on the concept, simulated some of the animation by zooming in and out of the static image as they provided the explanation.
- Participants were reminded that depending on where they see these ads, they would be able to click on them to get more information.

It should also be noted that, unless otherwise indicated, most feedback and reactions were very consistent across the various target audiences involved in this research.

## **Concept A – Out of Frame**

For this concept, a variation unique to each target audience was tested. Across the groups, Concept A received moderate to positive scores when asked to provide an initial rating.

Those who liked the concept appreciated and understood that the image that one might present to others, often through social media, hides or misrepresents reality.

Participants also appreciated the visual aesthetics of the concept, especially when compared to the much more text-focused approach used in the other two concepts. The combination of an impactful image and a strong headline helped catch participants' attention and effectively deliver the message.

The focus on social media was said to be relatable to younger participants, however it was less relatable to certain participants (especially older ones) who do not use social media much if at all.

Those who did not like Concept A as much mostly struggled with the effort needed to understand how the image "in frame" related to the rest of the concept outside the frame.

As noted above, many also felt that the imagery in general was not sufficiently impactful or representative of someone who is struggling. Without a more obvious visual link to mental health, some felt they would not pay attention to the ad.

As much as participants liked the headline, those who liked the overall concept a bit less felt that the character in their concept was not always in the background and that this weakened the effectiveness of the overall concept.

## **Concept B – Honest Answer**

For this concept, a variation unique to each target audience was tested except for parents/caregiver and for racialized individuals who shared the same concept. Overall, Concept B received moderate scores.

Those who liked the concept enjoyed the simple approach. The small print "inner dialogue" was liked by many and was seen as accurate and relevant as well as intriguing. The "voiceover" approach and first-person perspective were appreciated. Participants felt that the concept reflected how things can look different beyond the surface and that how people portray

themselves or how they initially and often automatically tell others about how they are feeling may not actually reflect how they are truly feeling.

Those who did not like Concept B as much felt that while the idea was good, it lacked visual appeal. Specifically, the font and backgrounds used lacked creativity and were a bit bland. Some participants did not enjoy the text-only approach and would prefer to see some visuals. Others felt that the small text was not relatable to them as it appeared too focused on specific experiences or scenarios.

### **Concept C – Bigger**

For this concept, all audiences were shown the same concept, followed by an alternative-coloured version. Across the groups, Concept C received moderate scores.

Those who liked the concept felt the message was clear and straightforward. The message that mental health issues can worsen or grow if not treated was deemed to be true and to many, relatable. In the English groups, many liked the directness of the words “get help now” which implied a sense of urgency in the message and gently reminded the reader not to suppress mental health issues.

From a visual perspective, many felt that the font worked well with the message and was eye-catching and creative. Several participants could imagine how the concept could be creatively portrayed as an animation with popping balloons/letters.

Those who did not like Concept C as much felt that the creative aspect seemed a bit childish (specifically the balloon-style font) considering the serious and important topic. As well, many felt the words “left untreated” got lost among the other text. More visuals rather than text-only would be appreciated for this concept.

When participants were asked to consider the alternative version which contained a blue background, reactions were mixed. Some felt that the blue background was more eye-catching and provided more contrast whereas the black and white was more boring. On the other hand, some preferred the black and white concept, suggesting that the blue seemed a bit more childish and lacking seriousness.

### **Final concept comparison**

Overall, the concept most often chosen as the winning concept was Concept A (Out of Frame), with the other two concepts tied in second place at quite some distance.



Concept A was particularly appealing to youth and young adults, Indigenous Peoples, members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community, parents and caregivers, and men aged 35 and older. Additionally, many suggested that they would switch their votes from Concept B or C when asked to consider the alternate version of Concept A.

Concept B (Honest Answer) and Concept C (Bigger) were also chosen by a fair number of participants as their top choice. Concept B was particularly appealing to Indigenous Peoples where it often was in a virtual tie with Concept A.

Concept C (Bigger) tended to be selected more as the preferred concept by members of racialized communities, by parents and caregivers, and by members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community.

### **Feedback on the mental health resources promoted in the concepts**

Many participants agreed that they would remember the 9-8-8 phone number.

The website would have much less recall as it did not have a memorable URL. However, participants suggested that they would probably use Google and search “mental health Canada” in order to find the website if they needed to.

Many participants understood that the new 9-8-8 helpline would be intended for more immediate, urgent help and for suicide prevention, while the website would be useful for long-term planning or non-urgent mental health and substance use matters.

A few participants felt that the approach of sharing both resources was a bit confusing once they noticed that the 9-8-8 helpline was intended for situations of crisis whereas they figured the website and phone number would serve the same objective.

Participants felt that the advertisements should make it clear that the helpline is secure and confidential, particularly as there are those who instinctively feel that anything associated with the Government of Canada may not be.

### Qualitative research disclaimer

Qualitative research seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively projectable measures. The purpose is not to generate “statistics” but to hear the full range of opinions on a topic, understand the language participants use, gauge degrees of passion and engagement and to leverage the power of the group to inspire ideas. Participants are encouraged to voice their opinions, irrespective of whether or not that view is shared by others.

Due to the sample size, the special recruitment methods used, and the study objectives themselves, it is clearly understood that the work under discussion is exploratory in nature. The findings are not, nor were they intended to be, projectable to a larger population.

Specifically, it is inappropriate to suggest or to infer that few (or many) real world users would behave in one way simply because few (or many) participants behaved in this way during the sessions. This kind of projection is strictly the prerogative of quantitative research.

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