

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Cultural and Ethnic Stigmas Surrounding Mental Health

Mental illness is such a serious issue that the Surgeon General of the United States has made this explicit recommendation for all people: "Seek help if you have a mental health problem or think you have symptoms of a mental disorder."

And yet it’s recognized that most people who have mental health problems do not get help. The reasons why are complex, but one of the main reasons is stigma. Stigma is defined as a mark of disgrace. Cultural and ethnic stigma around mental health can impact people dramatically despite the overall prevalence of mental illness being the same across all people.

The Impact of Culture and Ethnicity on Mental Illness

The ethnicity of a person is their race while their culture is the norms and values with which they identify, and both can affect the way people view and treat mental illness. While cultural and ethnic differences are known to have strong effects, studying the phenomenon is very difficult as people must admit to the stigmas that often go unsaid in a community. Cultures feel the stigmas without anyone having to explicitly express them.

The overall prevalence of mental illness is known to be the same across all races; however it is interesting to discover that there are some differences in mental health divided by culture and ethnicity, reinforcing just how pervasive these two elements can be. These include:

- Suicide rates.
- Incidence of "ulture-bound" syndromes or "folk illnesses"; diseases or conditions that are only recognized within a specific cultural or society. Examples include specific sleep disorders and suppressed-anger syndrome.
- Prevalence of mental illness type; depression versus phobias and anxiety as an example.
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) rates, especially in relation to war-zone trauma.

Mental Health Perceptions Influenced by Culture and Ethnicity

Stigmas around mental illness occur both towards specific populations and from within it. Consider the following stigmas that have been found to exist within specific cultures and ethnicities today:

- Rating of people with a mental illness as more dangerous as compared to the ratings of another race.
- Increased desire to be separated from an individual with mental illness, despite research showing interaction and proximity normally reduces stigma.
- Increased fear of treatment due to perceptions of unfair treatment in the healthcare setting due to race.
- Decreased communication about the state of personal mental health to a physician, mental health professional or even friend.
- Mental illness is seen to reflect poorly on the entire family, diminishing marriage and economic prospects overall.

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Making Changes

Increased awareness, education and sharing facts about mental health in today's multi-cultural society are all key areas of opportunity. The good news is that there are anti-stigma campaign success stories; a specific ethnic group that originally ranked people with a mental illness as more dangerous than other ethnicities did actually changed their perceptions after being given anti-stigma information. This shows that anti-stigma campaigns can work to reduce mental illness stigmas and that targeting these campaigns towards specific ethnicities may be crucial to their success.