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Becoming Resilient

HEALTH

The Role of Culture in Mental Health

Understanding diversity can help minorities overcome stigmas.

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Reviewed by Chloe Williams



When we reflect on the meaning of culture, we inevitably think about the diversity of languages, clothing and food in our multicultural society, as those aspects of culture are most visible and easiest for people unfamiliar with the culture to understand. Culture goes deeper than that backdrop; the specific beliefs ingrained in us at home along with society's culture play an important role in shaping our beliefs, norms, values and perceptions of certain ideas and behaviors.

When it comes to mental health, the culture of the society that surrounds us influences our attitudes about seeking help, the type of support we need, and whether or not we decide to seek help at all. Cultural norms can account for minor differences in how people communicate their symptoms to major omissions of which symptoms they report. Each cultural

the role of these cultural factors in the person's overall approach to getting treatment.



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Diversity is considered one of the United States' most significant strengths, but America is also a country with profound economic and cultural disparities that impact the mental health of its people. Research suggests that minorities in the United States are less likely to access treatment for mental illnesses or will not seek help until symptoms are severe. Unfortunately, only 66% of minorities have a regular health provider, compared to 80% of white adults. At 58% and 60% respectively, Hispanic and Asian populations show the lowest rates of having a regular doctor or provider. Research also reveals that African Americans are more likely to experience a mental health disorder than whites, are less likely to seek treatment, and when they do, it is often in emergency rooms.

from extreme poverty, political persecution and the trauma of oppression, their mental health is affected by the culture that surrounds them.

Providing accessible, effective mental health care to Americans of all cultures requires understanding the culture-related factors that influence mental health, such as:

- **Cultural Stigmas:** Every culture has a different way of looking at mental health and, for many, there is a stigma. Some cultures see mental health challenges as a sign of weakness; others do not view it as a healthcare problem or believe it is within each person's control. These inaccurate views can make it harder for those struggling to talk about a mental health issue openly and will negatively affect their decision to seek help.
- **Reluctance to Discuss Symptoms:** Cultural taboos also can influence a person's ability to describe personal symptoms and concerns to family and friends who may be able to direct them to professional help. Forbidding discussion of emotional concerns and possible mental illness can have a profound impact on whether a person chooses to acknowledge physical and emotional symptoms and seek professional help.
- **Lack of Community Support:** Without the support of caring family, friends and community, a person experiencing mental health warning signs can be left adrift, ashamed, with nowhere to turn and access the care they need. Understanding the harmful impact of this cultural stigma is essential to providing mental health services to members of racial and ethnic minorities, as well as to members of the majority culture.

ing to someone who can relate to their experiences and situation. For some minorities, it can be challenging to find **resources** that address their particular cultural factors and needs, which is why open communication with a supportive family and caring community are so important.

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Every person's experience in the journey to recover from mental health issues is different. Understanding the societal and cultural influences at play in mental health care is the first step in avoiding harmful misunderstandings, removing obstacles and encouraging people of all cultures to access the care they need.

References

The National Council for Behavioral Health. Four Ways Culture Impacts Mental Health (<https://www.thenationalcouncil.org> accessed July 11, 2019).

