

MEET DR. VINCENT AGYAPONG

*Area of Expertise -
A coalition of the
willing for the mental
health of Albertans*

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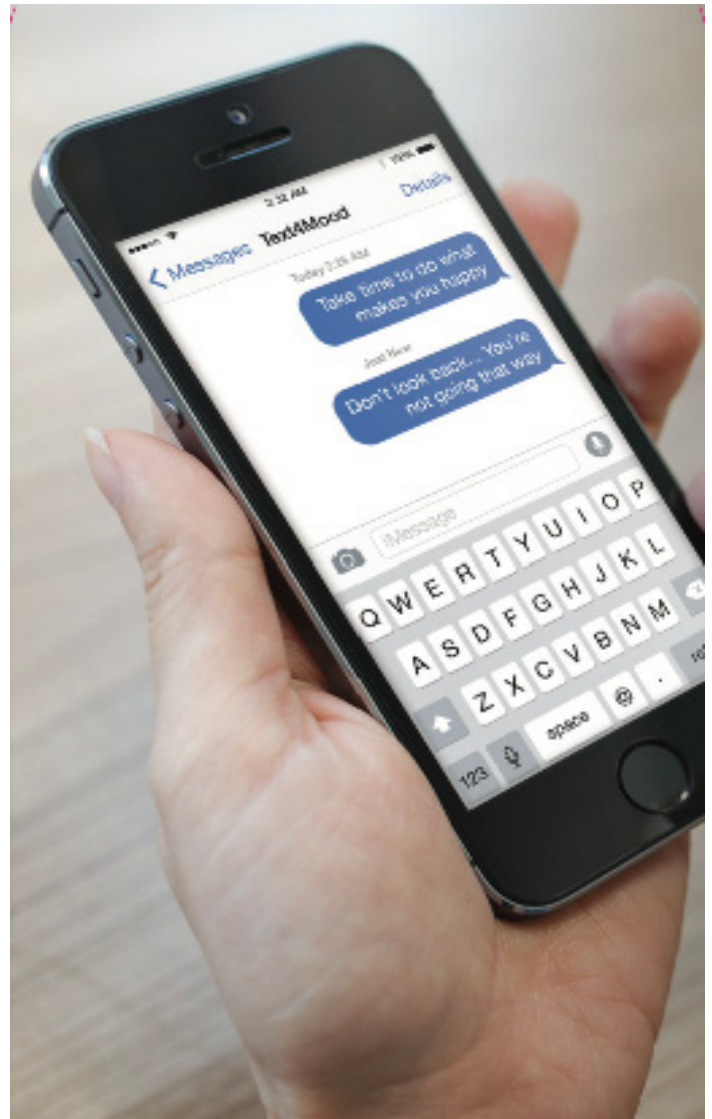


We all know the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll in our well-being. However, Albertans were fortunate to receive support from the Text4Hope initiative. The Text4Hope program is an innovative initiative aimed to help individuals navigate the circumstances of the pandemic with the daily delivery of evidence-based text messages to support the psychological wellbeing of subscribers. When the first cases of COVID-19 began growing overseas in early 2020, Dr. Vincent Agyapong braced for its potential effects on mental health: “I was in Fort McMurray when the wildfire happened, I had the first-hand experience of what people experience during a traumatic event. The pandemic is no different in terms of how traumatic it has been. Many people lost their jobs, businesses have been shut down, and there is so much uncertainty. It was only natural to expect that levels of anxiety, stress and depression would increase.” In 2016, Dr. Agyapong was one among 88,000 residents of Fort McMurray, Alberta, who were urgently evacuated from their homes due to an unprecedented wildfire. The wildfire caused not only the highest financial loss by a disaster in Canada (calculated as \$3.6 billion), but a persistent detrimental effect on the mental health of the population. Several sources of data support the increase in self-reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depressive disorders across the Fort McMurray population after the wildfire (1,2). The effects on wellbeing for the community did not go unnoticed for a mental health researcher like Dr. Agyapong, who was working on implementing the Text4Mood program (aimed to reduce depressive symptoms) in northern Alberta (3).

