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Overcoming Cultural Barriers to Seeking Mental Health Support

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Mental health support is an invaluable service, whether it's accessed privately with a therapist, from a local community organization, online, or through your organization's assistance program. Yet people who have these options often hesitate to use them when they find themselves suffering from a mental health issue like depression, severe anxiety, an eating disorder, or a substance abuse problem.

Why? Often, it's a cultural barrier that deters people from seeking support. If this describes you or someone you know, read on for ways to overcome hesitancy and get the needed help.

Cultural Barriers Are Common

Although attitudes about mental health problems like depression have been changing, there can still be stigmas attached to mental illness. You may find, or believe, that friends and family members see your struggles (or would see them) as a sign of weakness. You may fear being labeled. Pride can get in your way, too. You may believe that you should be able to handle any problem you have on your own.

Stigmas can be especially strong in some cultural groups.

- The National Council for Mental Wellbeing notes that among many communities of color, mental health concerns can still be a taboo subject. African Americans are less likely than

white Americans to pursue treatment and more likely to end their treatment prematurely.

- According to the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI), Latinx people are less likely than other ethnic groups to seek mental health treatment. Dr. Juan-Carlos Zuberbuhler explains that for many in these communities, "talking about mental health issues is difficult for cultural reasons—including feeling shame and fear that others will judge or label you."
- Religious beliefs can pose barriers to seeking mental health care. Christian fundamentalists may be told their symptoms are a punishment, or demonic in origin. And the American Psychiatric Association notes that Muslims are often less likely than the

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general population to avail themselves of mental health services—they may feel the health care system isn't equipped to provide culturally sensitive care, or they may believe seeking psychiatric care shows spiritual weakness.

- Studies have found that Asian Americans utilize mental health-related services at only one-third the rate of white Americans. Mental health may be a taboo subject in their community, or they may feel so much pressure to succeed academically or professionally that they ignore symptoms.

Overcoming Cultural Barriers

If a cultural barrier is inhibiting you or a loved one from seeking needed help, there are a number of steps you can take to overcome it.

Remember that the mind and body are intimately connected. From a medical standpoint, a mental illness is no different from a physical one. There's no need to feel shame about seeking mental health care any more than there is about seeing a doctor

when you're physically ill. A mental health problem isn't something you caused. It's something you need care for.

Educate and inform yourself. Whatever problem you're having, countless others have also dealt with it and are dealing with it now. Look on the web, in social media, or locally for information, support groups, and advice. It's helpful and reassuring to learn how not-alone you are and to hear about others' experience with different therapeutic options.

Reach out to supportive friends or family. Talking things over with a trusted person can help get your problem out into the open, give you clarity about the best way to tackle it, and reassure you that you're not alone.

Remember that you are not your illness. You are a whole being with abilities and talents, and you deserve to strive for a happy life. A disease, whether mental or physical, is a condition that you have. It doesn't define you.

Seeking help

It can take a lot of courage to seek treatment for a mental health issue, and cultural stigmas make it even harder. Recognizing the cultural and other barriers affecting you is a big step toward overcoming them. Don't buy into stigmas, don't put up barriers of your own, and if a loved one is struggling, encourage them to seek help and praise them when they do. Reaching out for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. ■

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