# MENTAL WELL-BEING: COMMUNITY, FAITH, & CULTURE

# Creating community connections for mental health

Often times, faith and community leaders are the first point of contact when individuals and families face mental health problems or traumatic

events. When faced with crisis or a time of need, many people turn to trusted leaders in their communities before they turn to mental health professionals. This could be due in part to the



stigma surrounding mental health and mental illness. However, it could also be attributed to people are unsure where to turn.

Faith and community leaders can help educate individuals and families about mental health, increasing awareness of mental health issues and making it easier for people to seek help. Community connectedness and support, like that found in faith-based and other neighborhood organizations, are also important to the long-term recovery of people living with mental illnesses.

As we learn more and more about the connections between the mind and body, it becomes clear that spirituality, religion and faith can help some individuals live well with mental health conditions. Keeping in mind that spirituality, religion and faith is not necessarily the same thing for each person.

## **How Faith Can Help**

Research has shown that for some, religion and individual spirituality can directly improve our physical and mental health. Here are some ways you may find helpful:

#### **Meditation**

One practice that has received a lot of attention is contemplative prayer and meditation. Many studies have found that 10-20 minutes of meditation twice a day causes what is called the "relaxation response": decreased metabolism, decreased heart rate, decreased breathing rate and slower, calmer brain waves.

The relaxation response was originally observed in practitioners of Transcendental Meditation, a form of Buddhist meditation, but subsequent research has found the relaxation response can result from other

contemplative practices as well. The daily ritual prayers of Islam and the Catholic practice of praying with rosary beads, for instance, are religious rituals that invoke the relaxation response.

### **Togetherness**

Religion can offer other supports for some with mental health as well. In the United States, the Christian practice of congregational prayer is so popular that it now exists even in Asian religions such as American Buddhism and Hinduism. One of the most popular ways to interact with the community is to attend congregational gatherings such as Sunday church, Saturday Torah readings, prayer meetings or full-moon celebrations at Hindu temples.

These group religious rituals provide structured social activities that cause relatively little anxiety and benefit our health directly. Places of worship



may also offer number of resources and social activities that can encourage and support people living with a mental health their **I** condition and families, providing additional benefits through community **T** connections.

### A Sense of Understanding

For some, the most important aspect of spirituality, religion and/or faith is that it offers ways to understand our experiences. The major world religions each offer explanations of why suffering exists in the world. Turning to these explanations brings comfort to many people confronting illness. The "why me?" question can never be answered entirely by medical science, and some people find the answers they seek in religion.

## **Helping Others**

Relatively recent research suggests that we experience direct health benefits when we volunteer to help others. Religious organizations may provide us with straightforward, simple opportunities to serve the community, thus improving our mood and reducing our anxiety levels.

#### Literature Way care education science pattern beliefs belief behavior cultivation institutions aspects goals arts excellence Families acquaintrance generations printculture expert practices Culture values Society transmitting intellectual customary human Cultivating Living Material characteristic Communities BeautyCulture intellectual characteristic Communities Communities Delicitude C What is Culture and How Does it Impact Us? Culture is the patterns of ideas, customs and Understanding Others capacity taste knowledge fine especially Corporate Culture behaviors shared by a particular people or society. These patterns identify members as part of a group Social religious training depends existence and distinguish members from other groups. Culture enlightenment PopCulture Influences Life IsthCentury everyday integrated developing People succeeding Material Culture features aesthetic humanities features aesthetic humanities shared may include: Ethnicity Language Culture also affects health in other ways, that can Religion And Spiritual Beliefs include the following: Acceptance of a diagnosis, including who should Socio-Economic Class be told, when and how. Age Acceptance of preventive or health promotion **Sexual Orientation** measures (e.g., vaccines, prenatal care, birth Geographic Origin control, screening tests, etc.). Perceptions of death, dying and who should be **Group History** Education Use of direct versus indirect communication. **Upbringing** Life Experience Making or avoiding eye contact can be viewed as rude or polite, depending on culture. While culture is not the same for everyone, even for

those living in the same area, one thing that is true of culture is that it is dynamic and evolving. Culture is learned and passed on through generations, and shared among those who agree on the ways. It is often identified 'symbolically' through language, dress, music and behaviors, and integrated into all aspects of an individual's life.

Culture frames and shapes how people perceive the world and their experiences. It can also define how patients and health care providers view health and illness. This can include what patients and health care providers believe about the causes of disease. For example, some patients are unaware of germ theory and may instead believe in fatalism, a djinn (in rural Afghanistan, an evil spirit that seizes infants and is responsible for tetanus-like illness), the 'evil eye', or a demon. They may not accept a diagnosis and may even believe they cannot change the course of events. Instead, they can only accept circumstances as they unfold.

Being aware of another's culture is important as many things can have different meanings. For example, in many Western societies, it is considered polite and appropriate to make and have eye contact when communicating with people. However, not making direct eye contact is a sign of respect in many cultures. This is important in many situations, but in regard to mental health, a care provider may wonder if the lack of eye contact means their patient is depressed.

- Willingness to discuss symptoms with a health care provider, or with an interpreter being present.
- Influence of family dynamics, including traditional gender roles, filial responsibilities, and patterns of support among family members.
- Perceptions of youth and aging.

Above all, remember that cultures are dynamic and that there is huge diversity within any culture. Even when you think you understand one culture, it will have evolved or you will have identified exceptions. In certain situations, it can be best to ask the person to tell you about their culture. Find out what something means to them, what is important and how it would affect them – don't ever assume it is or will be a certain way.

#### References

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