

Celebrating our Cultures: Mental Health Promotion with the Irish Community

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Description	This resource makes the case for mental promotion with black and minority ethnic communities in England. It sets out a framework for delivering local interventions and addressing the needs of black and minority ethnic communities within mental health promotion strategies being implemented in response to Standard 1 of the National Service Framework for Mental Health
Cross Ref	Making It Happen: A guide to delivering mental health promotion. Inside Outside: Improving Mental Health Services for Black and Minority Ethnic Communities in England
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Contact Details	John Scott NIMHE Blenheim House, West One Duncombe Street Leeds LS1 4PL 0113 254 3816 john.scott@doh.gsi.gov.uk
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Mental health promotion with the Irish community

Nearly 6.4 million people make up the black and minority ethnic population in England (that is 1 in 8 of the whole population). The Irish community is the largest ethnic minority by immigration in Britain, with between two and eight million people born in Britain who identify as Irish – that is around 11% of the population. Over half the Irish population lives in London and the rest in major metropolitan cities. The Irish are often viewed as an invisible minority, frequently classified with the indigenous population or with other white minorities, while sharing similar experiences to black and South Asian groups.

Disadvantage and discrimination characterise the experiences of many people from black and minority ethnic communities, especially in the area of health and health care. They experience poorer health, have reduced life expectancy and have greater problems accessing health services than the majority white population. For mental health, major concerns include disparities and inequalities in terms of rates of mental ill health, service experience and service outcome.

Standard One of the National Service Framework for Mental Health (Department of Health 1999) requires health and social services to:

- Promote mental health for all, working with individuals and communities
- Combat discrimination against individuals and groups with mental health problems, and promote their social inclusion.

There is a need for both universal mental health promotion programmes that are sensitive to the needs of the whole population, as well as specific mental health promotion interventions that work with and target particular black and minority ethnic groups.

What is mental health?

Mental health means different things to different people. How we define mental health and mental illness is influenced by factors such as culture, background, values and belief systems and spirituality.

The following is one way of looking at mental health:

Mental health is about how we think and feel about ourselves and others and how we interpret the world around us. It affects our capacity to cope with change and major life events such as having a baby or experiencing bereavement; it affects our ability to communicate and to form and sustain relationships. Mental health is central to our overall health and well being.

What is mental health promotion?

Mental health promotion involves any action to enhance the mental well being of individuals, families, organisations or communities. It is about strengthening protective factors and reducing risk factors for mental health. It is the responsibility of a wide range of people working in health and social care, schools, faith communities, voluntary and community groups, and those involved in initiatives such as social inclusion, neighbourhood renewal and community strategies. It recognises that how people feel is a significant influence on health and is therefore essentially concerned with:

How individuals, families, organisations and communities think and feel

The factors which influence how we think and feel, individually and collectively

The impact that this has on overall health and well being

(Department of Health 2001)

Mental health promotion can increase the 'mental health literacy' and mental health awareness of individuals, organisations and communities, facilitating prevention and early detection and reducing fear and stigma associated with mental illness. It can help promote social inclusion, facilitate tolerance and participation, reduce anxiety and enable people to have more control within their lives; and can contribute to improved physical and mental well being and reduce the risk of some mental health problems. For people experiencing mental health problems, mental health promotion can help improve services and people's quality of life, and can assist in recovery.

People from different black and minority ethnic groups will benefit from living in a community that understands them, values, supports and empowers them.

Mental health promotion operates at three interconnected levels:

- **Strengthening individuals**

Increasing emotional resilience by promoting self-esteem, life and coping skills (for example, communicating, negotiating, relationship and parenting skills) and enabling people from different black and minority ethnic populations to develop a positive cultural identity and thereby build their confidence and sense of worth.

- **Strengthening communities**

Increasing social support, social inclusion and participation, improving community safety, neighbourhood environments, promoting childcare and self-help networks, promoting mental health within schools and workplaces e.g. through anti-bullying strategies and race equality schemes, programmes to tackle racism within schools, workplaces and the wider community.

- **Reducing structural barriers to mental health**

Challenging stereotypes, discrimination and inequalities and reducing the political, social and economic barriers influencing the capacity of different black and minority ethnic groups to participate. Work to develop health and social services that support and promote mental health; ensure people have access to good quality health care; increase access to education, meaningful employment, training opportunities, housing, benefit entitlements and support for vulnerable people.

