



Mental Health
Australia

MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA AND OUR MENTAL HEALTH



Australia is a multicultural country, and as our cultural, linguistic and religious diversity continues to grow, it is essential that mental health services reflect and respond well to the emerging needs of our multicultural population, especially if they are to deliver safe, quality and equitable care for everyone.

Increased cultural diversity brings a range of approaches to understanding and explaining mental health, mental illness and wellbeing.

Cultural beliefs about what constitutes mental illness and how to respond to it affect how people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and subsequent generations, display distress, explain symptoms and seek help - including whether they choose to access health services.

Understanding mental illness as a health problem that requires medical treatment is a western concept that can sometimes seem strange or even threatening to some people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

Health professionals who try to understand and work with differing cultural views about mental illness will more successfully engage with CALD consumers, carers and communities to achieve better mental health outcomes for the individuals concerned and the broader communities in which they live.

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THE FACTS

Australians from CALD backgrounds demonstrate reduced and variable rates of access to mental health services, with complexities related to country of birth, language spoken at home, and other factors such as age and gender.

When factors including pre and post migration challenges are taken into account, these reduced rates of service access are more likely to reflect systemic barriers than lower levels of distress or need. Barriers to access include greater stigma about mental illness in some CALD communities, language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and limited knowledge of mental health and available services when compared with the Australian-born population.

Although Australians born in non-English speaking countries may access voluntary mental health services at reduced rates, there are reports that they may access involuntary mental health services at disproportionately high rates. This carries significant safety and quality risks and can further undermine a lack of trust in health services for both the individual and community.

Other factors contributing to increased risk of mental health problems in CALD populations include low proficiency in English, loss of close family bond, racism and discrimination, stresses of migration and adjustment to a new country, trauma exposure before migration, and limited opportunity to fully utilise occupational skills.

Factors that appear to be protective of mental health include religion, strong social supports and English proficiency.

Suicide rates for first generation immigrants generally reflect the rates in their country of birth while the rates for subsequent generations of immigrants tend to become more reflective of the rates for the Australian population. Research indicates that strong family bonds, religion and traditional values are associated with lower suicide risk.

Refugees and asylum seekers are at greater risk of developing mental health problems and suicidal behaviours than the general Australian population. Prolonged detention is associated with poorer mental health in asylum seekers, particularly among children.

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When it comes to multicultural mental health, what does best practice look like?

One of the most powerful ways to gain greater insight towards the experiences of mental illness in multicultural communities is to listen to people with a lived experience and share their own stories, in their own unique way.

The Embrace Multicultural Mental Health Project has highlighted several key areas of best practice to embed the voice of lived of experience into the design and delivery of mental health services for multicultural Australians.

- Support services and stigma reduction educational sessions need to be delivered in language and should be facilitated by bilingual health promotion officers.
- New projects should embed themselves into existing services and create partnerships with those services.
- Ideas need to be put together by community, not put to community for comment.
- The ideas need to be led and delivered by the community.
- The ideas then need to be evaluated by community – not just by the project funders, stakeholders or managers.
- Fact sheets need to be clear and concise, and translated into specific languages where possible.

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WHAT CAN THE GOVERNMENT DO?

As a multicultural nation, Australia's mental health policies and plans contain principles promoting cultural responsiveness. However, as there has been limited evaluation of the implementation of these policies in relation to CALD populations, it is not possible to determine if there have been improvements in mental health outcomes in CALD communities over time. Available information suggests that there are still barriers for CALD communities when accessing mental health care.

Australia's mental health care system includes reporting and monitoring mechanisms that provide an annual snapshot of mental health activity. There are also several mental health policies and plans designed to promote cultural competency. Although current policies and plans provide a vision for what needs to be done, they don't always provide strategies or indicators to assess how improved cultural competence can be achieved and tracked over time. On a national level, there is limited reporting on the implementation of these policies and plans in relation to CALD populations.

The Framework for Mental Health in Multicultural Australia (the Framework) is a free, nationally available online resource promoted by the Embrace Multicultural Mental Health Project which allows organisations and individual practitioners to evaluate and enhance their cultural responsiveness.

The Framework is mapped to existing national standards, particularly the National Standards for Mental Health Services (2010) and the National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards (second edition, 2017). It also broadly aligns with other national standards which recognise the importance of culture on mental health and service provision, including the Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan, Primary Health Network Mental Health Tools and Resources, and the National Framework for Recovery Oriented Mental Health Services.

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LOOKING FOR MORE DETAIL OR RESOURCES?



The Embrace Multicultural Mental Health Project is auspiced by Mental Health Australia and provides a national focus on mental health and suicide prevention for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The Embrace Project provides a national platform for Australian mental health services and multicultural communities to access resources, services and information in a culturally accessible format.

The Embrace Project builds on the important work of previous national multicultural mental health projects - including the MHiMA and the Multicultural Mental Health Australia project - and works towards an equitable mental health system which reflects and responds well to the needs of Australia's multicultural population.

Mental Health Australia partners with the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia (FECCA), and the National Ethnic Disability Alliance (NEDA) to deliver the project.

The key objectives of the Embrace Project are to:

- Increase participation of consumers and carers from CALD backgrounds in mental health services,
- Improve outcomes for CALD mental health consumers, carers and their families,
- Increase mental health awareness, knowledge and capacity in CALD communities, and
- Improve cultural responsiveness and diversity of the mental health workforce.

Find out more here - [Embrace Multicultural Mental Health \(embracementalhealth.org.au\)](http://embracementalhealth.org.au)

Multicultural young people and their mental health - Orygen

<https://www.orygen.org.au/Policy/Policy-Areas/Population-groups/Responding-together>

Challenging myths about culture and violence in migrant and refugee communities - Multicultural Centre for Women's Health (MCWH)

<https://www.mcwh.com.au/challenging-myths-about-culture-and-violence-in-migrant-and-refugee-communities/>

Mental Health Australia would like to thank its member organisations and key stakeholders for contributing to this extensive body of work on multiculturalism and mental health in Australia. If you are a member of Mental Health Australia and would like to add to these resources, please contact info@mhaustralia.org

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