

# *Flex Your Head!*

## Youth Mental Health Program: Phase Two Evaluation Report

September 29, 2014

**PREPARED FOR**

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Boys and Girls Club of Canada



Boys & Girls Clubs of Canada  
Clubs Garçons et Filles du Canada



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Gander Boys and Girls Club  
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Boys and Girls Club of Peel Region

...and all the participating youth who volunteered their time to provide valuable feedback on their experience of *Flex Your Head!*



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“This program has given more than information. It has given me a home.”

## Background and Introduction

In collaboration with their member Clubs, Boys and Girls Club of Canada (BGCC) has identified mental health difficulties as a pervasive challenge among youth members. BGCC is uniquely positioned to address mental health difficulties among youth. Clubs operate in an informal, inclusive and engaging environment outside of school hours. Programming is universal in its approach – it is for all children and youth – but it is also the case the children and youth who may have greater needs for support are more likely to access the Clubs. Clubs also have access to a range of community and social service partners, as well as schools, to build support for addressing mental health challenges.

With the generous support of AstraZeneca, BGCC has developed a mental health promotion and education program to be delivered to youth by Clubs. This program has been named *Flex Your Head!*. Over the past three years, Taylor Newberry Consulting (TNC) has worked with BGCC to:

- lead the development of the program’s theory, approach, and materials.
- implement a pilot project of the program with four Clubs.
- evaluate the pilot project and make modifications to the program based on evaluation findings.
- roll out the program more broadly across Canada.
- evaluate this wider roll out of the program (which has been termed “Phase Two”) for the purpose of this evaluation.

The present document provides the findings and recommendations from the Phase Two evaluation. This report builds on the evaluation of the pilot project and should be viewed as a supplementary document. The pilot project evaluation report provides detailed background on the program’s history and development and its theoretical underpinnings.<sup>1</sup>

### *Club Participation in Phase Two of Flex Your Head!*

Following the pilot project, 14 additional Clubs participated in an in-person training in Toronto and were subsequently invited to run *Flex Your Head!* within their Club. Of the 14 Clubs that planned to implement the program, 7 ran the program in its entirety (offered all 12 modules to youth at a consistent time each week), 4 ran some activities but did not implement the program as a whole, and 3 Clubs did not run the program at all.

The 3 Clubs that did not start *Flex Your Head!* following the training provided the following reasons for not picking up the program.

- One Club stated that the staff member that was trained left the Club and there was a need to train a new staff prior to the beginning of the program.
- One Club was short-staffed and needed to put priorities elsewhere.

<sup>11</sup> Newberry, J., Love, N. & Parkin, M. (2013). *Flex Your Head !: An Evaluation of a Youth Mental Health Pilot Program*. Evaluation technical report for Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada. Guelph, ON: Taylor Newberry Consulting.

- One Club decided to delay the start-date to September 2014 to allow for more time build momentum for the program.

The 4 Clubs that only ran some activities provided the following reasons for not offering the full program.

- One Club started the program and intended to finish it but due to staff turnover was not able to continue running the program, stopping all activities at Module 6.
- One Club started the program and intended to finish but the program was interrupted due to staff turnover. Instead of dropping the program all together, the Club decided to offer a few activities “here and there” within their other programs.
- One Club stated that there were experiencing other programming challenges and wanted to get programs that were already running “up to snuff” before committing to a full delivery of *Flex Your Head!*. In the interim, the Club pulled and used activities from *Flex Your Head!* as needed.
- One Club had challenges with recruitment and so instead of running the program with fewer kids, they decided to run activities from *Flex Your Head!* on an as needed basis. We note that this Club did not run the Program Launch as outlined in the program, which is considered a key recruitment tool and process.

All 7 Clubs that ran the program in its entirety participated in the evaluation (See Table 1). These Clubs include:

**BGC of Greater Victoria:** Boys and Girls Club of greater Victoria ran *Flex Your Head!* consistently every week for 1.5 hours at the Central Saanich drop-in program. All youth in the Club were offered to participate. The Club had a small but consistent number of youth attend regularly

**Cornwall BGC:** The program was run consistently every week for 1.5 hours. The staff did encourage certain youth to participate but they were not selected based on risk. Rather, they were selected because they had voiced an interest in a program like *Flex Your Head!* in the past.

**BGC of London:** The program was run consistently every week for 1.5 hours. It was offered to all youth in the Club in the same room each week. A group with pre-existing relationships joined. There were two youth that did not know anyone in the group prior to the program, but this did not cause an issue.

**BGC of Lethbridge:** The program was run through the Keystones program (an existing BGC national program). The purpose of taking this approach was to facilitate consistent participation and promote youth leadership. Youth in the Keystones program were already committed to attending the Club weekly.

**Gander BGC:** The program was offered to their “teen group”. While this group had not yet participated in a formal program together, they were used to coming to the Club during set hours each week. The staff leveraged this consistency and offered the program during the same hours the youth were used to attending.

**Okanagan BGC:** The program was offered at their youth centre. The youth that attend the centre are typically considered “at risk” and experience a variety of challenges, including homelessness. The program was run consistently each week, although participation varied.

**BGC of Peel Region:** The Club ran the program once a week for 1 hour. The program was heavily promoted in the Club prior to beginning. All youth in the Club were invited to participate.

## Program Participants

Sixty-three participants joined *Flex Your Head!* at the outset of the program. Nine of these participants dropped out of the program prior to Module 3, leaving 54 participants overall who completed the program. This means the attrition rate was 14%. We asked staff to check-in with youth that dropped out of the program so that we could better understand the attrition rate. The reasons youth dropped out of the program primarily related scheduling conflicts, friendships, and time constraints. In one case the staff member indicated that the youth was shy and the program didn't seem to match his current needs.

*"She really liked the girls group she was in and didn't have time to come to two programs."* (Club Staff)

*"They just have a lot of other stuff going on. They said they would do it next year."* (Club Staff)

*"He wanted to do it with his friend and his friend is doing it next year because his sister was in in this year. So he will do it next year."* (Club Staff)

*"He is shy and it was just a bit too much for him I think. I have a feeling we will get him in it next year though."* (Club Staff)

*"Honestly, she just prioritized her school stuff. It didn't fall on the right night for her. She seemed disappointed."* (Club Staff)

A potential concern for the evaluation was that youth who dropped out of the program were somehow different from those who remained engaged. This feedback suggested that this was not apparent. The average age of participants in Phase Two of the evaluation was 16.48. The youngest participant was 12 years old and the oldest participant was 23. Slightly more female youth than male youth participated (male=24, female=30). Participation in the program was relatively consistent although there was variation across Clubs. All but one Club had youth attend at least half of the modules. Gander BGC had the lowest participation rate (an average participation rate of 5.50) and the BGC of Peel Region had the highest (100% participation). Gander indicated that their program was interrupted by the summer holidays, which made it challenging to maintain consistent participation. Table 1 below provides a breakdown of participation by Club.

*Table 1. Participation by Club<sup>2</sup>*

Club	# of Participants	Average Sessions Attended (out of 12)	Average Age	# Male	# Female
Cornwall	6	7.17	15.2	3	3
Gander	9	5.50	16.3	3	6
Greater Victoria	4 <sup>3</sup>	7.17	16.0	1	1
Lethbridge	7	7.86	17.9	2	5
London	10	11	13.6	6	4
Okanagan	10	6	18.7	7	3
Peel	10	12	17.3	2	8

<sup>2</sup> Participants that dropped out of the program within the first three modules were excluded.

<sup>3</sup> While Greater Victoria had 4 program participants only two completed program surveys, which is where data pertaining to age and sex were obtained.

## *Building on Learnings*

Based on learnings from the pilot project, program modifications had been made for Phase Two. The evaluation was adjusted slightly to be less focused on program development concerns and more focused on consistent implementation and evaluation of outcomes. More detail pertaining to these adjustments are described below.

### **Evaluation Focus**

The evaluation of the pilot project of *Flex Your Head!* was organized around two major components – process evaluation and outcome evaluation.

