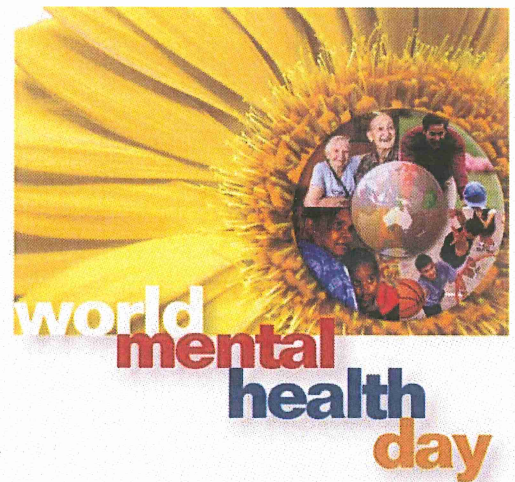


10 October



Mental Health in a Changing World: The Impact of Culture and Diversity

World Mental Health Day 2007 will highlight how culture directly affects mental health. Culture plays a significant role on wellbeing. It can strongly influence understanding and acceptance of mental illness. For instance in many cultures, mental illness is still stigmatised - forcing people to live in denial about their mental illness or be completely ostracised.

Australia is one of the world's most culturally diverse nations, with more than 200 ethnic communities. According to the Australian 2006 Census¹, nearly 25% of the total population was born overseas and a significant number of new arrivals were born in countries affected by war and political unrest. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that more than 50% of migrants worldwide have a mental health problem – these range from chronic mental disorders to trauma and distress. This is more prominent in those who have fled persecution.

Migration often means leaving behind family, friends and established networks, including health and community services that help build resilience and mental well-being. When some migrants arrive in a new country they often experience 'culture shock', which can impact significantly on their mental health.

In addition to adapting to these changes, their cultural background can also affect how they interpret, respond and cope with their mental illness. Culture can impact on how people label and communicate distress; explain the causes of mental health problems; perceive mental health providers; and utilise and respond to mental health treatment

Studies have shown that a sizeable number of migrants to Australia (including their families and carers) do not seek help for their mental illness. Instead they face many barriers in accessing mental health services, including language and cultural barriers as well as overcoming the stigma associated with their mental illness. Many migrants not only struggle with a lack of knowledge about available services, but also have to contend with a lack of culturally appropriate services and lack of translated material on mental health issues.

These barriers add to their mental illness and can be partly overcome by using interpreters, and acknowledging the differences in cultural explanations and perceptions surrounding mental health. Mental health service providers must therefore encourage further partnerships with consumers and carers from culturally diverse backgrounds and work towards developing nation-wide culturally inclusive policies to gain better mental health outcomes for consumers and their families.

Further information

Multicultural Mental Health Australia (MMHA) is a national programme funded by the Australian Government that works closely with mental health specialists, consumers and carers, advocacy groups and tertiary institutions to promote mental health and suicide prevention for Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse [CALD] backgrounds through campaigns, resources and information fact-sheets.

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The Mental Health Council of Australia (MHCA) is the peak, national non-government organisation representing and promoting the interests of the Australian mental health sector, committed to achieving better mental health for all Australians.

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