



**Taking Culture
Seriously
in Community
Mental Health**



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Cultural-linguistic Community Perspectives

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Perceptions and Understandings of Mental Health

- Focus group discussions revolved around the following broad themes:
 - What does mental health mean in relation to culture and the negotiation of 2 cultures
 - How is ‘good mental health’ attained, maintained, and recognized
 - How important is mental health to the well-being of the community



What did people say?

“...the ability to cope with stress, the ability to find help if there was such a need, would reflect that we are conscious of our situation, conscious of certain difficulties... then we can say that a person presents themselves in a relatively healthy way mentally or emotionally.”

- functioning



What did people say?

“It is a feeling of wellbeing in which the individual realizes all her aptitudes, as well as recognizes life’s normal pressures, and can work productively and be able to contribute to society.”

- negotiate social norms



What did people say?

“We didn’t talk about “mental health” in [home country]. Maybe we were high status in [home country]. When we came to Canada, the situation was changed. We dove to the bottom of society! We now have to do anything for survival...This is a process of remolding your mental health.”

- realistic self-evaluation



What did people say?

“As I understand it, mental health is how we see ourselves as individuals...and about how we develop within a society. Development is about bringing together many characteristics, including a person’s commitment to self, and later to the family, and then the community, especially when we are adapting to a new way of life.”

- collectivity



What did people say?

“The most important factor is faith. For us believing in god is very important. Every community, whatever they believe in, they need to have faith. I believe that if the person has good faith [believer] that they will not be affected by mental illness”.

- faith
- respect
- awareness



Perceptions and Understandings of Mental Illness

- Focus group discussions produced around the following themes:
 - Hesitancy to discuss mental illness
 - Stereotypes
 - Mental illness as inability to function in society
 - Lack of symptom recognition
 - Fears around stigma, labeling, shame
 - Common triggers



What did people say?

“There is still so much shame in our countries about mental diseases, and that makes it impossible for people to seek help. It still is a difficult issue, people don’t talk about it, it is embarrassing, and everyone tries to cover it up.”

- stigma



What did people say?

“I am just saying growing up in a western world and practicing a religion that preaches the total opposite of what the western world practices can create mental health problems.”

- negotiation between 2 cultures



What did people say?

“... people will do two part time jobs at night, and one more during the day if they get an offer, but that leaves them physically exhausted. And they are hoping ‘there will be light at the end of the tunnel’ but that does not happen. They get stuck in this vicious cycle and they lose hope for a better life.”

- under-employment



What did people say?

“In our countries poverty is not a synonym of mental illness. Here in Canada poverty is synonym of mental illness... I see mental health problems in my country, but it is not so obvious, they don't let the person fall so low, there is more human support, emotional; here there is more economic support.”

- loss of emotional support



Perceptions and Understandings of Mental Health Supports

- Here the discussions led to a focus on the following themes:
 - Possibilities of informal and formal support
 - Evaluation and critique of the Canadian Mental Health System
 - Perceptions around barriers to accessing services



What did people say?

“The majority of our community does not know [about mental health services] ... I have no idea what facilities are available for us. For that reason it is very important to educate people about what is available for us.”

- Lack of awareness



Informal mental health support

- Out of the focus group discussions, common sentiments emerged around where to turn for help:
 1. Many people prefer to turn to friends, family, religious leaders/religion
 2. Many immigrants do not have extensive support networks to turn to



Formal mental health supports

“In Canada, some doctors just rush you to medication...and that is what most people are afraid of.”

- distrust of medicalization

Summary

- **Some key themes to emerge from the participant discussions:**
 - **Mental illness is a particularly difficult topic to speak openly about**
 - **Openness to a diversity of perspectives is necessary to engage cultural-linguistic diversity**