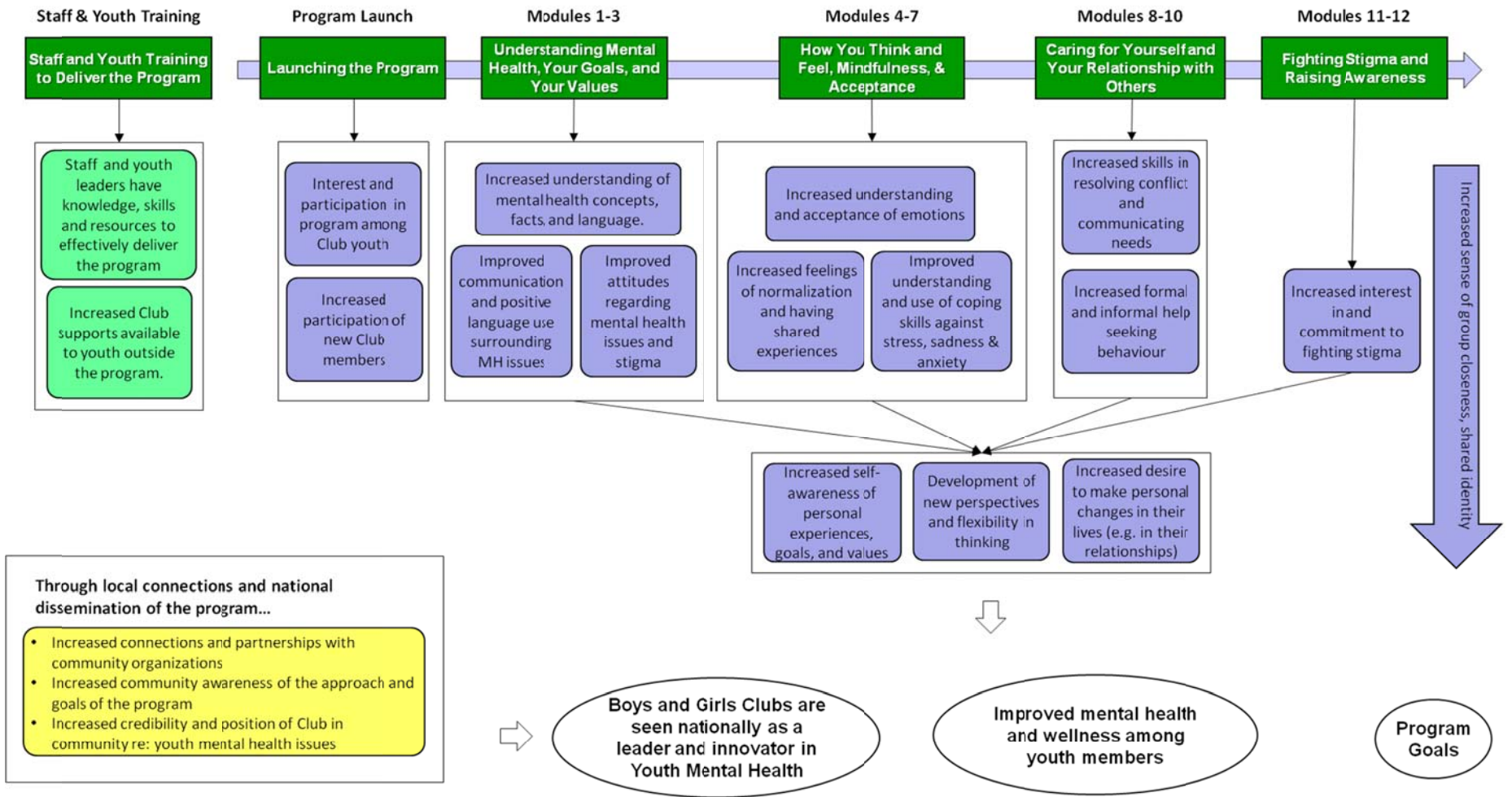
1. **Process Evaluation:** To understand the extent to which the activities were delivered as planned and if they were clear, well received, useful, and engaging for youth.
2. **Outcome Evaluation:** To understand the extent to which the expected outcomes of the project were achieved.

To guide the evaluation, a program logic model was created that visually displays the major components of the program (i.e., groups of modules) and the corresponding short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. This model was strongly informed by the clinical literature on youth mental health and principles of youth engagement. It was further developed and contextualized through a facilitated process with the Clubs during a national training event. The final program logic model appears on the next page.

The pilot project employed a formative evaluation design. Formative evaluation assesses key outcomes, but it is more prominently concerned with the extent to which the program is delivered as intended and how it can be improved. Interpreting outcomes is more tentative because program delivery tends to go through several iterations of change and improvement. Accordingly, TNC utilized Club feedback and the evaluation findings from the pilot project to make modifications to the program. The modifications reflected what Clubs needed in order to consistently deliver the program in a way that was beneficial to youth and supported their engagement with the activities (these modifications are outlined in the next section).

All Clubs involved in the wider roll out of the program, and in the Phase Two evaluation, used the revised *Flex Your Head!* program that included the modifications. In Phase Two, there was greater emphasis on assessing outcomes and ensuring a consistency of program delivery. While TNC was still interested in learning how the program was implemented, the purpose of the Phase Two evaluation was to assess the extent to which the goals of *Flex Your Head!* were reached and the core outcomes outlined in the logic model were obtained. The process information collected was primarily used to put outcome findings into context.

**Flex Your Head! Program Logic Model**



## Program Modifications

The overall reception in the pilot project to individual *Flex Your Head!* activities was very positive. With a few exceptions, youth enjoyed the activities and were highly engaged in them. Overall staff gave a very high approval of the program design. The primary modifications that were made to the program are outlined below:

- TNC altered or removed activities that were overly focused on individual work, especially written work. Where possible, we modified such activities to be more group based and experiential. A few poorly received activities were removed.
- We introduced the brief centering exercises that help practice mindfulness later on in the program, after youth learned more about their purpose. We did this because some Clubs felt these exercises sometimes made it hard to engage youth early in the program when its purpose was somewhat unclear. Clubs believed that youth would feel more connected to the exercise once a deeper understanding of mindfulness had been established and as they became more comfortable in the group. Optionally, Clubs can now deliver these activities at the end of the modules if it makes more sense to their context.
- Some modules were longer than others and Clubs sometimes struggled to complete the “mandatory” content. We reduced the total number of activities in each module and increased the number of optional activities.
- Some learning goals and activities were moved between modules to improve the flow and balance of the program.

## Phase Two Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation design utilized much of the same components as the pilot project. Revisions were made to the tools to align with the outcome focus of the evaluation. This means that more questions pertaining to youth benefits in core areas were included and some questions pertaining to process were removed. In line with the focus on outcomes, a youth focus group was added as an evaluation method to more deeply understand participant experiences. We wanted to ensure youth voice was captured to the greatest extent possible, to build on and address gaps in the quantitative findings, and to provide TNC with more information from which to tell the story about *Flex Your Head!*. The evaluation methods/design are described below:

### *Evaluation Methods*

Eight methods comprised the evaluation. Six of the methods were recommended as “core evaluation methods”. TNC provided an Evaluation Guide to each Club that included each evaluation tool, corresponding instructions in using each tool, as well as tips for smooth implementation.

### Activity Tracking and Reflection

For each module, a brief form was completed by staff to document the delivery of the activities. The form contained reflection questions that asked Club Staff to comment on how the activities were received by youth, how youth primarily benefited from the activities, and the challenges experienced in delivery. This was a recommended “core method”.

## Youth Program Attendance

Club Staff collected youth attendance throughout each module over the course of the program. This was an important tool of the evaluation to understand youth engagement in the program, and was recommended as a “core method”.

## Youth Pre- and Post-Program Surveys

Pre-program and a post-program surveys were completed by participating youth. This was a core evaluation method of the evaluation. The pre-program survey was administered during Module 1, 2 or 3. The post-program survey was completed between Module 10 and 12. The surveys contained a set of measures that were selected to assess the short-term outcomes before and after program delivery. The measures included in the surveys were: *Mental Illness Stigma Scale*, *Adult Hope Scale*, *Acceptance and Actions Questionnaire-II*, *Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Scale*, *General Help Seeking Scale*, and *Disclosure Expectations Scale*.<sup>4</sup> All measures have acceptable levels of reliability and validity in previous studies. For more information pertaining to each measure, please see the *Flex Your Head!* Evaluation Report of the pilot project. The surveys were a recommended “core method”. We note here that some concerns remained from the pilot project regarding the viability and reliability of using scale-based quantitative surveys in the Club context. We return to this point at the end of report when discussing methodological limitations.

## Regular Conference Calls with Pilot Clubs

TNC invited Clubs to participate in five conference calls. The purpose of the conference calls was to discuss the ongoing delivery of the program, troubleshoot difficulties, and to support the evaluation. This was a recommended “core method” and Clubs were strongly encouraged to participate.

## Staff Interviews

TNC conducted an interview with staff and youth leaders near the end of the program. The purpose was to reflect on the successes and challenges in delivering the program, make observations about how youth have engaged in activities, and comment on how they have benefited. This was a recommended “core method”.

## Youth Focus Group

TNC supported Club staff to facilitate a focus group with the youth participants near the end of the program. Instructions for facilitating the focus group were written out in the same module format as the program so as to support Clubs with embedding the focus group into program activities. The focus group protocol included questions about youth experiences with the program content and was specifically designed to assess whether short-term outcomes were reached. This was a recommended “core method”.

## Feedback Box

Clubs were encouraged to provide an anonymous Feedback Box (e.g., a locked box or other secure container, such as a locker) with a slot for youth to provide their ongoing feedback of the program.

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<sup>4</sup> For details on these measures please see Newberry, J., Love, N. & Parkin, M. (2013). *Flex Your Head !: An Evaluation of a Youth Mental Health Pilot Program*. Evaluation technical report for Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada. Guelph, ON: Taylor Newberry Consulting.

## Other Options

The evaluation package provided to Clubs also included some optional ways to gather information about the program. Clubs were encouraged to take photos and, where possible, collect or document items that were created as part of the program activities (e.g., signed t-shirts, posters, completed exercise sheets).

## Methodological Analyses

Quantitative analyses were analyzed using SPSS Statistical Software. TNC ran a series of paired-samples t-test analyses to determine if participants' outcomes on the various scales changed after participating in the *Flex Your Head!* program. Individual items means (descriptive statistics) were also reviewed to help interpret the findings.

The qualitative data was analyzed by looking for common themes in responses. All data was put into an excel spreadsheet. Notes indicating common words and phrases were identified. Using these notes, a secondary analysis was conducted and key themes were pulled from the data along with corresponding quotes.

All data was triangulated (brought together) to paint a picture about the impact that *Flex Your Head!* is having on participants.

## Club Engagement in the Evaluation

There was varying degrees of engagement across Clubs in the evaluation. Table 2. provides the number of participants that completed each core tool in the evaluation, broken down by Club.