Instead, faithful to his public health roots, he supported the community by extending his mental health practice outreach activities and implementing more text-based supportive programs in the region. Based on the previous successes of text-delivered interventions for depression and alcohol abuse, the group strengthened their collaboration with Alberta Health Services to launch the Text4Hope initiative in the early stages of COVID-19 lockdown. The aim was to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on stress and anxiety using a platform of daily text-delivered messages that were in line with local isolation rules, required minimum logistics, and easily accessed through any mobile phone for low-cost mass delivery. In addition, the text messages were scientifically sound and based on effective ther-

apeutic knowledge (cognitive behavioral therapy) created by experts. Some of the messages included were:

- “Put yourself on a media diet. It’s important to stay informed, but only check the news and social media intermittently, rather than continuously.”
- “Notice when you’re feeling sad, angry, lost or overwhelmed about life changes. Don’t push the feeling away, acknowledge these feelings and let yourself grieve.”



Text4Mood has helped many Albertans with their mental health

The service was made available to all Albertans in March 2021 and the uptake was amazing. “We had an objective of recruiting 500 people over 6 months and within just a month we were close to 40,000 subscribers” describes Agyapong (4). Furthermore, self-reported validated screening scales included in

the program [Perceived Stress Scale (5); Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item scale (6) and the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 for major depressive disorder (7)] showed a decrease in symptoms of anxiety and stress at 6 weeks compared to baseline (8) and a control group assessed prior to intervention. These effects were sustained up to 12 weeks after enrollment of respondents. The authors report that up to that timepoint, the program maintained 40,000 active subscribers (9) and had similar effectiveness to a cycle of web-based counselling for general anxiety disorder (8). Dr. Agyapong highlights the need for innovative programs like this in mental health: “it will not be possible to have enough psychiatrists or psychologists to meet the needs of everyone. If we have interventions that can be delivered to large groups of people, you can have 20 people interact with a therapist for a single session and they all benefit”. The Text4 initiatives are a step towards bridging the gap in access to quality care in mental health.

So, how did this all start? Dr. Agyapong’s career in psychiatry was a fortuitous turn of events as he explains,

“I didn’t want to do psychiatry when I was in medical school,

I wanted to do public health”.

However, on his journey to advanced studies in public health, a temporary job in psychiatry captivated him

and led him to focus on the “public health aspects of mental health”. In his first doctoral dissertation, he implemented the first supportive text message program for mental health disorders which eventually became the cornerstone for the Text4 initiatives. The initial and sustained success of all Text4 initiatives belongs to “the coalition of the willing” according to Dr. Agyapong. He describes the conformation of this multidisciplinary team as a snowball effect: “I started very small. I did not really have anything at all, and I came up with the idea of translating research in a clinical program, the Text4Mood program, when I was in Fort McMurray”. Dr. Agyapong continued, “then, I collaborated with the health services managers, as well as the mental health therapist in Fort McMurray. I also brought on board some researchers from Edmonton and people from Alberta health services who were interested in this kind of work, to

form a team that I call a ‘coalition of the willing’”. In the current pandemic, the coalition has strengthened and added multiple collaborators across Canada and overseas. This think tank has help to expand the horizons to implement text-delivered interventions while providing the necessary skills to support the process. Among the successes of the coalition is the recognition of the initial program, Text4Mood, as an innovation by the World Health Organization (10). He states it was recognized “because we have been able to publish measures which show that the program was benefitting a lot of people in a really meaningful and scientifically researched way”. He describes the focus of his research as “what immediately benefits the patient”. “How can we improve the psychological well being using very simple things?” In his words, “it is not like they [people who use these services] are suffering from very severe and enduring mental health problems like bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. People are coming in with very common, treatable conditions... so, that makes it very easy to design interventions and test those interventions.” Looking forward, he believes in the importance of keeping the momentum of mental health relevance seen in the last years.

“Unfortunately, stigma still exists, but I think mental health literacy has improved quite significantly. Not only in Canada, but also in the so-called third world countries.”

Dr. Agyapong also advocates that as clinical researchers “everybody should have some level of interest [in mental health research]”. He also promotes a perspective of psychological wellbeing as relevant across all diseases, explaining that “in the general medicine ward, most of the people meet the criteria for one mental health disorder or the other. It may be anxiety, stress, an adjustment disorder, depression...”. “So, you can definitely do some basic [mental health] research within your patient population.” To conclude, as the pandemic has raised awareness about the importance of mental health for society, he states “in the next few years, we are going to be less reliant on face-to-face interventions and medications. People are really going to incorporate more digital health solutions as well as exercise and natural ways to improve their psychological wellbeing”. Finally, he also mentions how important is to maintain the skills that we have

developed while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and to continue building resilience for future stressful events.

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