Key mental health issues for the Irish community

There is a great deal of diversity within any ethnic minority community, and each individual within an ethnic group is unique and different. Assumptions may be made that people have similar views, experiences or needs because they belong to a particular black or minority ethnic group. When planning mental health promotion, it is important to take into account other relevant issues for an individual such as gender, age, employment status, place of birth, experience of migration, family environment, and to recognise the complexity of people's lives. However, there are some common issues affecting all black and minority ethnic groups and also some issues that affect some groups disproportionately.

Key mental health issues for the Irish community

General:

Racism

Stigma

Language barriers[DQ: *Is this correct for Irish communities?*]

Social risk factors:

Poverty

Unemployment

Loneliness and isolation

Homelessness

Contact with the criminal justice system

Health:

Alcohol misuse[DQ: *May be seen as stigmatising. Should we say "perceived" alcohol misuse?*]

High suicide rates

Service issues:

Lack of knowledge of services (especially men)

Low use of mental health services (especially men)

Delay seeking help

High use of physical/drug treatments

Compulsory admission under Mental Health Act

High rates of admission/readmission

Suggested action points to help you develop a model for engaging with the Irish community on mental health promotion

Consult and work in partnership

- Design and deliver mental health promotion programmes in partnership with Irish people and community organisations that work with them
- Consult effectively and ensure community involvement and ownership in planning, implementing and evaluating mental health promotion interventions
- Build partnerships between the black and minority ethnic voluntary sector and the statutory sector, and identify adequate and sustained funding for local groups so they can be partners in developing and delivering mental health promotion

Raise awareness

- Raise awareness about mental health issues, mental health services and how to access them, and build the mental health literacy of the Irish population
- Develop mental health promotion materials specifically designed for Irish people
- Work with opinion formers and Irish community organisations, and provide mental health promotion interventions within accessible community venues including youth centres, schools, leisure facilities, faith organisations and local businesses
- Enable Irish people to develop a positive cultural identity and build their confidence and sense of worth

Challenge discrimination

- Challenge racism, health inequalities, discrimination and stereotypes both within services and the wider community
- Promote employment opportunities for both those who do and do not currently use mental health services

Train

- Provide training for a wide range of workers, including anti-discrimination and cultural awareness to improve the way people experience services
- Provide support, training and information for carers and families to increase their knowledge and understanding about positive mental health, mental illness, symptoms, mental health services, and empower them to promote their own mental health and well being and that of the person they care for

Promote mental health within services

- Work towards developing culturally sensitive services
- Provide information within primary care about effective and accessible sources of support within the voluntary and community sector such as self help groups
- Raise awareness about the important role of spiritual and religious beliefs for some mental health service users
- Consult with Irish service users to ensure that services are meeting their needs
- Involve Irish voluntary and community groups in helping plan and provide support following discharge
- Provide accessible information about the services and treatment on offer, including side effects of medication and the availability of complimentary therapies and integrate non-medical and social models of care
- Ensure physical health needs are met and provide regular health checks and promotion information.

Examples of mental health promotion initiatives with the Irish community

• London Irish Women's Centre

The LIWC aims to reduce isolation and social exclusion and ensure women have the support and confidence to play a more active part in their community. It provides advice, advocacy and mental health support to Irish women across London, increasing access to

benefits and other services, providing one-to-one advice and a counselling service. Groups provide opportunities for women to be involved in a range of activities and spend time together.

For further information: info@liwc.co.uk

- **The Suaimhneas Project**

Suaimhneas is a Gaelic word which translates as ‘peace of mind’. The project provides a support service to homeless Irish men and women in Liverpool who are experiencing problems around mental health and substance misuse. Aims include identifying the needs of homeless Irish men and women in Liverpool who are experiencing problems around health, mental health and substance misuse and offering a culturally sensitive service and a safe environment to explore the possibility of change. Services include drop-in information and advice, welfare benefits advice and advocacy, outreach support, youth work, social groups for older people, research and training, and work with Irish travellers.

For further information: enquiries@iccm.org.uk

Finding out more

NIMHE have published a resource ‘Celebrating our Cultures – mental health promotion with black and minority ethnic communities’ which provides more information and highlights 30 initiatives that are taking place across England working with different communities and in different settings (see www.nimhe.org.uk).



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