Table 2. Club Engagement with the Evaluation Tools

Club	# of Modules with Completed Tracking Forms	Program Attendance Completed ("Yes"/"No")	# of Participants that Completed Pre-And Post-Surveys	# of Conference Calls Attended (Out of 5)	Staff Interview Completed ("Yes/No")	Youth Focus Group Completed ("Yes"/"No")
Cornwall	12	Yes	6	3	Yes	Yes
Gander	5	Yes	9	3	Yes	Yes
Greater Victoria	7	Yes	2 <sup>5</sup>	1	Yes	Yes
Lethbridge	11	Yes	7	3	Yes	Yes
London	11	Yes	10	5	Yes	Yes
Okanagan	5	Yes	10	4	Yes	Yes
Peel	11	Yes	10	2	Yes	No
			<b>Total=54</b>		<b>Total=7</b>	<b>Total=6</b>

We hoped that more Clubs were available to participate fully in the Phase Two delivery of the program, as this would have increased the sample of Clubs and youth in the evaluation (a greater program sample size provides greater statistical power in detecting change). Among the 7 participating Clubs, with the exception of Greater Victoria, each submitted pre-and-post programs surveys for youth participants. There was some challenges with "missing data" on some survey items. Some youth did not complete every question on the survey resulting in a

<sup>5</sup> There were observed challenges in youth completing the program surveys due to variation in literacy levels.

significant amount of missing data<sup>6</sup>. It should be noted that TNC reached out to Clubs consistently by email as well as by phone to remind Clubs of their responsibilities and to inform them of missing data. TNC also requested assistance from the BGCC National Office when a Club was particularly difficult to reach or when evaluation tools were not submitted at the time when the Club had indicated they would be.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information about methodological limitations see page 48.

## Evaluation Findings

### *Staff Preparedness to Deliver Flex Your Head!*

Feedback from the ongoing conference calls, activity tracking sheets and staff interviews indicate that **Club staff felt prepared to facilitate the program**. In particular, Clubs indicated that they had the knowledge and skills to deliver the program. Clubs attributed their preparedness to the national training meeting in Toronto. While formal evaluations of the training were not conducted, feedback on the first conference call following the training indicated that Clubs understood the core theoretical concepts that are imperative to program facilitation. While the staff manual and supplementary program material was beneficial for reinforcing core content, staff believe the in-person training was critical for obtaining the knowledge necessary to deliver the program effectively.

Staff also indicated that the **program activities were clear in their directions and their purpose**. Six of the seven Club staff members highlighted how the program activities draw on skills that BGC staff already have, such as play-based learning and interactive discussion. Staff felt this utilization of existing skills made learning the mental health specific content less challenging.

It was also hoped that *Flex Your Head!* would serve to build the capacity of Clubs to provide mental health related supports both within and outside the formal delivery of the program. *Flex Your Head!* is designed to improve mental health literacy among staff and youth leaders, build new program resources that can be introduced when needed, and create connections to local and online resources. While more time is needed to answer this question in depth, we are in a slightly better position to answer this evaluation question in Phase Two than we were during the evaluation of the pilot project. The inclusion of ongoing conference calls with Clubs provided us with the opportunity to assess ongoing capacity to handle challenges within the program, as well as to explore how Clubs' enhanced knowledge about mental health has been used in other areas of the Club.

Three Clubs explicitly indicated that the program has **increased their capacity to provide mental health supports** within their Club. One Club staff member indicated that she would often feel stressed and anxious when any youth at the Club confided in her. While she wanted the youth to trust her, she was always nervous about not being able to refer the youth to the right support. The staff member voiced this concern on the first two conference calls. On these calls we discussed methods for finding resources in the community and the different types of resources that could be beneficial. On the third conference call, she indicated that she had found three valuable resources in the community that she feels confident referring youth to. She mentioned that she has shared these resources with her Club and plans to draw on them for a variety of their programs. This illustrates how an enhanced connection to the community has increased her capacity to meet the needs of Club members.

Another staff member shared during her interview that she feels as a Club they have generally **increased their capacity to meet the needs of youth**, because this program has helped them to learn about youth experiences.

*"I feel as a staff member that I am now more prepared to work with youth. I understand their experiences more. I understand their needs."* (Club Staff)

Staff and youth leaders have knowledge, skills and resources to effectively deliver the program

Increased Club supports available to youth outside the program.

The third Club indicated that through the experience of facilitating the program, her level of **“worry” and “stress” decreased over time**. For example, on the first conference call she raised a concern about a youth disclosure. The staff felt worried about the way she managed the situation. She was concerned that she “didn’t do enough”, when in actuality, she handled the situation in a manner consistent with the practices recommended by the program. We discussed the issue collectively on the call. On the second conference call, this same Club provided advice to another Club who was experiencing a challenge pertaining to a youth disclosure. This illustrates enhanced capacity and confidence to manage challenging situations within the program.

Another Club staff member indicated:

*We have filled a gap in programming. This program is the best program I have ever see at the Club and I have been here 10 years. We have strengthened our ability to connect with youth, to support their needs in a holistic way. It is amazing.”* (Club Staff)

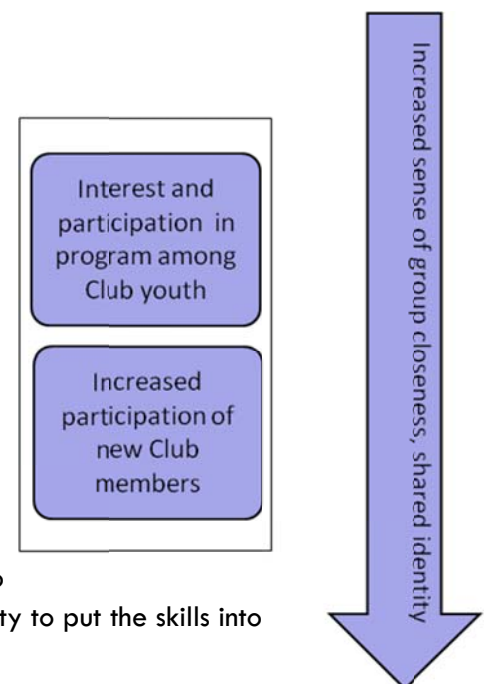
Taken together, Clubs were most worried and stressed about managing youth disclosure-knowing what to say in the moment and who to refer the youth to if needed. While staff felt they had the knowledge and skills necessary to initiate the program in their Club, knowledge and skills alone could not address their fear of mishandling a situation. However, once Clubs had gained some experience delivering the program and received ongoing support, their worry and stress dissipated. This suggests that Clubs’ capacity to provide mental health supports may have been enhanced through the implementation of *Flex Your Head!*.

### *Youth Engagement in the Delivery of Flex Your Head!*

Embedded within the program is a module that outlines for Club staff how to train youth to be co-facilitators of the program. The intention behind this component of the program is to strengthen youth engagement practices within the Club and enhance engagement in the program among participating youth. While it is not necessary for youth to have participated in the program before becoming a co-facilitator, it is encouraged and beneficial. With the exception of 1 Club (London) many Clubs were not in a position to secure a co-leader given that this was their first time running the program.

The BGC of London drew on another national leadership program (Keystone) to recruit their youth co-facilitator. The Club staff member highlighted the difference between “leadership” and “engagement” and indicated that the *Flex Your Head!* program **“was a wonderful opportunity to authentically engage the youth in a leadership position”**. In other words, the Keystone program prepared the youth to feel comfortable leading, but the *Flex Your Head!* program provided the opportunity to put the skills into practice.

All Clubs that did not formally utilize a youth co-facilitator still engaged youth in the delivery of the program. Staff requested youth to co-facilitate certain activities, providing a variety of youth in the program an opportunity to experience it from a different perspective. Staff believe this approach was beneficial for strengthening youth engagement with the activities, as youth were given the opportunity to connect with the program and their peers on a different level. This approach also provided Club staff with the chance to observe different youth in the facilitator



role, and for youth to test out the facilitator role, which they feel will be useful when securing youth co-facilitators in the future.

*“We had different youth lead certain activities. Everyone got a chance at one point or another. It was just a little way to strengthen engagement and to demonstrate that we know youth learn better from other youth.” (Club Staff)*

*“It was sorta like a pilot for us. We were able to see which youth effectively stayed on point and moved the conversation forward and which youth sorta just goofed off. I don’t mean that in a judgemental way, but it helped us know what we need to do to really prepare youth to co-facilitate and what characteristics will be most effective in a youth co-facilitator.” (Club Staff)*

### *Youth Engagement in Program Activities and Group Cohesion*

The activity tracking forms highlighted that participants were very **engaged in and interested in the majority of activities**. In particular, participants seemed very receptive to reflection and deeper thinking in the activities. Youth wanted to more than just the “fun” part of the activity. They wanted to have a deep discussion with their peers as well. Youth were also interested in the centering exercises (indicated by talking about them later or asking questions about them outside of the program), although staff sometimes had challenges keeping youth on track. Staff emphasized that starting the centering exercises later in the program helped to foster buy-in because youth were accustomed to the unique nature of the program already. The finding that youth engaged with reflection and the centering exercises suggests that the youth are interested in their mental health, developing a more mindful approach to life, and that the *Flex Your Head!* program was effective in helping to foster this.

*“We couldn’t get them to stop talking today. I could have just done the debriefing part of the activity for the whole session.” (Club Staff)*

*“Talk, talk, talk! We were sometimes rushed because they wanted to dive deeper into the issue.” (Club Staff)*

*“I was surprised by how much they opened up to be honest. They really wanted to draw meaning from the program and to talk in depth about the activities.” (Club Staff)*

*“Who knew mindfulness would work out!? They were annoying during the exercise, but they got it. And after a while they got a little less annoying and I could tell some of them really liked it.” (Club Staff)*

The activity tracking forms and staff interview findings also illustrate that youth were not only able to engage with the activity, but were able to **engage with the intended meaning or outcome of the activity** (e.g., developing mindfulness, recognizing differences, normalization of mental health etc.). This sometimes took some time if the activity was abstract or required that participants foster a new skill (like imagery or mindful reflection, as in the “Mindfully Eating a Smartie” exercise). Overall, staff members felt that by following the debriefing questions outlined in the module and by utilizing a youth co-facilitator to engage participants, they were able to get the intended message through during the activities in a way that fostered meaningful discussion. The following section of this report provides more information about the extent to which participants understood the fundamental concepts of *Flex Your Head!*.

