



Employee NEWSLETTER

Employee Assistance Program
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Understanding the role culture plays in mental health

What comes to mind when you think about culture? For a lot of us, we immediately think of what's right in front of us: unique languages, different clothing and diverse food. But a society's culture also impacts a person's beliefs, norms and values. It impacts how you view certain ideas or behaviors. And in the case of mental health, it can impact whether or not you seek help, what type of help you seek and what support you have around you.

According to research published by The Commonwealth Fund, minorities in the United States are less likely to get mental health treatment or will wait until symptoms are severe before looking. In fact, only 66% of minority adults have a regular health care provider compared to 80% of white adults. Hispanic and Asian populations report the lowest rates of having a regular doctor or provider, at 58% and 60%.

It's important that we understand the role culture plays in mental health care so we can support our loved ones and encourage treatment when it's needed most.

Here are four ways culture can impact mental health:

1. Cultural stigma. Every culture has a different way of looking at mental health. For many, there is growing stigma around mental health, and mental health challenges are considered a weakness and something to hide. This can make it harder for those struggling to talk openly and ask for help.

- 2. Understanding symptoms.** Culture can influence how people describe and feel about their symptoms. It can affect whether someone chooses to recognize and talk about only physical symptoms, only emotional symptoms or both.
- 3. Community support.** Cultural factors can determine how much support someone gets from their family and community when it comes to mental health. Because of existing stigma, minorities are sometimes left to find mental health treatment and support alone.
- 4. Resources.** When looking for mental health treatment, you want to talk to someone who understands your specific experiences and concerns. It can sometimes be difficult or time-consuming to find resources and treatment options that take into account specific cultures factors and needs.

These are only a few ways culture can impact the perception of and treatment for mental health. Every culture and person is different and face a unique journey to recovery.

You can help address the mental health of minorities by understanding the role culture plays in mental health and by showing support to those around you. Use these tips from Mental Health First Aid to get started:

- Take time to learn.** Use the myriad online resources, books and documentaries available to learn more about different cultures and how they are impacted by mental health and substance use challenges. (The Mental Health Coalition has compiled a list of resources that support mental health for the Black community specifically.)

Continued on the next page.



- **Respect the person's culture.** When you are talking or listening to someone of a different culture, show an attitude of acceptance and respect the person's feelings, culture, personal values and experiences, even if they are different from your own or you disagree with them. Do not judge, criticize or trivialize what the person says.
- **Ask questions.** It's OK if you have questions or don't understand something. Instead of making assumptions, respectfully ask questions that show you genuinely care and want to understand.
- **Focus on recovery and well-being.** Conversations about mental illness are shifting away from only the "illness" or "deficit" way of describing mental illness. It's more common now to hear people talk about well-being and recovery. When interacting with someone who may be struggling with a mental health or substance use challenge, focus on these topics and encourage them to pursue their own journey to recovery within their cultural practices.

While it can feel difficult or uncomfortable at first to talk to someone with a different perspective, experience or culture from your own, it's important to connect with peers and loved ones to provide support to those who may need it most.

By Mental Health First Aid USA

<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2019/07/four-ways-culture-impacts-mental-health/>

<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2020/07/four-ways-to-show-support-this-minority-mental-health-month/>