

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

Culture of silence: overcoming the cultural barriers of mental illness

Though an awful lot has been done to break down the barriers and stigma of mental illness, in certain cultural communities where it's still taboo, openly talking about and dealing with mental health issues can be a serious challenge. While every culture—and how they deal with mental health issues—is different, the suggestions below can help you or a loved one better navigate cultural concerns as you steer your way back to improved mental health.

State your needs. Even if those around you want to help out, they might not know how. If people offer help, be specific about how they can support you. Do you want them to sit down and listen? Make you a meal? Research medical help in your community? Talk to your family? Being concise and clear will not only make your allies feel more useful, but will also help you get much-needed support during this difficult time.

Find supportive help. Don't let the fear of being labelled with a mental illness, or fear of interacting with the members of the medical profession keep you from seeking support and treatment. If you feel that family and close friends won't accept your situation, research further shows a field such as isolation can make a tough situation even worse. Instead of going it alone, look to your family doctor or another health professional for the support and resources you need to get your mental and emotional health back on track.

Name it. Aside from helping to develop a treatment plan, a diagnosis gives you words to talk about your experience in a way other people can understand and relate to. It's also a reminder that you're not alone: many out there are coping with the same illness and similar issues.

Watch your words. Be careful not to equate yourself with your condition. "I am depressed," sends a very different message than, "I am dealing with depression." Though it used to be common to hear someone referred to as a schizophrenic, it would seem pretty strange to say, "She is a cancer." Why? Because people shouldn't be defined by their illness. Phrases like, "she is suffering from schizophrenia," or, "he was diagnosed with depression," help to separate the disease from the person.

Tell it like it is. If you're comfortable speaking out, you may want to educate the people around you about how hurtful insensitive comments about mental illness can be. A support group can be a good testing ground for finding your voice in a caring setting. For some people, telling their story, and working publicly to change cultural perceptions, can be a vital part of the healing process. This may include letters to the editor of a magazine or newspaper or giving talks to spiritual, community or cultural groups about your journey and the challenges you encountered on the path to better mental health.

Trust yourself. You're probably the best judge of the difficulties you may face in your cultural community. While it's important to get help for yourself, and help loved ones try to understand what you're going through, only you can decide who, when, and how much to tell those around you about your condition.

Seek and ye shall find. Studies suggest one in five North Americans has been touched by some type of mental illness. Countless resources out there—whether books, internet sites, magazines and videos—can help you connect to valuable information. Chat rooms and message boards on mental health concerns

may also help you get in touch with a more supportive community—possibly even of people from your cultural background—who've been in your shoes and understand what you're going through.

Don't take it personally. As hard as it can be not to feel shamed when your community may still try to shut out or dismiss your mental health challenges, remind yourself that mental illness is *not* something you chose. While it may be difficult, do your best to focus your energy on coping with your illness rather than worrying about what others think of you.

Dealing with mental illness is challenging on its own. But when you're also facing an uphill cultural battle, it can be overwhelming. By finding the social and medical support you need and working to counteract cultural stigma around mental illness, you'll help restore your own well-being and make the journey for others facing a similar situation that much easier.
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