*“They got the message of most activities for sure. Sometimes it took longer, but the debriefing questions were awesome.” (Club Staff)*

*“Definitely understood this module (Module 5), a little tricky at times but we came through.” (Club Staff)*

*“They dove in head first to the meaningful discussion!” (Club Staff)*

*“I wish every activity was like Meet Sally. They LOVED it and totally got the meaning behind it. I recommend going through the questions one by one, they loved talking about it.” (Club Staff)*

*“I needed my co-facilitator to translate for me. They helped to convey more simply the message behind the activity. It was great.” (Club Staff)*

In interviews staff were asked to comment on the factors that contributed to program participation, engagement, and satisfaction. Staff attributed youth engagement in the program to the nature of the activities, which were considered **experiential and interactive**. Hands-on activities or activities with a physical or interactive component (e.g., “Meet Sally”, “Poisoned Parrot”, “Bubbles”, etc.) were appreciated by the youth and led to the most engagement. Balancing the meaning of the activities with some form of icebreaker, physical exercise, or other fun activity seemed to help get buy-in and engagement from the participants. Participants also liked activities where they could show their creativity and express their feelings to one another (for example, the “Meet Sally” exercise, the “Emotional Pay-off” exercise). Staff emphasized that these types of activities dominate the program, which was a major factor facilitating engagement.

Youth indicated in the focus group that **feelings of safety** and a **strong comfort level** were important to participation.

*“We made a pact at the beginning not to share stuff with people outside of the activity. We talked about ‘What’s Hot and What’s Not’ haha. At first I was like ‘no way’, I won’t say nothin’. But that changed when I realized we were all chill.” (Youth Participant)*

*“Was quiet at first but we opened up. I trust my friends you know, to be cool.” (Youth Participant)*

*“I don’t love sharing but when others did I realized I kinda had to. It was good though. I liked knowing I could talk and it wouldn’t get spread around school.” (Youth Participant)*

*“Comfort was the upmost important thing for all members of our group. For this reason we opened up to one another.” (Youth Participant)*

*“I felt a little uncomfortable at first, as I am a shy person and I tend to keep my issues to myself. But after I heard other people’s stories I was more comfortable and I opened up and I’ve never felt more at ease with a group of people.” (Youth Participant)*

*“Everyone was so supportive and nice. It made the program so much better.” (Youth Participant)*

*“The fact that I can share my problems with everyone helped me to learn more about myself.” (Youth Participant)*

Youth also indicated that this sense of safety and comfort led to **strengthened engagement with their peers**. The findings illustrate that the relationships formed through the program will carry over into other environments as well, such as the school.

*"It was super fun doing the program with my friends. Like we have bonded. We can share stuff with each other even if we aren't in like 'the program'."* (Youth Participant)

*"I am totally gonna rock these friendships at school. We are awesome! I have friends to like actually talk to, not just like to do stuff with."* (Youth Participant)

*"I developed a close bond with my peers and staff very quickly. So talking to them was good, easy, and helpful...I will talk to them at school too if I need to."* (Youth Participant)

*"I was like whaaat? You want me to do whaaat? But then I realized how cool everyone is and we have totally bonded as a group. Not a clique, but we get each other and I can go to them whenever."* (Youth Participant)

*"I have made lifelong friends that I can trust forever."* (Youth Participant)

Staff highlighted how the program relationships have **improved the Club environment as a whole**.

*"The youth have totally benefited from being closer to their peers. They have connected as a group and really bonded. This is really important. It has made our Club environment better."* (Club Staff)

*"The youth are seeking out other like-minded youth and encouraging them to join. It is amazing."* (Club Staff)

Overall, the qualitative feedback illustrates that youth were engaged with the program content. Factors such as the experiential nature of the program and the safe and comfortable environment helped to foster this engagement. As a result, youth formed close group bonds with one another and feel as though they have access to a support network both within and outside the Club.

## Core Outcomes

There are four key outcome areas of *Flex Your Head!*: Mental Health Understanding and Attitudes; Emotions, Coping and Normalization; Help Seeking; and Fighting Stigma. The evaluation findings pertaining to each area are outlined below.

### Mental Health Understanding and Attitudes

Modules 1 to 3 provide an introduction to mental health concepts while demystifying common stereotypes and promoting positive language and attitudes regarding mental health and mental illness. All of these outcomes were assessed through qualitative feedback in the youth focus group and staff interview and through the use of the Mental Illness Stigma Scale (MISS).

In the focus group youth were asked to reflect on how their attitudes about mental health and mental illness have changed since starting the program. Many youth reported **positive changes to their attitudes, knowledge and awareness, consistent with the program outcomes**. The comments below demonstrate a degree of understanding, acceptance, and anti-stigma.

*"I learned that it is ok to be upset, it's a normal and natural feeling."* (Youth

Increased understanding of mental health concepts, facts, and language.

Improved communication and positive language use surrounding MH issues

Improved attitudes regarding mental health issues and stigma

Increased self-awareness of personal experiences, goals, and values

Participant)

*“I thought I got it, that is why I wanted to be in the program. I felt like I knew quite a bit cause of my mom and could talk about it here...I didn’t know anything!...or I guess I needed to learn more...I am glad I stuck around.”* (Youth Participant)

*“I know more now...I know the difference between mental health and mental illness.”* (Youth Participant)

*“I know a lot more facts. I know the difference between bullshit in the media and the real story.”* (Youth Participant)

*“I didn’t realize what people go through. I was a hater...I know more now and so I am different.”* (Youth Participant)

*“I learned that just because someone looks happy and fine, everyone fights battles every day.”* (Youth Participant)

*“Mental illness affects everyone I’ve learnt. I’ve also learned that it’s okay to open up.”* (Youth Participant)

*“We all feel and it is that spectrum thing that matters. I kinda get that we all feel bad stuff and that isn’t always a problem I guess.”* (Youth Participant)

*“The program was about talking about mental health in a way that doesn’t cast it in a bad light. Mental health is just a way of being, sometimes we are good, sometimes we are bad and such is life.”* (Youth Participant)

*“I learned a lot of facts, like 1 and 5 people have a mental health issue.”* (Youth Participant)

Staff also reported observing changes to knowledge and attitudes regarding mental health issues. While the concept of normalization is primarily discussed in Modules 4-7, the quotes above as well as staff feedback suggests this message got through to participants earlier in the program. Staff feel **the concept of normalization helped to improve youths’ attitudes about mental health**. It also helped them to utilize less stigmatizing language when talking about mental health.

*“I think they got the normalization message, that mental health isn’t something to be afraid of. A lot of them thought they knew more than they did coming in, but pretty quickly I could tell they could relate to the things we were talking about. They opened up at this point, around Module 2, and really started speak pretty well about stuff.”* (Club Staff)

*“The message that stress and anxiety is normal really got through to Club members quickly. They learned not to fear stress and anxiety and I think they took in the concept that our health is on a continuum-sometimes we feel better than other times. This point alone made them less judgemental of other people’s experiences.”* (Club Staff)

*“They don’t really fear stress the same way as they did before. They could relate to each other’s common experiences and I think this helped them really understand what we mean by ‘mental health’”* (Club Staff)

*"The warmed up to the idea that it is a good thing to talk about your experiences. They did this I think because they learned mental health is not something fear." (Club Staff)*

Qualitative findings also illustrate that the program **strengthened participants' understanding of the connection between thoughts, feelings and behaviours**-a core mental health concept.

*"Oh my gosh, I can like totally tell now that like if I am freaking out over little things it is just because I am worried about a test, or like worried about something going on at home...sometimes I just act like a bitch to my friends and they are like 'what is going on with you?' and I get so mad. But really, it is just that I need to process through stuff and it is all connected." (Youth Participant)*

*"It is like dominos, you think, then you feel, then you freak out, haha...joking. You think, then you feel, then you constructively handle the situation (laughter among group)." (Youth Participant)*

*"They are definitely connecting the dots. One student told me that she has noticed patterns in her life as a result of this program. For example, she notices that whenever her dad leaves (he is a truck driver) she gets in fights with teachers and with her friends. She can now tell this is just a stress reaction. This means she can manage it now. That is a huge difference!" (Club Staff)*

*"It is like a light switch was turned on and all of a sudden they understand themselves better. They get that we have thoughts, feelings and other things going on that influence how we act. One kid said that this simple concept has helped him to do better in school because he can calm himself down when taking an exam. This lets him stay in control and his grades are going up." (Club Staff)*

The quantitative findings from the Mental Illness Stigma Scale (MISS) do not confirm the qualitative themes above. In Table 3 below, the average ratings are provided for each item on the MISS (ratings are on a 7 point agreement scale), along with the t-test statistics that capture statistical differences in means before and after the program. Higher average ratings reflect a greater expression of stigma (note the reverse is true for items 4 and 11). We can see that while the overall scale was approaching significance ( $p=.06$ ), there were not statistically significant differences between means on all but one item. There was a statistically significant difference between means on the item: "I probably wouldn't know someone had mental health difficulties unless I was told" ( $t(22)=2.40$ ,  $p=.03$ ); illustrating that the program enhanced youth understanding that mental health issues are not always visible.

