

# **Celebrating our Cultures: Mental Health Promotion with Refugees and Asylum Seekers**



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Author	National Institute for Mental Health in England
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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
Superseded Docs	
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For Recipient's Use	

# Mental health promotion with Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Nearly 6.4 million people make up the black and minority ethnic population in England (that is 1 in 8 of the whole population). Refugees and asylum seekers are not a homogenous group – they have different cultural backgrounds, religious customs and come from different geographic areas. They will have had a range of experiences before arriving in the UK, and men, women and children may have different needs.

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 health 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, act on this and participate. 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. A mental health problem is any problem that disrupts how we think or feel.

### 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 for mental health and reducing risk factors for mental health problems. 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 has 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 the 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 enhance people's quality of life, as well as reducing relapse and assisting 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 can operate in three ways, and can be even more effective if these are combined:

- **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. Work and income related stress is a major factor in people's poor mental health. Mentally healthy workplaces with flexible working hours need to be widely promoted.

## Key mental health issues for refugees and asylum seekers

There is a great deal of diversity within any ethnic minority community, and each individual within an ethnic group is unique and different (Fernando 2002). 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, sexuality, faith 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 refugees and asylum seekers

### **General:**

- Racism
- Stigma
- Language barriers
- Cultural beliefs and practices
- Poor public perception

### **Social risk factors:**

- Poverty
- Unemployment
- Loneliness and isolation
- Homelessness
- Displacement and lack of belonging
- Loss of identity

### **Health:**

- High rates of anxiety and depression
- Experience of traumatic events impacts on mental health
- Service issues:
  - Lack of knowledge of services
  - Problems accessing services
  - Delay seeking help

## **Suggested action points to help you develop a model for engaging with refugees and asylum seekers on mental health promotion**

### **Consult and work in partnership**

- Design and deliver mental health promotion programmes in partnership with Refugees and Asylum Seekers 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
- Use interactive and participatory techniques such as story telling and drama, and simple, jargon free language to improve communication and encourage community champions, link workers and health guides to develop effective partnerships

### **Raise awareness**

- Raise awareness about mental health issues, mental health services and how to access them, and build the mental health literacy of Refugees and Asylum Seekers
- Develop mental health promotion materials specifically designed for Refugees and Asylum Seekers
- Work with opinion formers and Refugee and Asylum Seeker community organisations, and provide mental health promotion interventions within accessible community venues including youth centres, schools, leisure facilities, faith organisations and local businesses
- Enable Refugees and Asylum Seekers to develop a positive cultural identity and build their confidence and sense of worth
- Use art, music, drama and story telling to self empower and raise awareness by integrating the experiences of refugees into their present lives and enrich community potential

### **Challenge discrimination**

- Challenge racism, health inequalities, discrimination and stereotypes both within services and the wider community
- Promote employment opportunities for refugees, both those who do and do not currently use mental health services
- Monitor regularly to identify racism and discrimination within primary, secondary and tertiary care settings

### **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
- Use existing resources and experience within refugee communities for training mental health professionals

### **Promote mental health within services**

- Encourage recruitment of staff whose ethnicity reflects the communities they serve
- Work towards developing culturally sensitive services that, for example, provide a bi-lingual worker, a room designated for prayer and other religious activity, female-only wards, culturally acceptable food
- 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 service users who are Refugees and Asylum Seekers to ensure that services are meeting their needs
- Involve Refugee 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 Refugees and Asylum Seekers**

- **North Sheffield Young People's Mental Health Project**

This project has developed some resources and practical activities to promote the emotional well being, self-esteem and resilience of young asylum seekers in a school or youth work setting. Groups provide a setting for personal change and enable young people to understand themselves and how they interact with others. The programme seeks to improve listening skills, build confidence, enhance friendships, encourage problem-solving skills, increase awareness and develop individual coping strategies.

For further information: [ypmhp@chs.nhs.uk](mailto:ypmhp@chs.nhs.uk)

- **Turkish and Kurdish Drama Project**

This is a self-empowerment project to work through social issues affecting mental well being using drama and other art forms. Drama workshops are used to enable members of the Turkish, Kurdish and Cypriot communities, together with volunteers and activists, to reflect on their past and present experiences and discuss their issues and needs. A play is produced to highlight areas of concern, performed to professionals and community members at community centres, cafes and festivals. The activities also increase self-confidence and help develop new skills, and contribute to challenging racism and discrimination within institutions. A partnership with a local Sure Start programme is producing educational drama on parenting and access to services.

For further information: [ferhatc@safh.org.uk](mailto:ferhatc@safh.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](http://www.nimhe.org.uk)).

### **Contact details of groups for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in your locality**

You can use this space to add details of useful local contacts/ community groups and other relevant information:









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