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Culture and Mental Health

"People often think of mental health as a very personal matter that has to do only with the individual. However, mental illnesses and mental health in general are affected by the combination of biological and genetic factors, psychology, and society. This intersectionality is important, but the heavy influence of societal factors often goes ignored. An interesting aspect of society is its diversity in cultures and backgrounds that affect an individual's mental health related experiences."

– **The Public Health Advocate** | [Cultural Influences on Mental Health](#)

Culture is a very important component of our well-being. The values and beliefs we learn through our cultural experiences help guide us to wellness. For example, developing resiliency involves our personal ability to overcome problems on our own, but it also includes support from groups around us, like our family, community, and workplace. The way we overcome difficult situations – including the way we help ourselves and the way we find help from others – is linked to cultural factors like our values and beliefs that may be passed from generation to generation. Even the way we **perceive** situations, and the resulting emotions, is based on our experiences, values, and beliefs.

Culture can play a big part in the way we think about and understand health and wellness. Different cultural groups may have different explanations for mental health conditions, and different people may explain mental health challenges in different ways.

There are many ways in which culture can influence the mental health experience:

- Culture affects the way in which people describe their symptoms, such as whether they choose to describe emotional or physical symptoms, or even simply that symptoms were caused by misfortune.
- Culture may determine how an individual selectively describes their symptoms in a ‘culturally appropriate’ way so as to avoid negative judgement. For example, according to [a report of the Surgeon General \(US\)](#), studies show that cultural backgrounds can play a part when patients first report somatic symptoms and then later describe emotional afflictions when further questioned or asked more specifically.
- Cultures can differ in the meaning and level of significance and concern they give to mental illness. Every culture has its own way of making sense of the highly subjective experience of cognitive function and emotional health, for example whether mental illness is real or imagined, an illness of the mind or the body or both, who is at risk, causes, and ***the level of stigma***.
- Mental illness can be more prevalent in certain cultures and communities, often determined by whether that particular disorder is genetically or socially based. For example, the prevalence of schizophrenia is pretty consistent throughout the world (genetic factors), but depression, post traumatic stress disorder, and suicide rates have been shown to be more attributed to cultural and social factors.
- Cultural influences and ideals may impact the way people decide how they cope and whether they seek treatment for mental illness (whether that is by seeing a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, primary care practitioner, clergy member, or traditional healer, or not seeking treatment at all).
- Cultural factors often determine what type of support an individual receives from their families and communities when seeking help. This is particularly important because mental illnesses cannot simply be ignored and left untreated — doing so significantly impacts a person’s quality of life and can cause severe distress and secondary health effects.

[This website](#) shares outcomes from research regarding different cultural dimensions as they relate to mental health. While NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) is an American organization with a particular perspective about accessing US health care, the website offers an interesting view of [how cultural influence and beliefs can affect how different ethnic groups approach the topic and experience of mental illness](#). It is an important reminder to understand these influences and beliefs in our roles, and to demonstrate empathy.

The Canadian Mental Health Association has information and resources with respect to culture and the access to care in our country. [Look here for more information.](#)

The [Multicultural Mental Health Resource Centre \(MMHRC\)](#) seeks to improve the quality and availability of mental health services for people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including immigrants, refugees, and members of established ethnocultural communities. Addressing issues of language, culture, religion and other aspects of cultural diversity can promote greater equity in mental health care.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Morandini', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rochelle Morandini

Member Health & Well-Being, Director

If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.