We can also see that the pre-program group was on the "preferred" side of the scale midpoint of the items, suggesting the perception of knowledge and awareness of mental health concepts, facts, and language from the start. There were changes in the desired direction across the majority of items (all but three items) and the overall scale average was scored such that a higher number reflects greater stigma and less knowledge about mental health; the average of all the items was lower post-program<sup>7</sup>.

The youth and staff quotes above provide insight into the quantitative findings. Some youth indicated that they came into the program thinking they "knew quite a bit" and were surprised when they learned more or their assumptions were challenged. Staff also indicated that some youth misjudged their knowledge about mental health coming into the program. It is possible that the pre-program survey did not accurately capture youths' knowledge and attitudes upon

<sup>7</sup> Due to the low sample size on this scale the quantitative findings should be interpreted with caution.

entering the program and that their scores reflect a misinformed understanding of mental health concepts. In other words, the youth learned more about mental health concepts, facts, and language than the surveys were able to capture.

*Table 3. Mean Ratings and T-Test Statistics from the Mental Illness Stigma Scale (MISS)*

Survey Item (n=20-23)	Pre-Program Mean	Post- Program Mean	T	DF	Sig (2-tailed)
FULL SCALE	2.92	<b>2.58</b>	-2.01	19	.06
1. I would find it difficult to trust someone with mental health difficulties.	2.47	<b>2.28</b>	0.49	21	.63
2. It would be difficult to have a close meaningful relationship with someone with mental health difficulties.	2.64	<b>2.33</b>	-1.50	20	.21
3. I feel anxious and uncomfortable when I'm around someone with mental health difficulties.	2.28	<b>1.92</b>	0.49	21	.63
4. I probably wouldn't know that someone had mental health difficulties unless I was told.	3.47	<b>4.21</b>	-1.28	20	.21
5. There is little that can be done to control the symptoms of mental health difficulties.	2.55	<b>2.44</b>	-0.10	22	.93
6. Once someone develops mental health difficulties, he or she will never be able to fully recover from it.	2.62	2.76	-0.56	22	.58
7. Mental health difficulties prevent people from having normal relationships with others.	2.49	3.72	0.98	21	.34
8. When talking with someone with mental health difficulties, I have worry that I might say something that will upset him or her.	3.89	<b>3.72</b>	0.77	22	.45
9. I don't think that I can really relax and be myself when I'm around someone with mental health difficulties.	2.29	2.33	-0.25	21	.81
10. When I am around someone with mental health difficulties I worry that he or she might harm me physically.	2.51	<b>2.00</b>	1.30	22	.21
11. Psychiatrists and psychologists have the knowledge and skills needed to effectively treat mental health difficulties.	4.64	<b>4.76</b>	0.09	22	.93
12. I can tell that someone has mental health difficulties by the way he or she talks.	3.36	<b>2.16</b>	2.40	22	.03*

Note: \* indicates significant difference at  $p < .05$

## Coping, Emotions, and Normalization

Modules 4 to 7 tie the theories of cognitive behavioural therapy and mindfulness to engaging, experiential activities. The goal is help youth recognize and accept negative emotions, such as sadness and anxiety, as a normal aspect of life. Youth learn to identify “how they think” and to generate coping strategies to address emotional challenges.

Qualitative findings from the youth focus group illustrate that the program **increased youths' utilization of coping and stress management strategies. Youth indicated that they plan to use these strategies outside of the program, at home and in school.**

*"I have a few more things up my sleeve. We have started study groups at school to help keep calm during exam time. That has been awesome."* (Youth Participant)

*"I like being able to check in with myself. Sorta like a what's up. I know a bit more about how to calm down or like, know when it's worth getting worked up over something...like I can go crazy over stuff. So it's good, it was cool to talk about what I can do."* (Youth Participant)

*"I rock the flower power in my locker. I'm cool like that... It reminds me that I have support and am not alone."* (Youth Participant)

*"When I get that barfy feeling I know I need to stop talking and listen to people, like go to the guidance counsellor or Club staff you know. There was that chair exercise about asking for help. I sucked at it because I never let people in before."* (Youth Participant)

*"I think the biggest thing for me was like learning some things I can do to stay chill. Stress is like bad on the body and I think a lot of us just get used to being stressed. [Name of staff member] told us we don't like have to be stressed to the point of not sleeping or whatnot, that we can like do some things to relax or catch a breath that are not so bad for us."* (Youth Participant)

*"If someone needed my help with a problem, I would tell them to take care of themselves by going for a walk, eating right, meditating, keeping a journal. Some of this stuff is preference but knowing what calms you down helps to get through hard times."* (Youth Participant)

Staff echoed the youth feedback:

*"Another big eye opener was negative self-talk. We made a parrot and they were asked to put it on their shoulder and we really took that metaphor seriously. They told us that in their home life and at school they would think of that exercise when they were having negative self-talk."* (Club Staff)

*"They have learned techniques for managing stress. For example, exams are coming up and instead of freaking out like usual they have all made calendars and planned group study sessions on their own. Their plans include taking care of themselves, like exercise as well as studying. They learned the importance of this balance and ways to prevent stress from this program."* (Club Staff)

*"They tell me they are taking their strategies they learn in this program into the school. They communicate their needs with their teachers more and some have even put up tips from the program in their lockers."* (Club Staff)

*"The youth definitely learned new coping strategies. That was a huge benefit of the program. I have watched them use the strategies in the Club too. It is really neat to see."* (Club Staff)

Increased understanding and acceptance of emotions

Increased feelings of normalization and having shared experiences

Improved understanding and use of coping skills against stress, sadness & anxiety

Development of new perspectives and flexibility in thinking

*“The biggest thing they learned is coping strategies, for sure.” (Club Staff)*

This qualitative data above suggests that *Flex Your Head!* not only helped youth to critically reflect on their emotions, it helped youth to regulate their emotions and develop strategies to manage challenging emotions as well. When youth were asked to rate their level of agreement with a single item on the post-program survey: *“Now that I have participated in Flex Your Head! I feel better about my own mental health and how I cope with personal difficulties”*, the average rating was 5.55/7, representing a fairly high level of agreement. The minimum score on this item was 4/7, the midpoint of the scale. This item supports that youth enhanced their coping abilities and feel better about managing personally challenging situations.

Quantitative findings from the Adult Hope Scale provide insight into the usefulness of such enhanced emotional awareness and coping. The Adult Hope Scale is a 6 item measure that assesses perceived barriers to goal attainment. Respondents rated items ranging from 1 (“never true”) to 7 (“always true”), with higher scores reflecting reduced barriers. The quantitative findings illustrate that the program reduced the perception of barriers and helped participants to feel more confident about pursuing their goals, as indicated by the significant difference between the pre-program and post-program overall scale means ( $t(30)=2.54$ ,  $p=.02$ ). As can be seen in Table 4., in particular youth feel they have more ways to reach their goals ( $t(32)=2.15$ ,  $p=.04$ ), they are more energetically pursuing their goals ( $t(32)=2.12$ ,  $p=.04$ ), as well as are more successfully meeting their goals ( $t(31)=2.29$ ,  $p=.03$ ). Post-program, participants also rated themselves as being more successful ( $t(32)=2.49$ ,  $p=.02$ ). One qualitative statement brings to light these significant quantitative findings:

*“I think I am going to apply to school (university). I wasn’t even preparing because I didn’t think I could...[staff leader] told me I would be crazy not to, haha, not ‘crazy’, we don’t say that, haha. I mean it would be silly not to. I have lots to offer, like that turning point activity you know, I have had a long journey... but it shouldn’t end here.” (Youth Participant)*

It is possible that through increased emotional awareness and enhanced coping, youth perceive fewer barriers to their goals and feel better positioned to pursue and reach their goals.

*Table 4. Mean Ratings and T-Test Statistics from the Adult Hope Scale*

Survey Item (n=31-33)	Pre-Program Mean	Post- Program Mean	T	DF	Sig (2-tailed)
FULL SCALE	5.55	<b>6.24</b>	-2.54	30	.02*
1. I can think of many ways to reach my current goals.	5.79	<b>6.34</b>	-2.15	32	.04*
2. If I find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it <sup>8</sup>	5.71	<b>6.08</b>	-2.00	32	.06
3. At the present time, I am energetically pursuing my goals.	5.51	<b>6.57</b>	-2.12	32	.04*
4. There are good ways around any problems that I am facing now. <sup>9</sup>	5.79	<b>6.24</b>	-1.67	31	.11

<sup>8</sup> Average mean ratings at pre-test illustrate that youth came into the program with the perspective that they were already equipped with ways to get out of a jam (average mean=5.71 on a 7 point scale, 1-never true to 7-always true). While average mean ratings went up at post-test (m=6.08), the difference between pre-and-post survey ratings was non-significant.

5. Right now I see myself as being pretty successful.	5.40	<b>6.23</b>	-2.49	32	.02*
6. At this time, I am meeting the goals that I have set for myself.	5.10	<b>6.00</b>	-2.29	31	.03*

Note: \* indicates significant difference at  $p < .05$

The Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Survey (DERS) and the Adaptation and Adaptability Questionnaire-II were also used to assess change in this outcome area. The DERS is more specific than the Adult Hope Scale and focuses on emotional responses, emotional awareness, and emotional regulation. Respondents rated items ranging from 1 (“almost never”) to 5 (“almost always”). Higher scores reflect greater difficulty with emotional regulation. There were no significant differences between the pre-and-post program means on any of the items (See Table 5). Upon reviewing the means more closely, one can see that 8 of the item means moved in the desired direction at post-test, one stayed the same, while the other half did not move in the desired direction.

Table 5. Mean Ratings and T-Test Statistics from the Difficulty in Emotional Regulation Scale

Survey Item (n=22-23)	Pre-Program Mean	Post- Program Mean	T	DF	Sig (2-tailed)
FULL SCALE	1.97	2.70	0.16	22	.88
1. I pay attention to how I feel. (rev)	2.64	<b>2.48</b>	-0.76	22	.46
2. I care about what I am feeling. (rev)	2.64	<b>2.36</b>	-0.48	21	.63
3. When I'm upset I acknowledge my emotions. (rev)	3.02	3.01	-0.14	21	.89
4. When I'm upset I become angry with myself for feeling that way.	2.60	2.76	0.67	22	.51
5. When I'm upset, I believe that I will remain that way for a long time.	2.53	<b>2.40</b>	0.56	22	.58
6. When I'm upset, I believe that I'll end up feeling very depressed.	2.49	2.52	-1.28	21	.22
7. When I'm upset, I believe that my feelings are valid and important. (rev)	3.40	<b>2.96</b>	0.25	20	.81
8. When I'm upset, I can still get things done. (rev)	2.65	2.87	-0.61	21	.55
9. When I'm upset I know that I can eventually find a way to feel better. (rev)	2.42	<b>2.36</b>	-0.90	21	.38
10. When I'm upset, I feel like I am weak.	2.57	2.60	-0.74	21	.47
11. When I'm upset I feel guilty for feeling that way.	2.50	2.84	-0.81	21	.42
12. When I'm upset, I have difficulty concentrating.	3.15	3.24	-1.12	21	.28
13. When I'm upset, I start to feel very bad about myself.	2.88	3.12	0.67	20	.51
14. When I'm upset, I believe that wallowing in it is all I can do.	2.19	<b>2.13</b>	1.16	20	.26

<sup>9</sup> Average mean ratings at pre-test illustrate that youth came into the program with the perspective that already had good ways to get around a problem (average mean=5.79 on a 7 point scale, 1-never true to 7-always true). While average mean ratings went up at post-test (m=6.24), the difference between pre-and-post survey ratings was non-significant.

Survey Item (n=22-23)	Pre-Program Mean	Post- Program Mean	T	DF	Sig (2-tailed)
15. When I'm upset, I have difficulty thinking about anything else.	2.71	<b>2.32</b>	0.68	20	.51
16. When I'm upset, I take time to think about what I'm really feeling. (rev)	3.19	3.19	1.35	19	.20
17. When I'm upset, it takes a long time to feel better.	2.84	<b>2.35</b>	-0.14	17	.89
18. When I'm upset, my emotions feel overwhelming.	3.02	3.09	-1.07	13	.31

Note: \* indicates significant difference at  $p < .05$

Similarly, there were no statistical differences between means at pre-program and post-program on the Adaptation and Adaptability Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II) (See Table 6). The AAQ-II is a 7-item measure that assesses psychological inflexibility and experiential avoidance. Respondents rated items ranging from 1 ("never true") to 7 ("always true"). Higher scores reflect greater levels of psychological inflexibility. One can see that average ratings remained on the desired side of the median, although there was a marginal increase in some mean ratings post-program (See Table 6).

Table 6. Mean Ratings and T-Test Statistics From the Adaptation and Adaptability Questionnaire-II

Survey Item	Pre-Program Mean	Post- Program Mean	T	DF	Sig (2-tailed)
FULL SCALE	3.38	3.32	0.58	27	.57
1. My painful experiences and memories make it difficult for me to live a life that I would value.	3.27	3.29	0.35	31	.73
2. I'm afraid of my feelings.	3.38	3.48	0.26	32	.80
3. I worry about not being able to control my worries and feelings.	3.50	<b>2.53</b>	0.59	31	.56
4. My painful memories prevent me from having a fulfilling life.	2.62	<b>2.52</b>	-0.09	31	.93
5. Emotions cause problems in my life.	3.66	3.67	1.09	30	.29
6. It seems like most people are handling their lives better than I am.	3.70	3.97	-0.16	31	.87
7. Worries get in the way of my success.	3.51	3.79	0.95	30	.35

Note: \* indicates significant difference at  $p < .05$

We hypothesized a significant decrease in average ratings on the AAC-II (i.e., toward greater adaptability). However, the findings are inconsistent with qualitative feedback provided by youth and participants. One possible explanation for this is that participants may have been more mindful at the end of the program and more aware of the normalization of some of their feelings, leading to a more in-depth analysis of the survey question and a more informed and honest response (and ultimately a higher rating). There is evidence of this explanation in the qualitative

data. For example, youth focus group feedback illustrates that the program **enhanced participants understanding of their emotions and emotional experiences.**

*"I listen to my body now. I know what it is saying and how to make myself feel better." (Club Youth)*

*"It's ok to be upset, it is what I do about it and how it takes over me that matters." (Club Youth)*

*"Oh my gosh, I can like totally tell now that like if I am being crazy, or freaking out over little things it is just because I am worried about a test, or like worried about something going on at home...sometimes I just act like a \*itch to my friends and they are like 'what is going on with you?' and I get so mad. But really, it is just that I need to process through stuff and it is all connected." (Youth Participant)*

*"I learned that it's ok. to feel uncomfortable when I open up. That is just my body telling me I am doing something uncomfortable, it doesn't mean I shouldn't open up." (Youth Participant)*

*"They know what their emotions mean. They can tell the difference now between general stress and a real problem. They also can tell when their body is telling them something." (Club Staff)*

*"I have noticed that they can understand their emotions better. Like they know when they are just stressed or when they are actually hurt or angry with someone. They tell me this makes a big difference in their lives at home. They are talking to their parents better and not getting into as many fights." (Club Staff)*

The above quotes suggest that youth pay greater attention to their emotions and acknowledge their feelings more than they did pre-program. The quotes also illustrate that participants do not over-generalize their emotions and recognize the concept of emotional fluidity—all fundamental elements of mindfulness.

## Help Seeking

In relation to Modules 8-10, the evaluation focused on potential changes to help-seeking behaviour. Through education, destigmatization, and the normalization of mental health issues, it was hoped that youth would become more open to asking for help.

In addition to qualitative feedback, two measures were used to assess this outcome:

The General Help Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ) and the Disclosure Expectations Scale (DES). The GHSQ required youth to rate how likely they would seek help and support from various sources when experiencing emotional difficulties, on a scale of 1 ("extremely unlikely") to 7 ("extremely likely"). Higher scores indicate a greater likelihood of seeking support. There was no significant difference between the pre-program and post-program means, although the overall scale mean post-program moved in the desired direction (See Table 7.). There was also inconsistency in ratings of help-seeking across the different sources of support, as reflected in the scale averages. At pre-program, youth were most likely to seek support from an intimate partner, a friend, parent, or Boys and Girls Club staff member (ratings fell above the scale midpoint). Post-program, averages suggest that participants are slightly more likely to seek support from a friend and Boys and Girls Club staff member, but less likely to seek support from a parent. Averages also indicate post-program that youth are slightly more likely to seek support from a mental health professional, helpline, and doctor, although the ratings remained below the scale

Increased formal  
and informal help  
seeking  
behaviour

midpoint, suggesting they are still not very likely to seek support from these sources. None of these changes were statistically significant, however.

*Table 7. Mean Ratings and T-Test Statistics From the General Help Seeking Questionnaire*

Survey Item (n=29-31)	Pre-Program Mean	Post-Program Mean	T	DF	Sig (2-tailed)
FULL SCALE	3.53	<b>3.72</b>	0.92	27	.37
1. I would seek help from an intimate partner.	4.35	4.34	-1.58	30	.93
2. I would seek help from a friend.	5.27	<b>5.31</b>	0.09	29	.67
3. I would seek help from a parent.	4.40	4.12	-0.43	29	.80
4. I would seek help from another relative.	3.98	3.60	-0.26	30	.37
5. I would seek help from a Boys/Girls Club staff member.	4.31	<b>4.43</b>	-0.91	29	.07
6. I would seek help from a mental health professional.	3.18	<b>3.67</b>	-1.85	29	.07
7. I would seek help from a phone helpline.	2.37	<b>3.06</b>	-1.86	26	.12
8. I would seek help from a doctor.	2.64	<b>3.44</b>	-1.61	26	.17
9. I would seek help from a religious leader.	2.00	<b>2.55</b>	-1.40	29	.11
10. I would not seek help from anyone.	2.76	2.64	1.64	23	.43

Note: \* indicates significant difference at  $p < .05$

The Disclosure Expectations Scale (DES) is an 8-item measure that assesses perceived risk and utility of disclosing personal information. Respondents rated items ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 7 (“very”). High scores reflect greater perceived risk and greater utility (note the reverse is true for items 3, 6, 7, 7 8). While there was not a significant difference in the overall scale mean from pre-program to post-program, findings from the DES support that the program **enhanced the likelihood that youth will seek support from a Boys and Girls Club staff member**, in particular because youth perceive it would be **easy to talk to a staff member about personal information** ( $t(30)=2.40, p=.02$ ) and **they feel the support provided by a staff member would be helpful** ( $t(28)=2.35, .03$ ) (See Table 8 below).

*Table 8. Mean Ratings and T-Test Statistics From the Disclosure Expectations Scale*

Survey Item	Pre-Program Mean	Post-Program Mean	T	DF	Sig (2-tailed)
FULL SCALE	3.0	3.02	0.92	27	.37
1. How difficult would it be for you to talk about personal information to a Club staff member?	2.63	<b>2.34</b>	2.40	30	.02*
2. How vulnerable would you feel if you talked about something very personal you had never told anyone before to a Club staff member?	2.67	<b>2.34</b>	1.31	30	.20
3. If you were dealing with an emotional problem, how beneficial for yourself would it be to talk to a Club staff member?	3.27	3.14	1.34	30	.19
4. How risky would it be to talk about your hidden feelings or worries to a Club staff member?	2.59	<b>2.40</b>	1.46	30	.16

Survey Item	Pre-Program Mean	Post-Program Mean	T	DF	Sig (2-tailed)
5. How worried about what the other person is thinking would you be if you talked about negative emotions to a Club staff member?	2.84	<b>2.68</b>	1.19	29	.25
6. How helpful would it be to talk about a personal problem to a Club staff member?	3.12	<b>3.81</b>	-2.35	28	.03*
7. Would you feel better if you talked about feelings of sadness or anxiety to a Club staff member?	3.18	<b>3.71</b>	-1.44	29	.16
8. How likely would you get a useful response if you talked about an emotional problem you were struggling with to a Club staff member?	3.68	<b>3.79</b>	0.70	29	.49

Note: \* indicates significant difference at  $p < .05$

The qualitative findings from the youth focus group build on the quantitative data. Youth indicated that since participating in the program they are **more likely to ask for help**, and in particular they noted they are more likely to seek support from a Boys and Girls Club staff member.

*"I learned not to bottle up stuff. I will definitely go and talk to (Club staff member) more now. She is chill and I mean, she already gets me now and stuff."* (Youth Participant).

*"I never knew we had programs like this here. I have been coming a long time...I always talk to the staff, but never about certain stuff, this kind of stuff. I guess I learned I can do that."* (Youth Participant)

*"Club staff are here for you. That is what I learned."* (Youth Participant)

*"I will go to (Club staff member) now. Before maybe, but ya, now I would."* (Youth Participant)

*"I am not alone. Club staff are here to help me."* (Youth Participant)

*"It is OK if you need to talk to someone. I have made a lot of friends here. I can talk to them whenever I need to."* (Youth Participant)

*"I have a family now through this program. (Club staff member) and everyone is here for me. I will talk to them a lot more now I think. I won't be so scared to at least."* (Youth Participant)

As discussed earlier in this report, youth are also likely to seek support from the friends they made in the *Flex Your Head!* program.

*"I made so many friends. I can go to them whenever."* (Youth Participant)

*"The support from everyone showed me I can trust them in the future too."* (Youth Participant)

*"I know if I am at school and in a bad mood I can go and talk to (names of group members) if I need to." (Youth Participant)*

Lastly, help-seeking seemed to go hand in hand with the program's aim to normalize mental health struggles:

*"Since I don't need to be embarrassed because it is normal, I can talk about it now." (Youth Participant)*

*"I learned it's ok to ask for help because everyone needs to." (Youth Participant)*

*"It was weird at first to talk about some stuff, but everyone was cool and it was nice to talk about your day and what was going on...it helped sometimes." (Youth Participant)*

*"My youth were quiet up until Module 3. They clicked in here about how normal it is to open up and have stress. They just exploded!" (Club Staff Member)*

*"They liked the ouch my heart hurts exercise. After that one I noticed them approaching me in the Club more." (Club Staff Member)*

## Fighting Stigma

*Flex Your Head!!* is not merely about educating youth about mental health concepts and providing them with strategies to cope with their own emotional struggles. It also strives to situate positive mental health as an important community issue that permeates their social world. The goal of Module 12 is take the foundational content of mental health concepts, definitions, and myths and challenge youth to engage in action-oriented, anti-stigma projects. *Flex Your Head!* aims to build leadership among youth in order to build positive attitudes about mental health that can be shared beyond the program – in their Clubs more widely, at school, and in other areas of their lives.

Increased interest  
in and  
commitment to  
fighting stigma

Many of the comments from youth already presented in this report are relevant to anti-stigma attitudes, particularly in relation to newly acquired knowledge of mental health concepts and greater normalization of mental health issues that people experience. Additional comments made by youth and staff further suggest that youth have **become ambassadors for anti-stigma messaging in the Club and school environment**. They have done this by feeling more confident to speak out, by being more open minded to differences, and by using less stigmatizing language.

*"I just think I will be more aware now. Not like in a huge way to be honest, but I will notice a bit more when someone is being rude or being judgemental...I didn't really notice, that may sound bad, but I didn't know." (Youth Participant)*

*"I might jump in at school if I hear people saying stigmatizing things to people, like people who are gay, or who seem different... I hope I will." (Youth Participant)*

*"I won't judge a book by the cover anymore. (Youth Participant)*

*"It was remarkable to see how this program changed the way youth talked to each other in the Club. I used to hear so much stereotyping going on and not that it is completely gone, but it is much better. They talk to each*

*other differently, they are more accepting of differences and I really think it is because this program brought in concepts that our other programs don't.*" (Club Staff)

*"The program really did make a difference in the Club environment. I notice less name calling among a few of them that participated and just a better demeanor toward others."* (Club Staff)

*"I noticed they would correct judgement in the group and offer other perspectives. It was neat to see. They were challenging stigma in the group, but also it seemed like they were taking that to their school too. They would tell about stigmatizing situations that happened and what they did about it."* (Club Staff)

Module 12 guided participating youth through steps to create an awareness campaign. At the time of writing of this report only two of the Clubs had completed Module 12. One Club that had completed the campaign put together a presentation to deliver to the wider Club members. They decided to use the presentation as an opportunity to engage new youth in the program. One youth who participated in the presentation said:

*"It was so fun to do the last bit (campaign)! We also did a walk for mental health and went to a presentation in the community. I just want to do that stuff. It was so cool."* (Youth Participant)

The staff member who facilitated the group also believed there was great value in putting together the final presentation.

*"The campaign at the end was so fun because they were excited to share with the world what they just went through."* (Club Staff)

The other Club created a sound bite for a radio station that shared fibs and facts for mental health. The youth were very excited to be on the radio and felt it was a great way to get the word out to the larger community about what the Club is doing to fight stigma. Two other Clubs shared what they were hoping to do for their campaign. One Club used the closing focus group as an opportunity to make a video that captures some of their feedback. They were hoping to show this video at a school assembly as a way to demonstrate how talking about mental health can be fun and powerful. The second Club wanted to put on a play for their other Club members, with the long-term goal of delivering it in the community. They had not yet started planning, but the Club staff member said the youth were "very into the idea".

## Community Connections

While *Flex Your Head!* is designed so that it can be delivered by staff and youth leaders in the Club, the program also emphasizes the importance of establishing community connections. The *Staff Manual* contains a section with tips and strategies on how to reach out to various community organizations. Findings from the pilot project and discussions at the national training reinforced that community connections are important for a variety of reasons. First, community connections could help to connect youth to the

### Through local connections and national dissemination of the program...

- Increased connections and partnerships with community organizations
- Increased community awareness of the approach and goals of the program
- Increased credibility and position of Club in community re: youth mental health issues

program and to the Club more generally. Secondly, Clubs aspire to take a leadership role in youth mental health issues in their own communities and building relationships with key providers is one way to achieve this. Lastly, such connections are important to the program delivery itself. If some youth are identified as having particularly challenging difficulties, the ability of the program to refer them to local services is imperative, including in urgent situations. Having mental health organizations available for advice and resources is an important aspect of the programs capacity.

While there were numerous and ongoing discussions about the importance of establishing community connections, only one Club explicitly stated they had formed relationships with mental health providers in the community. As discussed earlier in this report, this Club identified resources in the community due to a staff member feeling anxious about handling disclosures. While she had established relationships in the community by Module 4, ideally this relationship would have been formed at the outset of the program. Nonetheless this Club has built community connections that will be valuable in the future.

One other Club experienced a situation that underscores the importance of establishing a community partnership upfront. This Club was put in a challenging situation whereby they were having difficulties maintaining a safe space because one youth was noticeably in distress. The Club contacted the Boys and Girls Club of Canada (BGCC) to notify them of the challenge. BGCC put them into touch with a mental health clinician who was able to connect with the Club to offer support. The support included tips for communicating and methods of handling tricky group dynamics around the issue. This scenario highlights the value that a community partner could play in providing support to Club staff to ensure a safe space is maintained.

### *An Unexpected Outcome*

Club staff members stated that they have noticed a difference in the way youth in *Flex Your Head!* have engaged in the Club more broadly since participating in the program. The youth are demonstrating **increased leadership within the Club** by volunteering more, attending events, and working with the younger kids. The staff didn't necessarily indicate that this behaviour was linked to anti-stigma messaging, nonetheless it is an indicator of enhanced generativity or a desire to 'give back'. One staff member highlighted that this change is due to the program taking a holistic approach to leadership. The program is not simply teaching leadership skills, but ensuring youth are prepared emotionally and mentally to take on leadership roles.

*"I have noticed my kids volunteering in the Club now. This Sunday we have a fundraiser and they are ALL coming. That would never have happened before. They are also volunteering with the younger kids and taking on more leadership."* (Club Staff)

*"They are working with the younger kids now. Two have become leaders in other programs and it is 100 percent because of this program. It gave them the confidence they need."* (Club Staff)

*"They are leaders in the Club now. We are supporting kids to be true leaders in this program because we are taking a holistic approach to leadership and making sure they are prepared, as individuals, to lead."* (Club Staff)

## Conclusions and Limitations

## Summary of Core Findings

The Phase Two evaluation of *Flex Your Head!* demonstrated that youth truly enjoyed the program as well as experienced a wide range of benefits from the program. As one youth eloquently stated: “This program was like a warm blanket. I just wanted to snuggle up every day.” Below is a summary of key findings from the evaluation.

**Club staff felt prepared to facilitate *Flex Your Head!*.** Staff highlighted the in-person training as being critical to their understanding of the underlying theoretical concepts of the program and how these concepts are worked into the modules. Staff also indicated that the program activities were clear in their direction and purpose.

Clubs also feel they have **increased their capacity to meet the needs of youth**. Staff attributed this increase in capacity to the program, and in particular to their enhanced understanding of youth experiences.

**Youth engagement was a clear theme in the evaluation.** Youth engagement was illustrated in three core ways. Youth were engaged with the program activities (demonstrated through participation), youth were engaged with the underlying messages of the activities (demonstrated through a desire to have deep conversations about the concept underlying the activity), and youth were engaged as facilitators of the program. Engagement was enhanced through the experiential and interactive nature of the program, as well through a sense of safety and comfort among group members.

Findings also highlighted that **youth experienced a sense of group cohesion** and this group cohesion will be carried forward into the school environment. Youth greatly value the friendships they have formed in *Flex Your Head!* and feel confident that these friendships will be supportive to them in the future.

Outcomes were observed pertaining to each of the core desired areas of change, although many of the quantitative measures did not reach significance.

## Mental Health Understanding and Attitudes

**Qualitative findings illustrate that youth experienced positive changes to their attitudes, knowledge and awareness.** While it was expected that the concept of normalization would become clear to youth between Module 4-7, findings suggest that this concept got through to participants early on in the program. By normalizing stress and anxiety as a common experience, youths’ attitudes and understanding of mental health concepts improved. Youth were able to strengthen their communication about mental health and accept the range of emotions they feel.

Youth also **enhanced their understanding of the connection between thoughts, feelings and behaviours**. The program helped youth to understand the concept that our thoughts and feelings are connected to the way we act in this world. This is a core mental health concept.

## Coping, Emotions, and Normalization

Youth focus group feedback highlights that youth **gained valuable coping skills** in the *Flex Your Head!* program. Youth illustrated **a greater understanding and awareness of their emotional experiences** and stated that the program **equipped them with strategies to manage challenging emotional experiences**.

While the quantitative data was less pronounced in this area, there were significant findings pertaining to youth goal achievement. Data suggests that **youth are more confident about pursuing and reaching their goals**. When

combined with qualitative feedback, it is possible that enhanced coping strategies play a role in reducing barriers to goal achievement.

## Help Seeking

Qualitative findings support the expectation that the program **increases the likelihood that youth will seek support from a Boys and Girls Club staff member**. Parts of the quantitative findings lent some support to this finding. Youth expressed the belief that BGC staff members are easy to talk to and they feel the support provided by a staff member is or would be helpful. This is an important finding as it suggests the program has enhanced trust between youth and Club staff members, which is essential to the process of enhancing Clubs' capacity to meet the mental health needs of their youth.

Help-seeking seemed to go hand in hand with the normalization of mental health. The program helped youth to understand that it is okay to ask for support because everyone experiences challenges in their life.

## Fighting Stigma

Qualitative data illustrates that youth have **become ambassadors for anti-stigma messaging in the Club and school environment**. Youth shared that this program has enhanced the likelihood that they will speak up, in the Club and at school, when a youth is being mistreated or when someone is using stigmatizing language.

Two Clubs completed an anti-stigma education and awareness campaign. One Club put together a presentation about mental health that was delivered to the other Club members. Another Club created a sound bite for a local radio station. Other Clubs plan to carryout campaigns and the ideas range from a theatrical performance to present core mental health concepts to a video presentation of core learnings that will be presented at a school assembly.

## Leadership

The findings illustrate that the program has led youth to engage with their Club beyond the scope of the program. Youth are **demonstrating leadership in the Club** through volunteering, attending events, and working with younger youth. This leadership is not centered on anti-stigma messages, however it illustrates that the **program may support youth engagement in the Club environment more broadly**.

## Community Connections

The evaluation illustrates that more attention needs to be paid to developing community connections prior Clubs beginning the program. While one Club established relationships in the community throughout the program, it is unclear the extent to which other Clubs have formed community partnerships.

Overall, this evaluation illustrates the program has had a very positive impact on youth in a variety of ways. *Flex Your Head!* fills a gap in Club programming by offering resources to support the mental health youth. Clubs have indicated a strong desire for the program to continue in their Club and appear to be committed to strengthening the program through learnings and experience.

*"This program is a pillar of our Club now. It is essential. We can't go back."* (Club Staff)

## *Methodological Limitations*

There were two primary limitations to the current evaluation, both of which correspond to the quantitative analyses. First, the analyses were conducted with a relatively small sample, which yields low statistical power. Consequently, it is difficult to statistically detect change and any statistical significance must be interpreted with caution. Not only did fewer Clubs participate than hoped, but many youth skipped questions on the survey. We heard that youth were fatigued by the lengthy survey or intimidated by the required literacy. One Club also forgot to administer one page of the survey, which further depleted our sample size.

Staff provided feedback to TNC that Club youth “do not take to surveys” and that Club staff also “do not like administering surveys”. Staff emphasized that many of the youth who are attracted to a program like *Flex Your Head!* in particular, are typically “verbal learners who thrive when communicating out loud versus through writing”. Given this was only the second year of the program, TNC felt it was important to try and capture as much data as possible. Furthermore, we wished to retain the original measures of the pilot since they had only thus been assessed against a new program in its development phase. While we could have shortened the surveys to accommodate the nature of the Club context and Club’s current evaluation capacity, we question whether this would have effectively addressed the basic issue.

Second, the quantitative measures did not demonstrate significant changes on the majority items. There are a variety of explanations that could account for the non-significant quantitative findings. For example, they may be partly explained by the universal nature of the program. The program does not target youth based on risk or other factors. By design, the program attracts youth with varying degrees of struggles, but on average youth are doing well enough to create “ceiling effects” on the measures. In other words, on many items, there might not have been “enough room” in the scales to witness statistical change. A more uniform group experiencing greater struggles may have shown greater, statistically significant changes.

In examples where we saw changes in the direction opposite than expected, it is possible that the program may have enhanced youths’ emotional awareness and mindfulness abilities to the extent that they could think more critically about their responses when completing the post-program survey. This seem apparent in relation to the DERS, for example. This is a common interpretive challenge in program evaluation where, at pre-program, participants do not have enough information to properly and critically answer a question, which can lead to inflated ratings toward the positive (i.e., “good”) end of the scale. By program end, however, participants often obtain the requisite information to provide informed and reasoned ratings that may in fact be more negative.

Lastly, we instructed Clubs to administer the pre-program survey between Modules 1-3. We allowed for this variation because of the reality of the Club environment. We knew that some Clubs would not have all of their participants show up at the outset of the program, as well as that it may take a few sessions to complete the survey. The qualitative data suggests that core messages of the program (especially pertaining to normalization of emotional experiences) got through to participants earlier on in the program than expected. The variation in when Clubs administered the survey may have inflated the pre-test scale averages, thus making observable change difficult to detect at post-program.

The combination of low sample size and missing data, observed challenges in administering the surveys, and the response bias just described leaves us with some doubt regarding the reliability and validity of the quantitative

measures. However, the qualitative data was extremely useful in our interpretation of outcomes. It is rich and thematically consistent with the core content of the program logic model. It moves beyond basic program satisfaction regarding “likes and dislikes” and delves rather deeply into the theoretical underpinnings of the program regarding mindfulness, automatic thoughts, stress and coping, stigma, and the positive influence of peer support and youth engagement. Where quantitative data was ambiguous, the qualitative data demonstrated the experiential learning and impact of *Flex Your Head!*

Moving forward, we recommend that program surveys be removed from future evaluations or modified with a very short number of customized questions that are more strongly linked to program content. We caution that, while shorter surveys could be used in the future, feedback from Club staff overwhelmingly indicate that they are not as useful a method as the qualitative tools. Youth do not like them and it is difficult to ensure consistent administration and data quality across sites, even with intensive support to Clubs. It would be beneficial and meaningful to enhance the participatory nature of the evaluation and to adjust the design so that it is more in line with principles of youth engagement. This approach would not only fit within the context of BGCC’s current youth engagement work, but it would build on what Clubs do best and highlight their strengths.

### *Recommendations for Continual Program Improvement*

We recommend that **enhanced training be a focus over the course of this next year**. While staff highlighted that the training they received prior to running the program prepared them to facilitate, the ongoing conference calls were an essential component to maintaining this sense of preparedness. If these calls are not a part of ongoing evaluation efforts, some form of training must fill their place. We are aware of the plan to create an online training platform and we feel this could be an effective training tool. Our only concern is that program theory can be difficult to convey without interactive discussion and opportunity for reflection. If this component of the program is undervalued, Clubs may not effectively tie the experiential content to the core theoretical underpinnings of the program that are designed to facilitate outcomes (in other words, the theory of change is broken). This concern can be avoided, however, with careful planning. We recommend the follow key priorities be built into the platform:

- A webinar with a mental health professional that focusses on program theory and the connection of theory to module content.
- A “highlight reel” from one Club (a video) that includes a staff member demonstrating how to facilitate an activity from start to finish.
- A strategy for forming partnerships in the community.
- Strategies for strengthening youth engagement in the delivery of the program.
- Ongoing postings of “sticky situations” and how they were resolved.
- A forum for youth feedback and recommendations from youth to staff.
- Ongoing webinars that address new literature and best-practices.

While the priorities above are outlined in the *Staff Manual* and the *Introduction* to the program, we believe reinforcing the messages through training is necessary.

We also recommend that youth engagement be an enhanced priority for Clubs, especially Clubs that are running the program for the second year. The program was designed to include youth as co-facilitators. This is challenging to achieve in the first year of running the program. However, as Clubs have demonstrated, youth engagement is still

possible even if youth have not been a part of the program before. More direct instruction to Clubs about how to engage youth as facilitators could be beneficial.